

Employability as Exploitability: a Marxist Critical Pedagogy

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Abstract

This chapter argues that any critical, and especially Marxist approach to pedagogy, needs to tackle head-on the ways in which academic workplaces and classrooms are being implicitly, and in some cases explicitly, shaped as employment laboratories. To counter this trend, one possible short-term tactic is to teach the dark side of employability. This means to reveal the exploitation and alienation of work as labour in a capitalist system, to warn against the magic pill of 'transferable skills', and teach life as a critique of the so-called 'successful transition' from graduate to worker celebrated by the 'embedding employability' discourse. The chapter first presents the neoliberal employability agenda in the UK since the late 1990s in terms of government and sector-led policy in higher education as well as employability metrics, and briefly reviews what has become a growing academic field. It then presents some of the key critical literature that explains the rise of this agenda, before proposing some initial thoughts on how to develop a counter-conduct pedagogy for exploitability, i.e. appropriating the employability agenda in universities so as to teach students 'how to know when to quit a job', among other tips on how to survive in a capitalist labour market.

Keywords: employability; higher education; neoliberalism; critical pedagogy; counter-conduct; exploitation; career; success; Marxism; reification

The employability agenda has been slowly but surely creeping into higher education (HE), embedded through curricula and extra-curricular activities by a range of different policy and economic actors, as well as a range of university employees, from teaching staff to careers specialists. This agenda is driven by government policy - in the UK since the 1997 Dearing Report (National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education, 1997) - but also around the world e.g. OECD reports (2008a and 2008b), the Bologna Process in Europe (1999) and similar recommendations in Asia (UNESCO, 2012) (Lee et al., 2016: 96-97; McCowan, 2015: 268). Testing the employability agenda has become a key metric, from global university rankings to local programme validations and module evaluations. Employability can be measured most simply as the rate of graduates to reach employment following their degrees. However, due to the increasing significance of the stakes involved, definitions of this metric have evolved in interesting and in some cases very complex ways. Either way, employability has become one of the factors determining (or thought to determine) students' university choices and is therefore now a key marketing and recruitment strategy shaping competition between universities.

It is no stretch of the mind to associate this trend with neoliberalism and the marketisation of HE, as universities worldwide increasingly, if not solely, rely on student fees and limited government funding. The general discourse of the necessary 'utility' of graduates to the labour market, and the debts they incur during their studies, force students to consider education as an investment on which they, or their parents, require a worthwhile return, i.e. a good job or the connections to get a good job. Thus, the question as to how universities actually help secure that job and those

connections has been raised, and thankfully, not without some debate or resistance from academics and other interested parties.

Yet, crushed between students' understandable anxieties and unemployment fears increased since 2008 on the one side, and senior university managers driven by the narrow imperatives of the financial pressures of student recruitment on the other, academics' well-known concerns are often silenced and ignored, typically remaining mere spectators in the discursive shifts, as well as the increasingly practical consequences, of the employability agenda on curricula and co-curricular activities.

What does the employability agenda in HE teach us about neoliberalism today? Are there any ways in which it can be resisted or reclaimed so as to counter the neoliberal model? If so, can the concept of counter-conduct effectively help academics turn the employability agenda to the advantage of a society that provides spaces to think beyond neoliberalism? This chapter provides some preliminary answers to these questions.

The literature on employability, which has grown significantly in recent years, is a useful starting point. Debates show that the stakes are significantly high from financial and discursive angles, and that the employability agenda, though it may seem peripheral in relation to other neoliberal strategies of restructuring, threatening jobs and programmes in many universities, is actually at the core of the transformation of HE since its opening up to massification, managerialism, and marketisation in the late twentieth century. Employability may even be the best-kept secret of this process. Engaging with this debate is therefore crucial.

Some, perhaps purer minded, critical theorists may consider employability to be a revolting instrumentalism, and completely refuse to engage with the term or its implications. Perhaps they are also the lucky ones who can still afford to ignore it. Some might also argue that participating in the employability agenda in academic workplaces can only serve neoliberal principles of marketised education. They may be right; yet before committing to such a conclusion, more critical work needs to be produced on this phenomenon and the debates and arguments need to be fleshed out.

