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5. NEOLIBERALISM AND THE VALUE OF HIGHER EDUCATION¹

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I reflect on the influence of neoliberalism on the meanings and recognition of value in respect of higher education. The term neoliberalism is somewhat vague and conceptually overburdened and it is worth stating that I am defining it here as ‘a project for institutional change grounded in particular ideas about the social’ and not simply as “an expression of the *zeitgeist* of global capitalism or as a conspiracy of ruling elites’ (Flew, 2014, p. 64). I am doing so precisely because my chosen definition explicitly links neo-liberalism to the institutional (higher education) and the social (the broader context in which the practice of higher education is located). Furthermore, I am locating the points I make on the higher education landscape of England (higher education provision in the UK is not uniform) to foreground the need for specificity. Paradoxically, this might serve to support understanding of the global implications of both cultures of valuation and their refraction.

Hall focuses his attention in this volume on the production of value in higher education, arguing for a reconceptualisation of the latter. I start from the premise that little is known about the value of higher education at all, although much is assumed, such is the conflation of higher education (as a particular form of education) with education (as a public good). Whilst it may be permissible to disagree about the nature of its value, it is problematic to suggest higher education may have little or no value at all, in general or to particular constituencies (Wolf, 2002). To suggest that higher education might not serve the interests of particular constituencies can too easily be construed as a ‘backlash’ (University Alliance, 2014), or as an attempt to place higher education beyond their reach (Watts, 2009). This state of affairs in turn hinders effective responses to the influence of neoliberal ideologies on the meanings and perceptions of its value. The situation is further complicated by the temporal aspects of value and the necessity for sensitivity to both the changing and enduring meanings of value over time, which is highlighted in Edmonds’ chapter in this volume. This kind of sensitivity is, however, often absent in respect of analyses of higher education, which in turn may overlook the influence of regressive processes on value attribution and recognition.

For example, critiques of the current over-emphasis on the mercantile or instrumental value of higher education may unwittingly evoke nostalgia for a bygone

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era which is (erroneously) cast as superior to present arrangements. Moreover, accounts which attempt to counter or provide an alternative to neo-liberal discourses on higher education often attend to what higher education might or ought to be (*inter alia* Barnett, 1990; Blake, Smith, & Standish, 1998; Boni & Walker, 2013; George, 2014; McMahon, 2009; Newman, 1852/2014) rather than what it is (Boni & Gasper, 2012). On the one hand visions for an imagined future are essential, but if they remain unsupported by contextually differentiated and nuanced accounts about its value in the here and now, they can also be summarily dismissed as idealised or ideological. On the other hand, concentrating on the value of higher education in the here and now erases antecedent influences on the formation of what is understood by value.

My purpose in this chapter is therefore to consider how to interrogate prevalent ideas about the value of higher education without becoming embroiled in these predicaments. I do so in two steps. First, rather than the *value* of higher education itself, I focus instead on *cultures of valuation* (Haiven, 2014; Lilley & Papadopoulos, 2014). Cultures of valuation do not offer the metrics for evaluation. They furnish instead the contexts for judgements about value, act as mechanisms through which value is attributed and lenses through which it might be recognised. Here I specifically highlight two cultures of valuation in which higher education is embedded. I have chosen the first, the culture of financialisation, because it is currently pervasive and dominant. I have called the second ‘privileged intrinsicity’ because it epitomises the tendency to nostalgia and idealisation in attempts to counter financialised narratives of value. Second I discuss how the apparent rejection of higher education by white working class young people in England, which is often interpreted as a lack of aspiration (Milburn, 2009), can be seen instead as a refraction of neo-liberal cultures of valuation. The resultant insights from an analysis of this refraction have the potential to provide accounts of higher education that resonate with what matters to these young people and why (Sayer, 2011).

