Beyond Neo-Liberalism a New Settlement - Three Crises and Post-Secondary Education

James Avis
University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, England, UK

Abstract

This paper explores the current crises facing neo-liberal capitalism and the call by apologists of capital for a new social contract or what may be described as a political and economic settlement. It considers the significance of these debates for post-secondary education with the initial part of the paper examining three intertwined crises - those of neoliberalism, race, and social care. Following this section, the paper interrogates the call for a new social contract set on a capitalist terrain that seeks to restore the legitimacy of capital. The significance of these arguments for post-secondary education is then explored. The social contract sets a rhetorical agenda for post-secondary education that under capitalism is solely ideological but whose themes could be utilized in the struggle for a transformed society.

Keywords: *Neo-liberalism, post neo-liberalism, post-secondary education, vocational education and training, race, settlement, social contract, crisis of care*

Introduction

The global economic system is facing three entwined crises, that of neoliberalism, race (neo- and post-colonialism), as well as that of social care, the latter being significantly aggravated by Covid-19[1]. These crises are interrelated, neoliberalism with its doctrine of marketization, privatization,

competition and the pursuit of profit have served to undermine the provision of welfare services in the west and limited their development in the emerging economies. The result, particularly in the Anglophone societies, was an overstretched health service which has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Whilst such a characterization of the current conjuncture is somewhat over-generalized it provides a useful overview of the current context, particularly as it applies to the UK. This paper[2] explores the current crises, the call by apologists of capital for a new political and economic settlement, and the significance of these debates for post-secondary education**.** It is important to recognize that settlements are always vulnerable to contestation, having to be continually re-secured by the powerful to retain their hegemonic position. Settlements seek to shape a common sense that there is no realistic alternative to the status quo (Education Group, 1981; Education Group II, 1991; Avis, et al, 1996).

By way of introduction, I explore the crises facing neoliberalism, race, and social care followed by a section that addresses the call for a new settlement, or what some pundits refer to as a new social contract. Finally, I consider the relevance of these arguments for post-secondary education, by which I have in mind education or vocational training (VET) that follows secondary schooling, normally at a level lower than a degree. This can be 'delivered' in a variety of institutional settings such as schools, colleges, vocational bodies, the wider community, trade unions as well as social movements such as Black Lives Matter and Extinction Rebellion.

The three crises

Over the last 50 years or so neo-liberalism has been dominant, whilst simultaneously being subject to rigorous critique by the left (Education Group II, 1991). There are three key points to be made. Firstly, neoliberalism never

attained the assent won by social democracy in the years following the Second World War although we need to recognize that social democracy was characterized by its own set of contradictions (Education Group, 1981). Such a recognition avoids exaggerating its successes and falling into an unhelpful 'golden ageism'. Secondly, the hegemonic position of neo-liberalism is not predicated on a ready acceptance of its tenets but rather based on a perception that there is no viable alternative. Thirdly, there is a danger that neoliberalism becomes a gloss for capitalism, deflecting our attention away from resistance to capital and its accumulation strategies. Such a position construes a critique of neoliberalism as sufficient in itself, calling in effect for a softer and more humane capitalism - one that may mirror our imagining of Nordic egalitarian capitalism (Avis, 2019; Kenworth, 2004; and see European Education Research Journal, 2019). This position echoes that of neo-institutionalists who draw our attention to the social coalitions that respond to the political, social, and market conditions in which they are socially embedded as well as their ongoing reconfiguration. These processes are shaped by the particular social formation in which they are lodged as well as their interrelationship with the play of partisan politics (Thelen, 2014; Busemeyer, 2015).Although such analyses acknowledge power concerning the alliances that are formed they tend to skirt around the question of social antagonism, that is to say, the manner in which incommensurate and conflicting interests are central to capitalism. However, these interests and conflicts can be addressed in different ways in particular social formations. We need to recognize that capital is not all of a piece having variegated forms, for example, rentier, finance, or neo-mercantilism. These differences are partly reflected in conceptualizations of the 'varieties of capitalism' (Jessop, 2015; Hall and Soskice, 2001), whilst noting that regardless of context the logic of capital is always one of accumulation and struggle.