Thus, this chapter argues that any critical, and especially Marxist approach to pedagogy, needs to tackle head-on the ways in which academic workplaces and classrooms are being implicitly, and in some cases explicitly, shaped as employment laboratories. To counter this trend, one possible short-term tactic is to teach the dark side of employability, to reveal the exploitation and alienation of work as labour in a capitalist system, to warn against the magic pill of transferable skills and teach life as a critique of the so-called 'successful transition' from graduate to worker celebrated by the 'embedding employability' discourse. Perhaps the success of the employability agenda will be the final nail in the coffin that will force us to create better spaces for the 'common in higher education' (Szadkowski, 2019). However, until that accelerationist wet-dream happens, best to keep struggling and counter-conducting in the factory lines of corporate graduate production.

The argument is presented in two sections. Firstly, section one discusses why we cannot ignore the employability agenda and what it reveals about the effect of neoliberalism on HE, focusing on the UK policy developments since the late 1990s and broader efforts by the HE sector to embed employability in HE. Section two discusses how to explain and deal with this agenda from a critical and specifically counter-conduct perspective, i.e. how to teach the dark side of employability as exploitability.

The Employability Agenda and the Neoliberal University

Policy making in HE and employability metrics

It is a cliché to state that a sociological concept is difficult to define, and employability is no exception. However, the debate over the definition of employability is interesting in so far as there is a tension over the fundamental scope of the concept. On one side of the spectrum, one can find the more simplistic and reductionist quantitative approach used traditionally by league tables, employers, and the general public. This was based before 2018 on the 'Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) Survey' (HESA, 2017a) - which is now replaced by the 'Higher Education Graduate Outcomes Statistics' (HESA, 2018)¹ - and on specific transferable skills. On the other side of the spectrum, one finds a more elaborate, encompassing, and qualitative definition going beyond raw data and focusing on a range of skills, attributes, outcomes, etc. and adopted by AdvanceHE.² Is employability a specific and industry-determined subset of broader graduate outcomes or attributes (Hill et al. 2016), or is it the umbrella term that captures all skills and outcomes expected to be achieved during a degree? Fundamentally different views of the ethics of university life could adhere to any of these positions, making it difficult to sometimes position oneself. Taking the first approach where employability refers to a very specific set of more vocational or applied skills could either be taken by a very business-minded view or by a view that considers studying and teaching at university to encapsulate a range of social transformations that go beyond students' labour market utility as workers, thereby requiring to limit employability to specific business requirements. On the other hand, the broader view can be adopted firstly by those who want to embrace employability, but also secondly by those who may realise that employability, for better and worse, captures the reality that university life is driven by market factors. Thus, 'love it or loathe it' (Norton, 2019), it inevitably embodies all the various dimensions of student and teaching activities; however uncomfortable one may feel, the only way in this perspective is to reframe it so as to address and possibly counter some of the reductionist effects of this realisation and acceptance of the marketised education sector.

The latter position - that employability is a broad umbrella term that should be used to encapsulate the whole university experience - is represented by the Advance HE definition, adopted widely by various stakeholders:

Advance HE views embedding employability as providing the opportunities to develop the knowledge, skills, experiences, behaviours, attributes, achievements and attitudes that enable graduates to make *successful transitions* benefitting them, the economy and their communities.

Employability is relevant to all students and at all levels of study. To be addressed effectively, employability should be embedded into all learning and teaching policies, processes and practices

¹ The DLHE collected data from graduates six months after graduating and was problematic on a range of variables, see Christie (2017: 408). The Graduate Outcomes Survey is called 'the 'NewDLHE' review' and promises to 'capture rich, robust and comprehensive data using a more efficient and future-proof methodology' (HESA, 2017b). The first experimental set of data from 2017/2018 was released in June 2020 and a key difference is that it is a near complete census survey and data is based on what graduates are doing fifteen months after graduating (Cook & Hewitt, 2017).