(BIO)FINANCIALISATION AS A CULTURE OF VALUATION

The value of higher education is often expressed in economic terms such as ‘the returns to higher education’ (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2011) and is reduced to its ‘contribution to more general economic and social redistribution’ (Preston & Green, 2003, p. 4, cited in Department for Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS], 2013). I maintain that this trend reflects embeddedness in a particular culture of valuation that might be described as financialisation (Dowling & Harvie, 2014; Haiven, 2014; Martin, 2002). Lilley and Papadopoulos (2014) go further, designating this phenomenon as ‘biofinancialisation’ because

the worth of goods, things, activities and spaces can be *essentially* translated into financial evaluations... Financial value is here used to express the primacy of investment value over other values (aesthetic, use, moral, ecological,

material, cultural) that predominantly assess the future monetary profit to be gained from potentially any field of life or the environment. (p. 974, original emphasis)

In short it is not only that financialisation *pervades* everyday life (Martin, 2002) but that ‘the very ontology of our everyday lives’, (Lilley & Papadopoulos, 2014, p. 972) is transformed into transactions only calculable in financial terms. Biofinancialisation thus articulates the penetration of finance into the very recesses of subjectivity. This argument echoes through Bradford and Hey’s (2007) discussion of the contemporary landscape of subjectivity, that these days ‘it seems impermissible for the citizen to be anything other than successful’ (p. 596). The measure of success is calculated in financial terms such as the value of assets or the size of income. What is more, ‘although different scales of evaluation are by definition incommensurable... the worth of almost everything... is in principle transferable into one single logic of financial value that is potentially tradable in the market’ (Lilley & Papadopoulos, 2014, p. 974). Hence, the ‘wider benefits’ of higher education such as ‘improved health outcomes’ are framed as ‘the reduced likelihood of requiring public sector assistance in relation to healthcare’ (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS], 2011, p. 11) with the concomitant savings in spending thereon.

Such evaluations in themselves may be said to be simple expressions of the political economy of higher education rather than the manifestation of a culture of value attribution. However, it is pertinent for analyses in this arena that (bio) financialisation itself also relies on ‘privileged access to education and socio-cultural capital’ (Lilley & Papadopoulos 2014, p. 977). In other words there is a dynamic between the criteria for evaluation, the methods of evaluation and the object of evaluation. Hence it is not simply that economic evaluations of higher education reflect the financialisation of everyday life; they ‘perform and reproduce’ it (Lilley & Papadopoulos, 2014, p. 980). Pronouncements about the social and personal value (‘realising one’s potential’) of higher education that feature heavily in political rhetoric thus constitute an ‘ideological displacement’ (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978) in which the influence of (bio)financialisation as a culture of valuation is apparent. (Bio)financialisation therefore has a theoretical function inasmuch as it explains the origins and use of economic and mercantile measures in evaluations of higher education.

PRIVILEGED INTRINSICALITY – A RESPONSE TO (BIO)FINACIALISATION

The idea, fear even, that the value of higher education is being reduced to the economic and the mercantile finds expression in a culture of valuation which I have elsewhere described as ‘privileged intrinsicality’ (Downs, 2015). Privileged intrinsicality is salient precisely because the value of higher education is being seen as reduced in this way. Privileged intrinsicality is also delineated through opposition to the instrumentalisation of higher education and through nostalgia for the days

when higher education was an elite pursuit (Scott, 1995). This is the case even when, paradoxically, the intention is to make it more inclusive. Looking back to a supposed 'golden age' seems to be part of more general trend that signifies confusion in an age where the pace of change is outrunning comprehension (Elliott & Turner, 2015). Although Eichhorn (2015) argues that nostalgia might be both harmful and helpful depending on context, in the current higher education context, Scott's (1995) warning – that what is being longed for here is a time when higher education was 'rooted in subtle and stealthy socialization and acculturation rather than explicit intellectual formation' (p. 2) – is still apposite. Privileged intrinsicity assumes that higher education, like education, is valuable in and of itself and assumes common understanding of the concept 'higher education', even though higher education actually remains under-theorised (Scott, 1995; Walker & Boni, 2013). It is significant for example that the dominant model of higher education is usually equated with three years' (or more) study for a Bachelor's degree awarded by a university. Stevens (2004) maintains that this idea was perpetuated almost absent-mindedly in policy, but it also reflects the vested interest of those universities whose elite status is intertwined with the continuation of this model.

This is not to imply that higher education never is or should be an end in itself. But it is one thing to say that higher education has intrinsic value; it is another to transform this claim into an entire culture of value attribution. This transformation serves to regulate the depth and reach of analysis and commentary in (at least) three significant ways.