The above alerts us to the different ways neoliberalism impacts specific social formations being mediated by the particular institutional context as well as the

play of partisan politics (see EERJ, 2019). At the same time, there has been a move towards the deepening of competition, marketization, privatisation, and deregulation. The criticisms of neoliberalism which gained momentum during the economic crisis of 2008 have been exacerbated in subsequent years and are increasingly apparent during the current pandemic.

Before discussing post-neoliberalism I briefly rehearse the outlines of a leftist critique of neoliberalism which will be very familiar to readers of JCEPS. Marketisation and deregulation are not innocent processes but serve the interests of particular class groupings. The deregulation of financial institutions has enabled speculators and financiers to accumulate wealth, resulting in an increasing polarization in the distribution of income, wealth, and indeed jobs. The marketization of education has been appropriated by the middle classes to serve their interests, whilst the privatisation of schools and health services has increased the cost of provision but also entrenched inequalities as a result of the diminution of state provision. Privatization of welfare services encourages cherry-picking of activities that are profitable leaving the costly and difficult responsibility of the state.

Pundits of neoliberalism argue that by encouraging competition, marketization, privatization, and deregulation all of the society benefits. Importantly, this would include the disadvantaged and marginalized provided they assume responsibility for their self-development and that of their families. Increasingly such a rhetoric rings hollow. In a number of respects, the mainstream critique of neo-liberalism morphs into its current form. Post neoliberalism serves to exacerbate and render visible the contradictions and tensions present in its earlier form. These can be seen in the excesses of those who control the financial system, the abuses of power of oligopolies as well as the disconnect and decoupling of wages from productivity. These processes serve to illustrate

the irrationality of neo-liberalism and its flaws but they have also seeped into popular understandings of the economic system facilitating a deep-set cynicism. Importantly, the health crisis has encouraged a re-evaluation of what counts as really useful labor as well as drawing attention to the arbitrariness and unnecessariness of the politics of austerity. Schwab (2020a: online), the founder and executive chairman of the World Economic Forum (WEF), points out that,

> People are revolting against the economic elites they believe have betrayed them, and our efforts to keep global warming to 1.5^{o}C are falling dangerously short, with the world at such critical crossroads, this year we must develop a 'Davos Manifesto 2020' to reimagine the purpose and scorecards for companies and governments.

Schwab (2019) calls for the development of a type of stakeholder or progressive capitalism (see Fraser, 2019:11-15) that would be better able to attain popular consent in what he describes as 'The Great Reset' (2020b). This would serve to develop a new social contract or settlement.

Thus far I have considered the critiques of neo- and post-neoliberalism. The latter carried with it a disabling cynicism that has been undermined by the current crises of race and social care. These crises implicitly suggest that there are alternative ways of organizing societal and economic relations. The call for a new social contract, stakeholding capitalism and 'The Great Reset' seeks to resolve these crises but on a capitalist terrain.

At the time of writing (June 2020), the struggles surrounding Black Lives Matter (BLM) serves to draw our attention to the structures of whiteness and how this is enmeshed with other structures as well as social relations. We only need to reflect on intersectionality and the interrelationships of race with class and gender. In addition, BLM and the toppling of statues point to the salience

of the history of slavery and colonialism. Britain's involvement in the slave trade and colonialism can be seen in the toppling of the statue of Edward Colston, a notorious slave trader in Bristol, and with calls for Oriel College Oxford to remove its Rhodes memorial, which are just two examples. A limitation of my earlier discussion and analysis of neo-liberalism is that it failed to acknowledge the centrality of race in capitalist economic and social structures. Western Capitalism is imbricated with race. This relation is not solely part of its history and relationship with colonialism but is present in neo-colonialism and existing economic and social structures all of which serve to 'reproduce' white supremacy. The point is, that neoliberalism embodies a kind of white supremacy that sits alongside, mediates class relations, and is played out differently in particular societies. We could for example explore the way this is played out in the UK and contrast this with other European societies. There is also an articulation with the climate emergency. Notably, it is the emerging economies that suffer most from climate change and ecological despoliation, many of which were former colonies of the west. The exploitation of these societies was in part justified through the use of racist tropes and in part by an abrasive and self-serving colonialism that sought to appropriate natural resources.