² In 2018, Advance HE was formed as the 'new sector agency' merging the Equality Challenge Unit, the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, and the Higher Education Academy (HEA) (Advance HE, 2018). The HEA defined itself as 'the national body for learning and teaching in higher education' (HEA, 2016). Advance HE is registered as a company limited by guarantee and as a charity owned by Universities UK - a lobbying group of UK vice-chancellors which McGettigan (2013: 6) compares to the Confederation of British Industries (CBI) - and by GuildHE, a network of higher and further education members producing policy advice (Advance HE 2021). Advance HE is a broad and multifaceted agency and network that publishes guidance and frameworks on key issues and strategies for higher education. It also awards teaching fellowships according to the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF), a 'globally-recognised framework for benchmarking success within HE teaching and learning support' managed and led by Advance HE (Advance HE, 2021a). Its most recently published vision and strategy (Advance HE, 2021b) covers a very wide range of issues for policy-makers, senior management, teaching staff, and students.

and considered throughout the student lifecycle, from the very start of a student programme through to completion of their studies. Graduates should be equipped to make *successful transitions* not just on graduation but throughout their life, and to manage their careers effectively. All stakeholders, including academic and support staff, students, careers services, students' unions and employers, have a role to play in embedding employability and should be encouraged to engage in and be involved in doing so. Employability should be integrated into the culture of the institution (Tibby & Norton, 2020: 5 my emphasis).

Beyond the specific details of this definition – i.e. which skills, attributes, outcomes, etc., and how should all these actors concretely integrate employability into the culture of the institution – it seems crucial to take a step back and explore how this definition evolved to understand how it sits with the former and cruder definition of employability as used in league tables and as echoed by universities (Christie, 2017), and which may be much more attractive to students' decision-making. Many efforts have been made to improve student participation in these definitions and to find a common space which speaks to students' need for quick and useful data, while integrating policy-makers and academics' concerns for a broader definition (CBI/NUS, 2011; O'Leary, 2017; Office for Students, 2021a). However, involving student voice remains difficult and inevitably framed by what it may reveal to HE institutions for their university choices, and hence recruitment pressures. As supported by Advance HE, the key reason why embedding employability is important for 'Higher education providers (HEPs)' is that 'excellence in graduate outcomes enhances an institution's reputation and global standing and influences recruitment and employer engagement' (Tibby & Norton, 2020: 5). Before developing a more critical view on these definitions, the following briefly presents the evolution of definitions of employability.

As mentioned above, the employability agenda is now fully adopted by universities across the world. In the UK, this agenda was set in motion by New Labour following the 1997 Dearing Report. The importance of this agenda and its focus on the attainment of certain skills was confirmed and reinforced by the business sector, as evidenced by the collaborative and influential Universities UK and CBI report (CBI/UUK, 2009).³ It is interesting to compare definitions of employability in this report to more recent ones, since they all remain very similar to the definition established by Knight and Yorke (2004) and developed in subsequent publications with the HEA (Yorke & Knight, 2006; Yorke, 2006; Moreland, 2006; Yorke, 2010; Pegg et al., 2012). Arora (2015: 637) also uses this definition because of its adoption by the CBI/UUK report:

A set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community, and the economy' (CBI/UUK, 2009: 13)

Another definition given in the CBI/UUK report, but more hidden in the 'What is employability?' section, is more market-oriented, while maintaining some of the structure of the above definition:

A set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all labour market participants should possess to ensure they have the capability of being effective in the workplace – to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy (CBI/UUK, 2009: 8)

The 2020 Advance HE definition (Tibby & Norton, 2020) has since taken out the words 'market', 'workforce', 'effective' and 'workplace', and added 'experiences, behaviours' and 'attitudes' as key criteria. Nevertheless, the consensus and shared understandings between these actors is clear.

³ Moreover the involvement of the business sector in broader HE policy and governance continues to grow: 'Decisions on whether higher education providers in England can offer their own degrees will now be influenced by leaders in market competition and graduate skills. The Quality Assurance Agency, the independent body for quality and standards in UK higher education, has appointed two new experts to advise on degree awarding powers as regulatory changes come into force in England. Anne Lambert is on the Board of the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA), and Jenny Taylor is Foundation Leader at IBM UK.' (QAA, 2018)

Moreover, the field is blurred by the addition of the 'enterprise agenda', which has exponentially increased in recent years. Norton (2019) raises the interesting issue as to whether both agendas diverge or overlap, and notes how the enterprise agenda has avoided some of the problematic semantic debates regarding employability by focusing on 'the foundations for developing the student throughout their career and looking to create impact and sustainable change at a programme, school/faculty/college and institutional level', thus better emphasising the goal of individual success.