First, this transformation disavows the ways in which higher education always and already has instrumental value and a purpose, whether that be the satisfaction of an individual thirst for knowledge or a love of study; the provision of policy solutions to concerns about social mobility, social justice and the needs of the knowledge economy (Bowes, Thomas, Peck, & Nathwani, 2013); the maintenance of class privilege; or some other noble purpose (Robbins, 1963). An instrumental purpose may be more or less quantifiable, but that does not legitimise discounting certain forms of instrumentality while criticising others. Moreover, the contemporary foregrounding of one instrumental purpose of higher education, namely its value to the economy, can be seen as a mere shift in emphasis rather than a rupture with the past (McNicol, 2004). And yet instead of tracing undulations in the meaning of value, arguments tend to proceed on the assumption that conceptualising higher education as a tool for the achievement of personal or political goals is something novel, representing a break with the past. (Blake, Smith, & Standish, 1998; Bradford & Hey, 2007; Stevens, 2004).

Second, transforming the claim for the intrinsic value of higher education into a culture of value attribution privileges a particular form of higher education, often labelled a 'liberal' higher education. This is a broad term which on its most basic interpretation foregrounds the study of subjects which have no explicit vocational

or technical focus. A liberal higher education is not without instrumental value inasmuch as it serves the formation of the ‘well-rounded citizen’, a term which is not only value but class laden (Bradford & Hey, 2007). Within a culture of privileged intrinsicity, this kind of education is positioned as more valuable than others. In conjunction with a perceived shift to the instrumental purposes of higher education, the tenor of the critiques becomes one of ‘grief for lost intimacy’ (Scott, 1995, p. 7). This is evident for example in Barnett’s (1990) work, in which he states that the ‘historical conception of higher education as standing for intrinsically worthwhile ends – essentially the idea of liberal higher education – is being *lost from sight*’ (p. x, my emphasis). Missing from such accounts is the possibility that a ‘liberal education’ is not a value neutral concept (Scott, 1995, p. 2).

Third, eliding the specific meaning of the value of higher education within a more expansive and general notion of value ignores the experience of some groups of students, erasing the role and mediating influence of gender, class, dis/ability and ethnicity, and pre-empting what might actually matter to people (Sayer, 2011; Watts & Bridges, 2006). For some students, study for instrumental reasons – because it leads directly to a job for example (Bhatti, 2003) or because it is necessary for entry to a particular profession (Milburn, 2012) – might be more valuable than study for knowledge acquisition per se. The benefits of a liberal education cannot be assumed to apply evenly. I must stress here that my critique is not of the specific types of knowledge, often located in the areas of the arts and humanities, that might constitute a liberal education. Indeed the arts and humanities are themselves required now to produce justificatory narratives that fit into financialised cultures of valuation (Belfiore, 2015; Benneworth, 2015; O’Brien, 2015). But I do maintain that responding to financialised cultures of valuation by repurposing the arts and humanities as a portal to a lost age is insufficient at best and at worst it is counterproductive because it ignores contextual specificity (Eichhorn, 2015).

Failure to focus on the contextualising culture of valuation here does a disservice to the agency of individual actors, and it isolates those actors from the forces that are brought to bear on the processes of individual and collective value attribution. For example, criticising the emphasis on employability in higher education fails to address how being ill-equipped to deal with the stratifying effects of a globalised labour market impacts more negatively on some people than on others. Privileging the intrinsic worth of higher education therefore omits, or at the very least truncates, questions about who is doing the valuing, from which vantage point, for what reason and at which point in time. It assumes instead a set of universal, inviolable and often invisible criteria for judgements about value that are largely impervious to both historicity and to the multiplicity of social conditions and human life.

The rest of the chapter aims to address these omissions by attending to the refraction of those cultures of valuation by white working class young people in England.

REFRACTING NEOLIBERAL CULTURES OF VALUATION

Responding effectively to narratives about the value of higher education in a culture of (bio)financialisation is hampered by a number of factors, not least that ‘our semiotic-ontological access to the world is organised through cultures of valuation to such an extent that one cannot simply withdraw from these cultures without dismantling one’s own existence’ (Lilley & Papadopoulos, 2014, p. 980). Therefore accounts which attend to what higher education might or ought to be and that fail to attend sufficiently to their location in the current and prevailing culture of (bio) financialisation can be dismissed as idealised or ideological. Neither is critique alone sufficient, even when it transcends mere scepticism, because it will always and already exist in relation, or as ‘other’, to the prevailing narratives of the dominant culture.