Ruby Sales in her contribution to the BBC's, *Racial justice: Who are the allies? The Real Story*[3] (2020) commented on her preferred reference to the civil rights movement[4] in the US as the Southern Freedom Movement. She argued the civil rights movement transferred power to politicians and consequently became enmeshed in white power structures, whereas the Southern Freedom Movement signifies the centrality of 'ordinary' people in the struggle for social justice. Importantly she refuses the notion of allies because all members of society are damaged by white supremacy, although noting that the main beneficiaries are a small group of white ruling class men.

BLM will encounter attempts to co-opt and domesticate its concerns, reflected in the sorts of debates that address inclusive and stakeholder capitalism which calls for an acknowledgement of diversity (WEF, 2020a). I am reminded of Lingard, Sellar, and Savage's (2014), analysis of Australian education policy and the way conceptualisations of social justice shifted from a concern with equality towards equity. The former term echoes social-democratic understandings of equality while the latter focuses on reductive and narrow conceptualizations of equal opportunity linked to a version of meritocracy. Although social democracy offers a more developed understanding of equality, calling for a flatter distribution of income and wealth, it veers towards a consensual framework that works within the current structural arrangements of society. To fulfill its possibilities, a re-worked construction of social democracy needs to be pushed to its limits. It would need to transcend what Fraser (2019:11,12) describes as progressive neoliberalism which incorporates a 'liberal meritocratic politics of recognition' with 'an expropriative, plutocratic economic program'. Such politics would have to move towards revolutionary reformism that embodies an anti-capitalist stance. This position would incorporate a range of struggles that engage with the contradictions and tensions present in the current conjuncture whose resolution require fundamental social change. In 1968 Gorz wrote,

> A struggle for non-reformist reforms – for anti-capitalist reforms – is one which does not base its validity and its right to exist on capitalist needs, criteria, and rationales. A non-reformist reform is determined not in terms of what can be, but what should be. (7-8)

This idea is reflected in Nancy Fraser's (Fraser and Honneth, 2003:79-80) writing.

> When successful, non-reformist reforms change more than the specific institutional features they explicitly target. In addition, they alter the terrain upon which later struggles will be waged. By changing incentive structures and political opportunity structures, they expand the set of feasible options for future reform. Over time their cumulative effect could be to transform the underlying structures that generate injustice.

The point is, the struggle against white supremacy can be articulated with those against other structural inequalities of gender and class, all of which are embedded in capitalist relations. This is not to diminish the specificity of the struggle against white supremacy. Sales and Andrews (BBC, 2020) call for a fundamental transformation of society, though Andrews (2018) argues this politics would need to move beyond the debilitating consequences of a concern with consensus to acknowledge the centrality of conflict in bringing about fundamental social change. Leonardo (2009:51) suggests that whilst the middle class may benefit from white supremacy an analytic focus on this class fraction serves to obscure the centrality of the capitalist class, or what Sales refers to as the ruling class. In addition, the hollowing out of the class structure has meant that the privileges and benefits that the middle-class gain from white supremacy has diminished resulting in a redrawing of the contours of class relations. This middle-class fraction is thus placed in a position whereby it would benefit from adopting a common cause with the black and white working-class in an anti-capitalist and anti-supremacist movement. At the same time, the progressive capitalist critique of neo-liberalism seeks to establish a new settlement or social contract that aims to secure the interests of capital and disarm those social movements that work towards the transformation of society.