More broadly, Lee et al. (2016: 96-97) give a detailed review of the institutional genesis of the employability agenda in the UK, with the 2006 Leitch Review of Skills (Leitch, 2006), followed by the Labour government's Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) framework for HE called *Higher Ambitions: The Future of Universities in a Knowledge Economy* (2010), quickly reinforced by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition who implemented the need for universities to publish 'Employability Statements', 'outlining their strategies for delivering highly skilled graduates (HEFCE, 2010)' and later on, 'Key Information Sets (KIS) on each of their undergraduate programmes, giving details, among a long list of other things, of graduate employability rates, average graduate earnings and common job types attained six months after graduation' (Lee et al. 2016: 97). The agenda was thus by then fully 'embedded' into university governance, notably through the Higher Education and Research Act (2017), and ready to shape the transformation of the UK university landscape into a fully marketised student-fee based system post-2010. The role of employability in this transformation was made less visible in the midst of the fundamental restructurings occurring during this period, but looking at this history, its centrality is clear.

A key dimension of the neoliberalisation of HE and of the employability agenda is the influence of various rankings and metrics. The new Graduates Outcomes Survey (HESA, 2018) has already been mentioned, but HE institutions also rely on a range of league tables (Guardian, Complete University Guide, Times, Times Higher Education, QS World Rankings, etc.), on the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (Barkas et al. 2019), the National Student Survey (NSS), and the Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) survey (Christie, 2017: 403; Advance HE, 2020: 5). League tables are an interesting indicator of the evolution of the employability agenda, now taking into account a broader range of variables. For the QS Graduate Employability Rankings (QS, 2019), five indicators are used. The 'simple and reductionist' Graduate Employment Rate constitutes 10% of the grading. This consists in measuring 'the proportion of graduates (excluding those opting to pursue further study or unavailable to work) in full or part time employment within 12 months of graduation' (QS, 2019: 6). The other indicators are 'Employer reputation (30%)', 'Alumni outcomes (25%)', 'Partnerships with Employers per Faculty (25%)', and 'Employer/Student Connections (10%)'. Moreover, the Guardian UK Universities League Table uses the category 'Career after 15 months' - its ranking of UK universities lists scores from 62 to 96% from worst to best UK university of 'graduates who find graduate-level jobs or are in further study at professional or HE level, within 15 months of graduation'. This is in line with the new Graduate Outcomes Survey (HESA, 2018). In contrast, the Global University Employability Ranking published by the Times Higher Education (Global Employability Ranking and Survey 2020) is determined by employers. It is commissioned by the company Emerging and conducted by the specialized consulting and polling institute Trendence. The survey is based on the votes of 8,820 respondents: '108,225 votes were canvassed from 9,000 operational and international managers in 22 countries. They voted to rate the employability performance of 6,000 international institutions' and together covered '300,000 recruitments' (Times Higher Education, 2020). Thus, in spite of significant developments in integrating broader definitions of employability from a range of stakeholders, the voice of employers remains very loud and it needs to be seen whether the appetite for quick and simple rankings, which continue to favour elite institutions, will be offset by newly updated methodologies and data collections. The following assesses the growing academic literature and how this has influenced the above evolutions of the employability agenda.