I suggest that we might sidestep these dilemmas by using the concept of refraction (Goodson, 2012; Goodson & Lindblad, 2010; Rudd & Goodson, 2012) to re-interpret the apparent *rejection* of higher education by white working class young people in England (National Audit Office [NAO], 2008; Sammons, Toth & Sylva, 2015; Stahl, 2015), which is most often seen as *reflecting* a lack of aspiration (Milburn, 2009). We could, however, see it as a *refraction* of neo-liberal cultures of valuation as they collide with what matters to these young people. Following refracted trajectories leads to analytical ground that may otherwise have remained unexplored, such as the extent to which dominant narratives about value are able to rise above material reality (Goodson, 2013, p. 13; Smith quoted in Salmon 2010, p. 5) and how individual notions of ‘value’ are always and already embedded in dominant cultures of valuation. For example Stahl’s (2015) study of white working class boys’ aspirations sets out how the views expressed by these groups (on social class and on the importance of higher education) do echo to some extent the dominant aspiration discourses. But their views are also reconfigured when they pass through the lens of pre-existing values (such as a particular kind of loyalty to kith and kin) and identities (as members of a community). This means the boys valorise higher education whilst still eschewing it in favour of other (sometimes more lucrative) careers. Therefore the concept of refraction serves to signpost the way, theoretically and methodologically, to analyses of the value of higher education which start with what matters to the actors concerned, which are sensitive to historicity and to the multiplicity of social conditions and human life. This undertaking can be considerably supported and complemented by the concept of lay normativity (Sayer, 2011).

Lay Normativity

The concept of lay normativity expresses the idea that people ‘regularly engage in reasoning about how to value things’ (Sayer, 2011, p. 23) and are able to theorise about social phenomena and events on this basis. It runs counter to premises of divisions

between fact/value, reason/emotion and subjectivity/objectivity and proceeds on the conviction that arguments about valuations in everyday life are not ‘merely arbitrary, a matter of assertion or power’ (p. 23). In short people are able to theorise or explain social events and phenomena precisely because they are able to make value judgements about them. I have therefore argued (Downs, 2015), that lay normativity can act as a culture of valuation because it foregrounds an evaluative relationship to the world rooted in ‘everyday thought, practice and social arrangements in order to reveal what everyday thought fails to register’ (Sayer, 2011, p. 216). This does not mean that we all care in the same or mutually supportive ways or that we care about the same things. Some people may care deeply about that which others may find abhorrent. But most people ‘are sentient, *evaluative beings*: we don’t just think and interact but evaluate things including the past and the future’ (Sayer, 2011, p. 1, original emphasis). Lay normativity is therefore particularly useful as a concept here because it recognises the importance of temporality.

A normative standpoint does not in itself create conditions capable of ‘dangerously naturalizing and homogenizing contingent social forms’ (Sayer, 2011, p. 243), although care must be taken not to fall into this trap. Indeed arguing for lay normativity makes little sense if one ignores the fact that people have their own susceptibilities, as well as manifesting those of the particular society in which they happen to live. It is the situated, dynamic relationship between the individual and their circumstances that is of paramount importance here. Therefore analysing the absence of white working class young people from higher education as refraction of neo-liberal values in no way proscribes inclusion of structural factors.

LAY NORMATIVITY AS A CULTURE OF VALUATION IN PRACTICE

What needs to happen if the absence of white working class young people in higher education is to be interpreted as the refraction of a neo-liberal, financialised culture of valuation or an idealised, nostalgic culture of privileged intrinsicity through a culture of lay normativity? I suggest we need first to understand what matters to these young people in practice. This task is rendered more complex by the dominance of financialised cultures of valuation. Archer (2003) for example noted that the working class respondents in her research ‘seemed to value higher education in primarily economic and instrumental terms’ (p. 123), ‘(e)choing, *to some extent*, dominant government rhetoric’ (p. 23, my emphasis). But she also points out that many of these respondents did differentiate between the personal, the familial and the state in their assessments of economic value, confirming Sayer’s (2011) contention that people ‘regularly engage in reasoning about how to value things’ (p. 23). Archer’s respondents were clear about this (value equates to the potential to support family). But, having scant idea about the experience of higher education prior to entering a higher education institution, and with no experience of being a graduate or of having a degree (Jenkins, Jones, & Ward, 2001), they had to avail themselves of prevailing

and dominant discourse *to some extent* to fill the gaps left by their lack of actual experience or knowledge.