It is perhaps misleading to discuss the crisis of care separately from those of neo-liberalism and race, as these crises are interwoven and enmeshed. By examining them separately it is possible to consider their specificity whilst at

the same time noting their interrelationship. Prior to the pandemic, scholars who adopted an anti-capitalist and often anti-work stance were examining the crisis of social reproduction and care (Hester and Srnicek, 2019). Fraser commented (2016:99),

> The 'crisis of care' is currently a major topic of public debate. Often linked to ideas of 'time poverty', 'family-work balance', and 'social depletion', it refers to the pressures from several directions that are currently squeezing a key set of social capacities: those available for birthing and raising children, caring for friends and family members, maintaining households and broader communities, and sustaining connections more generally.

Fraser draws our attention to time poverty, family-work balance, the raising of children, and so on, all of which have been reshaped during the pandemic. For many living in two-income families, the necessity to engage in waged labor is inescapable. This applies not only to those facing poverty but also to the professional middle class who through waged work seeks to secure a particular standard of living and position in the labor market. In cities such as New York, childcare would be provided by those who are disproportionately poor, black, or Latina. If these workers have children they would be cared for in their communities at home or abroad. Such patterns whilst being accented differently will be played out in other metropolitan cities such as London, Berlin, Mumbai, and so on. However, Covid-19 has interrupted these patterns of care resulting in deepening poverty for many formerly employed as nannies, child care workers, etc. For those Reich (2020) describes as 'remotes' (members of the professional middle class) who are locked in relatively safely working from home, the crisis of care centers around the family-work balance and managing the care and education of their children. For others who have been furloughed or made redundant there is a spectre of unemployment with all the anxiety this creates

and the stress and strains it places on domestic relations (The Guardian, 2020b; UNICEF, 2020).

The lowest-paid as well as black Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) workers are most at risk from the pandemic and together with young people face the possibility of unemployment (Public Health England, 2020; The Guardian, 2020a; Seibt, 2020). The crisis of care merges with that of health which has been emphasized during the pandemic. Covid-19 has led to a re-evaluation of the social care and nursing workforce. This re-evaluation extends to the labor of key workers who collect our rubbish, deliver our mail, keep public transport running, look after our elderly and so on. These workers perform 'really useful' labor and draw into sharp relief the 'useless' labor of many of the 'remotes', members of the managerial and professional middle class, working on their laptops in the safety of their own homes, often engaged in meaningless labor (Avis, et al 2021). This is not to forget the capitalist class who may well have fled metropolitan centers for safer environments (Hahn, 2020).

The three crises discussed above reflect a cluster of contradictions surrounding the current conjuncture, alerting us to the abuses of capital, the way it has devalued really useful labor and has exacerbated inequality. The discussion draws our attention to the irrationality of post-neo-liberal capitalism and raises questions about the nature of waged labor, its distribution, use-value, and articulation with racist structures. Additionally, the analysis points towards the articulation of capital's short-termism (Foster, 2016:100; Young and Horden 2020:3) with the global climate emergency. The interest in developing a new social contract or settlement seeks to manage these contradictions in the interest of capital, offering an imaginary solution.

A new settlement?

Capitalism is a dynamic system constantly adjusting to the circumstances in which it finds itself. Marx and Engels (1985 [1848], p83) captured this process in their phrase 'All that is solid melts into air', with Schumpeter (1994 [1943] Chapter VII) referring to processes of 'creative destruction' through which capitalism regenerates itself. Such processes apply not only to production but also to social relations and socio-political settlements. The social-democratic settlement and the concessions awarded to the working class sought to domesticate anti-capitalist struggles. These processes must not be seen in a determinist light but rather as the outcome of struggle as well as the manner in which dominant coalitions of interest seek an 'accommodation' that does not undermine the continuance of capitalism.

Over the years there have been many appeals for the reform of capitalism. On occasion, this has been reflected in calls for a more humane form of capitalism that can secure widespread consent. Wolf (2019: online) commenting on current conditions writes,

> We need a dynamic capitalist economy that gives everybody a justified belief that they can share in the benefits. What we increasingly seem to have instead is an unstable rentier capitalism, weakened competition, feeble productivity growth, high inequality and, not coincidentally, an increasingly degraded democracy. .most important businesses. The way our economic and political systems work must change, or they will perish.