A growing academic field

The academic literature on employability is growing fast, especially when one associates it with its more recent avatars, enterprise and entrepreneurship. Here is not the place to review, or even provide a short summary of all its recent trends and debates (for literature reviews see: Artess, Hooley & Mellors-Bourne 2017; Abelha et al. 2020; Dalrymple et al. forthcoming). What I will focus on however is a brief and preliminary review of the recent critical literature on the concept, which remains more limited and dispersed than the mainstream dominant view, but which has had a significant impact. Tholen (2015) presents a useful review of the literature based on the distinction between mainstream and alternative views on employability. The mainstream view rests on the assumption that employability refers to 'the individual content that makes a person successful in the labour market' (2015: 767), and thus assumes the 'consensual and empowering quality of employability' (2015: 770). This view relies heavily on the attainment of specific skills, competences, and more recently, graduate attributes and outcomes. Many policy documents and rankings are based on this neoliberal approach to individual success and transition, nurtured by the enterprise and entrepreneurship direction of the broader agenda, and it is also important in professional careers guidance settings. For Tholen, this mainstream approach encapsulates a rational choice, agentic, and micro-perspective to sociology, based on 'human capital theorists' (Ibid.; Kalfa & Taksa, 2015: 581) and a strict separation between structure and agency (Tholen, 2015: 769), where views of the student as entrepreneur and of education as an investment dominate policy making and implementation (2015: 768-769).

The alternative view, in contrast, takes a more macro-historical approach where employability is instead conflictual, contextual, and relational, and more specifically 'structured by opportunity and inequalities' (2015: 770). A range of structural issues is covered by scholarship from this alternative view. For Tholen, most of these views remain overly structural, and his own approach favours a perspective inspired by Giddens's structuration theory, where the aim is to better 'integrate or connect the micro and the macro in a thorough or comprehensive manner' and for which he uses a comparative empirical survey of UK and Dutch students (2015: 773). Here is not the place to assess this work, but his literature review is a good starting point to think of how to distinguish between critical views of employability. Tholen is right to point to the distinction between a dominant view of atomised students whose main education objective is to optimise their skillset vs. an alternative view of structurally determined students affected by distinctions of race, class, and gender whose career objectives and prospects differ greatly, and for whom a more rational, specific, and business-driven view of employability obscures those distinctions.

However, the implications of the range of alternative or critical standpoints also vary. Since Tholen's work, more critical analyses have emerged that would accept his sociological theoretical starting point, but provide more specific solutions for what academics and HE institutions should do in response. Many critical approaches accept the importance of the employability agenda but argue it needs to be reframed and redefined as a complex 'process' (Rees, 2019; Reid, 2015), a 'journey' (Clarke, 2018) involving a range of sociological factors and values. Studies are influenced by critiques of marketised education and by notions of social capital and habitus from Pierre Bourdieu, social constructivism, and more postmodern and feminist authors, emphasising the importance of discursive and normative questions, as well as more pragmatic ontological concerns (e.g. Rees, 2019; Clarke, 2018; Bacon, 2018; Kalfa & Taksa, 2017 and 2015; McCowan, 2015; Rutt et al. 2013; Jameson et al. 2012; Boden & Nedeva, 2010). For several of these studies, managerialism can be turned to one's advantage and provide a critical basis for developing an employability agenda that is not merely a 'product' of HE, but also an 'integral and useful part of the learning process', where entrepreneurialism can be reframed for 'creating ventures and enterprise with social, community and cultural justifications and values' (Rees, 2019: 13).

This literature has undoubtedly had an effect on certain actors involved in policy-making for HE. Looking back at the definition adopted by Advance HE discussed above, the explicit focus, beyond skills, on ‘experiences, behaviours, attributes, achievements and attitudes’, on ‘the economy and their communities’, on ‘culture’, and the more implicit idea that employability needs to embody and be embedded at all levels and by all stakeholders reflects the more contextual and macro-sociological level pushed by alternative conceptions of employability. In effect, Artess, Hooley & Mellors-Bourne (2017: 15) note in their literature review (commissioned by the HEA) that the

HEA employability framework takes a broader and more inclusive perspective, and does not prioritise the perspectives of employers above those of students or academics, it specifically brings these groups together to develop a mutually agreed and combined perspective. In this way, it is actually in line with those critical writers who argue that educators need to inhabit this agenda and imbue it with more radical and critical content (Hooley 2015; Jameson et al. 2012; Kalfa and Taksa 2015; Reid 2016; Rooney and Rawlinson 2016).