Second, thinking about analysis under the influence of lay normativity entails an interrogation of some a priori ideas that make up notions of value, such as advantage and disadvantage (Hattam & Smyth, 2014), participation, aspiration (Hart, 2013; Stahl, 2015) and success (Bradford & Hay 2007). It also involves the exercise of practical reason which Nussbaum (2000, p. 79; 2011, p. 34) describes as ‘being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s life’. This in turn requires a degree of reflexivity that is largely absent from current evaluations of higher education (Walker, 2006). On these terms the value of higher education is not measured on criteria external to the individual, such as how long it takes a graduate to find a job, nor by average earnings, nor by how graduates contribute to the economy, nor whether someone conforms to a pre-determined idea of a ‘cultivated’ or ‘successful’ citizen.

Goodson (2014), echoing Wright Mills (1959), also indicates a methodological strand to this point when he insists that ‘we have to understand the personal and biographical if we are to understand the social and political’ (p. 1). Research often proceeds ‘in ignorance or denial of personal missions and biographical mandates’, but Goodson argues that these are ‘a good place to locate our studies (and indeed our policies), not reluctantly at the end of a process, but enthusiastically at the beginning’ (p. 1). Their inclusion implicitly foregrounds the primacy of ‘what matters to people’, which also implies a greater role for narrative approaches, which are a vehicle for first person expressions of what is to count as valuable. There is a cautionary note to be sounded here because when we ask someone what matters to them there is the danger that ‘(w)hat we capture, in fact, is a mediation between the personal voice and wider cultural imperatives’ (Goodson, 2005, p. 215) and constraints. For example, Bridges (2006); Elster (1983); Nussbaum (2000); and Watts (2009, 2013) have all offered treatments of the concept of adaptive or adapted preference. This is a complex concept, to which it is not possible to do justice here, but it alludes to the way in which ‘choice’ can be unconsciously and unwittingly influenced by social, structural, psychological, environmental and institutional constraints. A simple but clear indication of the influence of adapted preference can be heard for example in the expression that ‘university is not for the likes of me’.

Third, taking lay normativity as a starting point would entail expanding the reach and depth of analysis to include that which is currently excluded. For example, in social scientific educational research there is currently a greater focus on working class ‘non-participation’ in higher education in both policy and research than on middle class ‘self-exclusion’. It would also mean re-orientating a long tradition in the field of social scientific study of focusing on the ‘underdog’ (Becker, 1970). This concentration on working class non-participation and its framing as a sign of disadvantage has tended to perpetuate rather than counter a deficit model of the working classes, particularly the white working classes (Skeggs, 2004), not only in terms of the rhetoric of aspiration (Milburn, 2012) but also as reflecting (lack of)

working class moral worth (Sayer, 2005). Middle class ‘non-participation’ in higher education meanwhile tends to be treated in qualitatively different ways in both policy rhetoric and in research, and is positioned discursively as ‘self-exclusion’ for example (Whitty, 2001). When systems and processes of valuation that emanate from sources external to personal values and evaluative relationships are applied in research, working class practices thus can be, and are, construed as ‘other’, to those of their middle class counterparts (Bourdieu, 1986; Skeggs, 2004). Situating analyses in a culture of lay normativity offers the potential to avoid these binaries.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I argued that little is known about the value of higher education, although much is assumed and I suggested two steps that might offer a way of ‘thinking against the grain of orthodoxies’ on the subject while simultaneously mitigating potentially ‘damaging effects of foreclosure’ (Hattam & Smyth, 2014, p. 271). The first step entails focusing on cultures of valuation rather than on value itself in order to highlight the influences that are brought to bear on processes of value attribution and recognition. The second involves tracing the refracted trajectories of dominant discourses when they collide with particular cultures of valuation. I suggested that Sayer’s concept of lay normativity might serve as a particularly useful culture of valuation here because it is expressive of that which already and actually matters to people. Unlike (bio)financialised cultures of valuation, lay normativity eschews essentialising discourse. In contrast to privileged intrinsicity, which is rooted in the past, it also allows for the dynamic between the present and the past, for what has changed and what endures.

In this way the absence of young white working class young men and women from higher education spaces can be read along a refracted trajectory as the exercise of agency, which in turn arises out of evaluations that are rooted in current lived realities *and* imagined futures. The story is thus transformed from one of deficiency, or free-market notions of choice, to a story of enacting personal life missions in the context of reasoned evaluations of the available options.

NOTE

- ¹ This chapter is a reworking of Downs (2015). Furthering alternative cultures of valuation in higher education research. *Cambridge Journal of Education*. doi:10.1080/0305764X.2015.1102865

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