Some years earlier Lagarde (2014) and Carney (2014) (then of the IMF and Bank of England) called for the development of an inclusive capitalism, with the World Bank (2019:10) subsequently pointing out that 'the current social contract is broken in most emerging economies, and it is looking increasingly out of date in some advanced economies'. The World Bank is not alone in

calling for a new social contract, so too does the Global Commission on the Future of Work (2019:10-28). Stiglitz (2019:31) whilst commenting on neo-liberal America, states, 'We have to construct a new social contract that enables everyone in our rich country to live a decent middle-class life'. Similar sentiments can be found in much of the writing of those who are close to the center of capitalist power. For example Raghuram Rajan (2019 and see 2011) of the IMF argues that the state, market, and community are three pillars that support wider society. When these are out of equilibrium difficulties arise for the wider society until the balance is re-secured. Not dissimilar ideas are expressed by McAfee (2019) who argues that four elements of society need to be held in balance to secure the well-being of all. These elements are capitalism, technical progress, responsive government, and public awareness, when these are out of equilibrium dysfunctionality occurs.

What then are the elements of this emerging settlement? Here I draw on material, some of which predates the crisis of care, but which serves to reflect the rhetorical elements present in an emerging settlement. The World Economic Forum (WEF) (2018, 12-13) calls for the development of 'meaningful, fulfilling and safe work', 'human centered economic growth' and the provision of 'agile safety nets', 'incentives for job protection' and 'smart' job creation allied to support for the development of mass entrepreneurship. These aim to overcome the negative impact of socio-economic change flowing from the fourth industrial revolution, and we could add, the crises of health, neo-liberalism as well as race. Azevêdo (2017, 2018) of the WTO is concerned about the inclusion of those who have been 'left behind' by current socio-economic developments, a concern echoed by the ILO (2020:3) in its call arising from Covid-19 that vulnerable groups be given special attention

- Women, who hold 70 percent of jobs in the health and social care sectors, are, therefore, often on the front line of the response to the crisis…
- Informal economy workers, casual and temporary workers, workers in new forms of employment, including those in the "gig economy";
- Young workers…
- Older workers…
- Refugees and migrant workers…
- Micro-entrepreneurs and the self-employed – particularly those operating in the informal economy, who may be disproportionately affected and are less resilient.

The UN (2015) could be seen as having extended this wish list through its sustainable development goals[5] and seeks to ensure equitable education across the lifespan, gender equality, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, and industrialization as well as the promotion of decent work. Underpinning these proposals rests a commitment to human-centered economic growth and social justice but this is all lodged within a market economy.

In June 2020 the WEF launched what it described as 'The Great Reset' of capitalism. There is a paradox, The Great Reset appears to offer everything we could possibly want. It calls for, 'rebuilding the global economy in a fairer, greener way as we come out of the coronavirus pandemic - will also require societies to battle and beat racism' (2020: online). Georgieva (2020: online) of the IMF at the launch worried about tension between what she described as 'The Great Reversal' as opposed to 'The Great Reset'. She argued that the pandemic would serve to deepen inequality if steps were not taken to avert this 'reversal'. These concerns were echoed by Guterres, Secretary-General of the UN who commented,

> The Great Reset is a welcome recognition that this human tragedy must be a wake-up call. We must build more equal, inclusive, and sustainable economies and societies that are more resilient in the face of pandemics, climate change, and the many other global changes we face. (WEF 2020b)

Schwab added that a reset

> … is necessary to build a new social contract that honors the dignity of every human being… The global health crisis has laid bare the unsustainability of our old system in terms of social cohesion, the lack of equal opportunities, and inclusiveness. Nor can we turn our backs on the evils of racism and discrimination. We need to build into this new social contract our intergenerational responsibility to ensure that we live up to the expectations of young people. (WEF 2020b)

In a number of respects, the cumulative effect of these commentaries could be read as a call for a renewed or reset social democratic settlement. Acemoglu (2020) refers to this as 'welfare state 3.0' which anticipates the development of a green and sustainable economy with a flatter distribution of income and wealth, one which recognizes our civic responsibilities as well as our social obligations and so on.