Has the ‘radical and critical’ academic field on employability won the day, and developed a counter-hegemonic view on employability able to challenge the mainstream rational choice approach dominant in the government, employer, and rankings-led narrative? Perhaps claiming victory is a little premature, and more analysis of this ‘radical and critical content’ is required. The rest of this chapter thus embarks on a reflection of the employability agenda from a Marxist perspective, and to do so it is useful to ask the question of interests and gains to explain the rise of this agenda.

Pedagogy for Exploitability, or the Counter-Conduct of Employability

Explaining the rise of the employability agenda

It is to some extent surprising that in spite of a rich Marxist and critical pedagogy literature analysing the pitfalls of neoliberal education, there is very little research directly focusing on the problem of employability from a Marxist perspective. Evidently, the problem is subsumed under more general critiques of neoliberal processes and of the role of the labour market and political economy in shaping HE policy (e.g. Hall, 2020; Rikap & Harari-Kermadec, 2020; Thi Mai & Hutnik, 2020; Allmer, 2019; Rasinski, Hill & Skordoulis, 2018; Carpenter & Mojab, 2017; De Lissovoy, 2017; Gupta, Habjan & Tutek, 2016; Mayo, 2016; Bathmaker et al., 2016; Maira & Chatterjee, 2014; McArthur, 2011).⁴ Nevertheless, more direct engagement remains wanting. To begin, who is gaining from the impact of the employability agenda? Whose interests does it reflect? Arora (2015) explicitly applies a Marxist framework to understand the employability agenda as an ‘organising principle in higher education institutions’ (2015: 645), and she does so through a Gramscian analysis. She argues that the employability agenda is

an example of an educational priority that has been widely accepted and, yet, directly serves the interests of the hegemony. The acceptance is, arguably, a form of manufactured consent that has been reinforced through the media as common sense. (Arora, 2015: 639)

Arora’s work is useful in situating the agenda in a broader constellation of factors in which education policy serves the interests of a particular elite (made up mostly of the government, leading economic actors, and the media) and of particular political economy principles. In that constellation, HE has been framed as a ‘weak link’ (2015: 645) needing to be more business-facing, an analysis also confirmed by Lee et al.’s (2016) genesis of the rise of the employability agenda. Moreover, the financial crisis of 2008 prompted further justifications for the trend set in

⁴ For a review of some of the literature on employability concerned with the labour market and political economy, both from a mainstream and critical perspective, see Artess, Hooley & Mellors-Bourne (2017: 13-15).

place by New Labour's policies. This argument is also framed by the assumptions of the critical pedagogy literature, which is presented by Arora through the work of Giroux (1993) and his concept of educators as 'transformative intellectuals', in parallel to Gramsci's 'organic intellectuals', who must play a role in 'questioning, challenging and shaping educational policies, philosophies and traditional pedagogies' (Arora, 2015: 639).

This section builds on this analysis by going beyond alternative and critical views and their redefinitions of employability as a broader set of values that needs to incorporate inequalities. Instead, I propose that a counter-hegemony – and as will be argued below, a counter-conduct – of employability needs to more radically teach how employment maims, injures, hurts, traumatises, and can even kill people. It needs to bring in a different conversation about work and labour with different stakeholders in which students are taught not to be empowered to work but empowered to *fight for their rights* at work. Being critical about employability cannot just be about adding context to the agenda. It needs to also show the nefarious effects or dark side of putting the pressure on workers to fit the needs of business or of employers.

In the neoliberal economy today, these needs particularly refer to a focus on exploiting young peoples' subjectivities, forcing them to compete in terms of their passion and commitment for the job, selling their personalities and processes of self-realisation (Farrugia, 2019; Crisp & Powell, 2017; Lordon, 2014). The 'embedding employability' narrative is, probably naively, assuming this self-realisation phenomenon (Honneth, 2004) is part of the process of human emancipation, rather than a new form of worker benchmarking and exploitation, and thus fails to question what is really at stake in embedding employability across the academic spectrum. In this context, we need to think more broadly about what is success or a successful transition? What does this language obscure and make us forget? Who gets to determine this?

