

# The politics and political economy of knowledge

Patrick Ainley *reviews a recent study*

Aeron Davis (Editor) *The Death of Public Knowledge? How Free Markets Destroy the General Intellect*, Goldsmiths Press, London, 2017. 262pp., £22.95 hb. ISBN 9781906897390

**F**or Aeron Davis public knowledge is wider than education. It includes the information nowadays disseminated via the internet but also by the press, books and libraries in cultural repositories of all sorts. As Davis writes in introduction, these are 'a foundational element of democracies, markets and societies everywhere', without which 'there is no social contract, no political legitimacy, no market transactions and no basis for common decision-making' (p3).

Neoliberalism is a political strategy aiming to model society on a free market of individuals. There is no common decision making in such a society because the market decides what to invest in profitably and individual actors respond to market signals. So, despite its commitment to perfectly inform all participants, neoliberalism actively encourages the atrophy of the general intellect required for any shared cultural identity. Davis brings together academics and activists to instance how this happens with short chapters culminating in a 'Manifesto for Public Knowledge'.

His first section affords an 'insight into what a future British media landscape might look like'. It compares public and private media systems internationally before focusing on Greece under EU austerity, New Zealand, the BBC and USA. In each, his contributors find 'a combination of polarization and fragmentation', 'impoverishing informed citizenship', dismantling a nationally mediated public sphere into 'infotainment packages' building advertising. 'Public-Commercial Hybridity' is compromised at the BBC as private providers gain from public 'efficiency' cuts. In the USA, the system 'creeps towards oligarchy' as on-line operators

disrupt the business models of the surviving mainstream newspapers, whose editors oppose a public policy solution in uneasy alliance with remaining professional journalists, just as in the UK.

Causation is thus attributed to the exploitation of new media technologies by billionaire corporations investing in a neoliberal economic regime to meet the demand for individual choice in a massified society in which the old divisions of class and culture have been erased to 'give the punters what they want'. As Rupert Murdoch is quoted by Colin Leys, 'the public interest is what interests the public'. Alternative sources of non-fake news, such as *The San Francisco Public Press* launched in 2009 as a 'Wall Street Journal for Working People', tend towards a subscribing audience if they abjure advertisements and corporate sponsorship.

Part two examines legal aid and libraries in Britain where austerity-driven cuts deprive ordinary citizens of legal and other forms of public knowledge. Also in schools, where Ken Jones describes the new-market state form that has supplanted the post-war welfare state compromise between national and local authorities as power contracts to the centre whilst responsibility for 'delivery' is contracted out to schools, teachers and students. As in F&HE, teaching and learning thus become increasingly constrained by inspection of targets. Jones does not see this marketised system moving towards vouchers, even though this was the stated aim of former-Education Secretary, Michael Gove, and one which he still hopes to achieve under the consolidation entailed in 'hard Brexit'.

Already, 'the botched introduction of an unsustainable student loan system' (Davis p88) augments what Andrew McGettigan's chapter on 'The Treasury View of Higher Education' calls 'a hybrid loan-voucher scheme' in which fees/loans act as human capital investment in the Future Earnings and Employment Record (FEER) enabling

applicants to speculate on the returns they can make by comparing courses across universities in 'the coming wave of education evaluation' (p112). Similarly to schools, the main aim is not ideological (so-called 'dumbing down') but that is its effect.

In Section 3 on 'The Corruption of News and Information in Markets', financial behemoths are shown to have had 'The Edge' on market information since deregulation. This includes manipulating inter-bank lending rates to 'Put the Lies into Libor'. The Irish financial press illustrates how a source of supposedly reliable public information sustained the housing bubble that burst in 2007.

In Section 4 Colin Leys traces how the internal market was imposed on the NHS as a step towards privatisation, replacing the previous social-democratic compromise Jones outlined for schools. As Leys says, the market 'effectively rejects . . . the concept of a public sphere to which the concept of public knowledge is necessarily linked'. Its introduction therefore involved attacking the professions and the universities - both previously insulated from commercial pressures and from government, until power was concentrated in the hands of managers, 'think-tanks' and well-funded consultancies.

This parallels Bong-hyun Lee's corporate takeover by the *chaebols* in Korea. However, free-market Utopianism precludes any learning from mistakes with blame for inevitable market failures attributed to those held accountable for delivery in the new Consulting-Corporate-Government Complex.

In conclusion, Des Freedman and Justin Schlosberg present a seven page 'Manifesto for Public Knowledge' declaring, 'We want to wrest control of knowledge-producing and decision-making back from structures that are not only largely unaccountable to their users but also explicitly intertwined with the powerful interests that need regulating in the first place.' To achieve this, 'we will have to demystify prevailing narratives about the knowledge society and associated civic empowerment'. 'A truly progressive reform agenda requires . . . nurturing new vehicles of public knowledge production . . . and reconfiguring old ones to make them more democratic, accountable and sustainable.'

Such an ambitious task requires strategic alliances, perhaps even asking with Colin Crouch in his 2017 book written for Social Europe\* whether Neoliberalism can save itself by using the contradictions between its 'market' and 'corporate' forms; more crudely, between American gangster capitalism and German banker capitalism, or in the UK between the remnants of productive capital aligned to the EU and speculative finance capital aligned to the USA.

More immediately for students, this book provides a series of insights into the world in which they find themselves. It may take them beyond the boxes their universities will be forced to tick for FEER and contribute to further disillusion with the political consensus on supposedly 'vocational' courses in schools, colleges and universities, as well as so-called 'apprenticeships' in employment. For automation and outsourcing are rendering students redundant before they complete their courses, even for professional preparation.

The fantasy of an economy running itself algorithmically without intervention by those who set it up was briefly taken up during the 'student spring' protests against tripled fees in 2010-11 by autonomist Marxists quoting 'The Fragment on Machines' in Marx's *Grundrisse* to argue that 'the development of fixed capital' (machines - particularly those now incorporating advanced automation and Artificial Intelligence) had elevated 'general social knowledge' to 'a direct force in production'. This implied that 'the conditions of the processes of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect'.

Although, as Colin Waugh commented at the time, much of this anarchistic speculation resembled Marcuse more than Marx, it was linked to the idea that such a general intellect could be exercised by HE students. But although mass undergraduate courses have become less specialist and more generalised, tertiary education is not the level at which to foster a foundational education. As Marx said in *Capital*, 'fully developed individuals, fit for a variety of labours, ready to face any change of production, and to whom the social functions they perform, are but so many modes of giving free scope to their own natural and acquired powers' is the ideal of a general intellect that could be created in comprehensive primary and secondary schools. Linked to democratic citizenship, an entitlement to tertiary-level lifelong further and higher continuing adult education would find its place in a National Education Service worthy of the name to counter *The Death of Public Knowledge* that Aeron Davis and his contributors challenge in this book.

\* Crouch, C. (2017), *Can Neoliberalism Be Saved From Itself?* London: Social Europe