Two issues flow from the current conjuncture. The first refers to the crisis of neoliberalism which has been exacerbated by the pandemic. 'The Great Reset' allied with a new social contract seeks to restore legitimacy to the capitalist project. Secondly, the concerns with diversity, green new deals, sustainability, the call for decent work, and the engagement with Black Lives Matters in part seeks to co-opt and domesticate these struggles and movements**. At the same time,** they also provide resources in the struggle for a transformed society. For example, McGrath et al (2020) commented, on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) that 'sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic

growth' under capitalism is simply impossible (and see Avis, et al, 2021). The claims for inclusivity, diversity, and the commitment to a fairer more just world can all be turned back on themselves and used to critique the Great Reset and capitalism. These aspirations, in the same way as those for 'sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth' under capitalism, are simply impossible. At best, gestures towards them may be won when the balance of power favors labor but withdrawn at times when the balance of power advantages capital. Or, as in the current conjuncture, serve an ideological purpose to create an illusion of the prospect of a fairer society that offers all the prospect of dignity and decent work.

It is salutary to note the disconnect between the commentaries of protagonists of the Great Reset and the lived experiences of those at the bottom of the social structure in the global south and north. Perhaps the call for a new social contract seeks an imaginary resolution of societal contradictions (Althusser, 1972:264-267; Cohen, 1972), suggesting that this is a mirage that serves the interests of capital. The WEF's Davos Agenda (2021: online) for its virtual meeting to be held in January 2021 calls for the rebuilding of trust,

> The fault lines [see Rajan, 2011] that emerged in 2020 now appear as critical crossroads in 2021. The time to rebuild trust and to make crucial choices is fast approaching as the need to reset priorities and the urgency to reform systems grow stronger around the world.

Yet this does represent an adaptation to current conditions which may offer some concessions to placate the exploited and oppressed which could be clawed back when circumstances are more auspicious for capital. We need only reflect on the transition from social democracy to neoliberalism which re-appropriated concessions offered to the working class and impoverished the welfare state through privatisation. Notably, such shifts are shaped by struggle and the balance of power between capital and labor.

At this stage in the paper, it is worth reiterating the key concerns of this settlement that serve to constitute an imaginary and ideological resolution of the contradictions of post and neo-liberal capitalism.

- the development of meaningful, fulfilling, and safe work
- human centred economic growth
- the provision of 'agile safety nets'
- incentives for job protection
- 'smart' job creation
- The development of mass entrepreneurship
- The Inclusion of the left behind
- The rebuilding of the global economy in a more socially just, fairer, greener way
- The recognition of diversity
- The requirement for societies to battle and beat racism

This is a phantasy discourse that seeks to develop persuasive fiction to secure consent. It skirts around the questions of (neo)colonialism, white supremacy, and how these are embedded in capitalist relations. If these questions were to be seriously addressed other than through the rhetoric of diversity and fairness, this would serve to fundamentally undermine the ideological supports of the Great Reset.

Post-secondary education and VET

It is important to acknowledge the way in which education is embedded in the structures of society. Allman, et al (2003:149-150) writes,

> Education plays a key role in the perpetuation of the capital relation; this is the skeleton in capitalist education's dank basement. It is just one of the many reasons

> why, in contemporary capitalist society, education [*and we might add Vocational Education and Training*] assumes a grotesque and perverted form. It links the chains that bind our souls to capital.

Whilst there is determinism in this statement that plays down agency and struggle it poses important questions about the relationship between education and capital. Such questions are particularly important when we consider post-secondary and vocational education and training which are often viewed as being for 'other people's' children, and in the case of the latter, tightly focused on waged labor. The emerging settlement carries with it an agenda for education allied with several of concerns that wider society should address. However, before considering this issue, I would like to make several preliminary points that address post-secondary education, VET, and (post) neoliberalism. It is important to recall that by post-secondary education I have in mind education or vocational training that follows secondary schooling, normally, at a level lower than a degree. Both historically and contemporaneously VET has been accorded less esteem than academic forms of education. This has been mirrored in its relationship to class and social mobility, linking it both with the working class as well as limited opportunities for upward social mobility. This pattern does not just apply to the UK but also to other social formations (Avis and Atkins, 2017; Down, et al 2019; Koo, A. 2016; Lakes, R. Carter, P. 2009), and even to those that are thought to offer greater recognition and value to VET such as in Germany (Bathmaker, 2014).