A counter-conduct pedagogy for exploitability: how to know when to quit a job

As Hooley has already argued from a career guidance perspective (2015), different questions need to be asked and workshopped with students. Arguing for a more political and ethical approach to career guidance, Hooley raises crucial concerns about social justice and the labour market, alongside an emerging field of scholars and practitioners (Hooley & Sultana, 2016; Hooley, Sultana & Thomsen, 2018; Hooley, Sultana & Thomsen, 2019) providing a more critical angle to the employability agenda. For Hooley (2016: 8), reflecting on his practice as careers guidance, 'we end up selling the rat race and the war on talent to students even though many of us have doubts about the way that this frames career decision-making'. Instead he proposes an emancipatory framework that would 'make cross-curricula links, connect with the traditions of student unionism and student activism and encourage students to be critical about the opportunities that are most obvious to them', and 'ultimately to think about when to quit a job' (2015: 10). Hooley shifts the power relations and key assumptions of responsibility involved in the employability agenda. He brings in new actors to the party that are absolutely essential to anybody's working life, i.e. 'trade unionists, campaigners and whistleblowers' (Ibid.) as important stakeholders and sources of advice, and reminds us that 'it is not our job to police the behaviour of recruiters, but neither is it our job to legitimise this behaviour' (Ibid.).

In essence, Hooley asks us to question the status quo and take seriously the inequalities of the labour market. Rather than just acknowledge these inequalities by broadening the definition of employability, here is an actually radical agenda for developing a graduate labour market that is more concerned with its success as a collective of human beings looking out for each other's rights and who think before accepting any job, than with its success as a rational individual empowered and skilled-up, ready to offer themselves to employers and compete with each other to sell their labour. Rather than the neoliberal mantra of 'get a job and think later', linked to the protestant ethic of 'work hard all your life and go to heaven', Hooley's radical agenda for career guidance

proposes instead to think before you get a job, to prioritise solidarity and to try and ‘imagine other ways of ‘being in the world” (Hooley & Sultana, 2016: 3).

This framework challenges career guidance workers to make a fundamental choice: whether, that is, to be technocrats that skilfully help others fit into the world as it is, or whether they are prepared to work within a zone of professional discomfort and challenge injustices evident in contemporary labour markets and social relations more broadly, while at the same time doing their best for their clients within the constraints of the here and now (Hooley & Sultana, 2016: 5).

Concretely, the latter option means using different techniques such as ‘Freirian-style dialogic conscientisation and intercultural guidance’, the use of ‘literature to unpack the imperatives embedded in the ‘dogmatic nature of work’, ‘the mobilisation of the ‘practice portrait’ as a method to develop an awareness of the links between action and social structures’ as well as looking at ‘advocacy and action in the local and wider community with a view to challenging and eventually transforming oppressive structures’ (Ibid.). Hooley and Sultana suggest a range of examples for career guidance in a detailed table (2016: 7) by applying these techniques to five ‘faces of oppression’ (Young, 1990), i.e. exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence, so as to teach and guide about how these forms of oppression can manifest themselves and how graduates could avoid reproducing them.

These issues also raise the problem of practitioner, academic, and student accountability and participation in HE policy. Efforts are being made at national and local levels to include more student voice in the employability agenda, but challenges remain, especially in terms of the above concerns for social justice, ignored by modes of neoliberal discourse dominant in HE policy circles. Moreover, to what extent are practitioners and academics listened to and taken into account? How democratically and systematically are their voices integrated into employability strategies developed at institutional level? To this end, it is essential that critical scholars and practitioners participate in employability roles in their workplaces and make themselves heard by echoing the theoretically rich ideas of authors such as Hooley and Sultana and those participating in their special issues and edited volumes, and try out their concrete suggestions. Everyone wants to better prepare young people and make sure they are not crippled by student debt and by jobs they hate – if many believe university’s main objective is not job creation, no one can ignore that most students go to university so as to get a better job than if they did not go to university. Nevertheless, it is indeed ‘ironic’, if not hypocritical and sadistic, to support initiatives for ‘successful transitions’ and ‘lifelong learning’ ‘when what await many ‘knowledge-workers’ are routinisation, surveillance, and exploitation’ (Hooley & Sultana, 2016: 8). As teachers, researchers, and practitioners we have a duty and responsibility to translate existing research about the world of work and the political economy into practice for students and graduates who otherwise might get lured into certain illusions about their ability to control labour market pressures and injustices through personal self-realisation, passion, and commitment to achieving as many skills as possible.