We need to recognise that VET is not all of a piece and needs to be placed in its socio-economic context, one in which worklessness has become far more prominent. Blacker (2013:1; and see Smyth, 2016) writes,

> The current neoliberal mutation of capitalism has evolved beyond the days when the wholesale exploitation of labor under-wrote the world system's expansion. While "normal" business profits plummet and theft-by-finance-rises, capitalism now shifts into a mode of elimination that targets most of us – along with our environment – as waste products awaiting managed disposal.

Consequently, many working-class and particularly BAME young people will find themselves being 'warehoused' on low-status VET which seeks to habituate them to at best intermittent periods of low waged employment interspersed with lengthy periods of unemployment (Avis, et al, 2017). Even those who form part of what Esmond and Atkins (2020) describe as a technical elite will encounter a tight and highly competitive labor market. Not only is labor being expelled from waged work but capitalism in its current configuration is characterized by a scarcity of decent jobs (Brown et al, 2020). This scarcity is echoed in Esmond and Atkins' (2020, 209) reference to a 'rising curve of inequality in VET' (209).

Smyth (2016) has implicitly suggested that there is the potential to challenge school-based VET by drawing upon the understanding of and lived experiences of those who are marginalized by the education system and who are constituted as 'social waste' (130-1). This practice would place the voice of young people at the center of pedagogic processes (Down, Smyth, and Robinson, 2019). Importantly, the ideology promulgated by the apologists of capital has the potential to be appropriated and used against itself in a transformative struggle. The concerns of what I am describing as the new settlement can be mobilized as part of a struggle against capital. For example, the concern with decent and sustainable livelihoods, the interest in diversity, and meaningful work can all be turned against capital in as much they are unattainable within a capitalist society, or at best only achievable by a minority of workers.

Beyond waged labor – re-imagining VET

The starting point for this discussion, focuses on the notion of labor. Vocational and much post-secondary education has been orientated towards the workplace and waged labour, indeed, its raison d'être has been to address the needs of employers. Covid-19 reminds us of the significance of labor involved in care - some of which will be paid, but much will lie outside the purview of the wage. The pedagogic and educative demands of the latter have often been ignored. If we take seriously the suggestion that a new settlement or social contract should be orientated towards providing all members of society with access to a decent life as well as to meaningful, fulfilling, and safe work such labor would require access to vocational education and training but not necessarily in its current configuration as it is wedded to capitalist interests. The point is that a great deal of labor that creates use-value for individuals, communities, and wider society is unpaid and frequently overlooked. Consequently, it is rendered invisible, marginalized, and viewed as irrelevant as it fails to generate surplus value. A similar point could be made about those who labor in the informal economy, a sector of great significance in emerging economies. All of those involved in such labor, paid or unpaid, could benefit from VET to develop their skills, expertise, and capabilities located in practices that echo those of community education and public pedagogy that are dialogic, empowering, and which could develop use-value. **It is important to conceive of an expansive notion of VET that is freed from the shackles of capitalism. To reiterate this would necessitate a dialogic engagement with participants that would address community concerns**.

Those calling for a new social contract often draw on the UN's sustainable development goals[5] to support their position. Here we encounter calls for decent work, smart job creation, human-centred growth, agile safety nets, job protection, and so on, all of which if taken seriously carry educational demands.

Much the same could be said about the concern with sustainable agriculture and what is described as 'green new deals' that seek to address the climate emergency (see Green New Deal Group, 2008). All these issues address educational questions and the interest in developing use-value that supports really useful labor, and by default, the creation of a fairer society. Consequently, they point towards the need to address those who have been 'left behind', who are marginal in a society facing poverty and are socially, economically, and politically impoverished. This raises questions of fairness that also concern the relationship between BAME's and social justice.

There is an irony in the preceding discussion. McGrath and colleagues remind us the SDG's come up against the logic of 'really existing capital' (Avis et al, 2021:7) - the same can be said about the educative possibilities of 'The Great Reset' and the dangers of what Gramsci (1971:106 pp) refers to as transformism or passive revolution whereby the dominant class transforms social relations to secure its interests. Yet the possibilities posed by the reset could be pushed to the utmost in a politics that refuses to be tied to the cost-benefit analyses of capital and that has in its sights a transformed society and world. The key point is that the elements of the new settlement are lodged on a capitalist terrain and whilst the contradictions of the claims being made in favor of a decent, fairer, socially just society are ultimately fraudulent under capitalism, but can be mobilised in a struggle. VET is just one site amongst a number. However, if VET is to contribute to human flourishing, space and resources will have to be won through an anti-capitalist struggle that seeks to transform the social formation and that is aligned with radical movements – those of class, race, and gender, as well as those that address green issues. In this re-imagining VET is not necessarily located in schools, colleges, or universities but rather in the cultural institutions of the working class and social movements such as BLM together with those that address the environment. Each of these sites has a

pedagogic contribution in the dialectic whereby really useful knowledge is created and which informs really useful labor.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have addressed the crises of neoliberalism, care, and race that confront capital. In response, a number of those close to the center of capitalist power have called for a new social contract or settlement. I have sought to draw out a number of the implications of this emerging settlement for post-secondary education and VET. This social contract carries a set of concerns that reflect the UN's SDGs. However, when placed within a broader social and educative context these aspirations can only be realistically attained in a transformed society. It is unimaginable that they could be attained in a capitalist society that is if they are anything more than rhetorical flourishes that aim to disarm critique. They could however be appropriated by a progressive neoliberalism that invests in the hierarchical structures of capitalist social relations, drawing upon a truncated discourse of equal opportunities. Alternatively, these concerns could form the basis of revolutionary reformism that seeks to push capitalism to its breaking point towards what would be a fairer greener social formation. Such a social formation would transcend capitalism and move beyond the crises of race, care, and neoliberalism to a society in which we could express our species-being, humanity, and solidarity.

Notes

1. A reviewer of the paper alerted me to the historical use of pandemics in the subjugation and killing of those who are of African and or indigenous ancestry. We need only consider the history of the British Empire and its colonial and neo-colonial practices.

2. This paper draws upon my (2018) Socio-technical imaginary of the fourth industrial revolution and its implication for vocational education and training: a literature review, *Journal of Vocational Education and Training* 70(3); Thinking about the future: the fourth industrial revolution, capitalism, waged labor and anti-work, Malloch, M., Cairns, L., Evans, K., O'Connor, B. (Eds) The SAGE Handbook of Learning and Work; (2021) *Vocational Education in the fourth Industrial revolution: l*

Education and employment in a post-work age; and Avis et al (2021) Re-conceptualising VET: Responses to Covid-19, Journal of Vocational Education and Training.

3. *Racial justice: Who are the allies? The Real Story*, is a BBC world service radio broadcast, chaired by Ritula Shah. The programme drew on contributions from Ruby Sales – a veteran African-American human rights activist, public theologian and social critic, Mark Naison - Professor of African-American Studies and History at Fordham University, Kehinde Andrews - Professor of Black Studies at Birmingham City University UK and Edward Webster - Emeritus Professor at the Southern Centre for Inequality Studies at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg in South Africa

4. It would be more correct to refer to the civil rights movements

5. **UN Sustainable Development Goals**

- Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere
- Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
- Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
- Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
- Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
- Goal 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
- Goal 7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
- Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
- Goal 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
- Goal 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries
- Goal 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
- Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
- Goal 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
- Goal 14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
- Goal 15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
- Goal 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
- Goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development. (UN 2015:18)

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Author Details

James Avis is Professor Emeritus at the University of Huddersfield and Professor of Post-Compulsory Education at the Institute of Education, University of Derby

Email: J.avis@hud.ac.uk