What does a Marxist pedagogy of counter-conduct bring to this analysis? Counter-conduct is a concept developed by Foucault (2007) which I have defined in previous work with Louiza Odysseos as ‘students’ multifarious resistance’ and which helps to ‘capture their reflexive questioning and resisting of the disposability of others, which is frequently assessed in terms of their potential as workers, as well as their self-formation in the very same process’ (Odysseos & Pal, 2018: 5; Nişancioğlu & Pal, 2016). The advantage of counter-conduct over the term ‘resistance’ is that it implies the ways in which certain particular forms of protests, re-framings, or refusals can be counter-hegemonic but also remain closely tied to governmentality structures and processes. In other words, counter-conducts are always potentially re-appropriated by those against which they were meant to resist, and their existence as strategies or tactics that can irreversibly contest the oppressive structures they contest is always in question. Thus, any attempt to reframe, contest, or even refuse the employability agenda is extremely fragile and a

total overcoming and victory over the pressures for employability as a structuring mode for providing education today is - in the immediate short-term at least - illusory. Not because another 'way of being in the world' is not possible, but because reversing completely the role of the employability agenda would mean a complete structural reorganisation of the HE sector and the political economy and how it functions today. That is not going to happen overnight - but one can participate in how employability strategies are set up institutionally, and from my personal experience as an Employability Coordinator at Oxford Brookes University, there is scope to negotiate and have an impact at the local level. Thus, framing the suggestions made above to teach the dark side of employability as processes of counter-conduct, shows an awareness of the limited potential of this form of resistance to marketised education. Moreover, this concept is particularly apposite for processes that merge ethical and economic concerns, which according to neoliberal modes of governance, remain determined by market conditions. A counter-conduct of employability as exploitability helps to formulate why understanding the exploitation inevitable in any form of capitalist employment is crucial to any process of emancipatory self-formation, and especially to one driven by solidarity concerns and an environmentally- and class-conscious collective.

Finally, a Marxist approach to pedagogy plays a twofold role in this analysis. It provides the historical and structural context of the productive forces and property relations of the political economy necessary to understand and explain the rise of the employability agenda. More work on this dimension is undoubtedly needed. Secondly, building on the work of Carpenter and Mojab (2007), a Marxist pedagogy helps to reflect on the ideological ways in which the neoliberal employability agenda in HE adds an additional layer of abstraction or reification to the education production line - or, in other words, how the employability agenda further obscures the ways in which education or consciousness is allowed to be critical of labour as capitalist work. A non-critical employability agenda distances even more students and academics from the hidden processes of capitalist fetishisation of commodities and labour, by providing detours to avoid critical thinking in universities and going straight to the production relations of the education market i.e. to the production of 'successful graduates' as capitalist subjects ready to be exploited. Accordingly, the marketisation of education consists in the layering of reifications according to which labour is inevitable and universities' role is to facilitate that 'journey' from student with a higher risk of exploitation to graduate with a slightly lower risk of exploitation, and for which critical thinking becomes an impediment if it provides a potential rejection of that path. As critical educators, it is essential to take a step back from the ideological processes at play in accepting and broadening the employability agenda so as to encompass all forms of HE. This chapter hopes to have provided some conceptual starting points to do so.

Concluding Thoughts

To conclude, it is doubtful, to say the least, that engaging critically with the employability agenda constitutes a concrete way of 'thinking beyond neoliberalism', as the title of this volume urges us to do. Nevertheless, any large-scale social transition implied by such a project is inevitably multi-layered and multi-temporal, i.e. it will occur in different places and according to different chronological sequences. Although one should remain sceptical of this particular sequence argued for here i.e. developing a counter-conduct of employability, it is also testament to how we should not think of resistance and transition as necessarily major ruptures in the order of things. Crucially, in terms of the neoliberal university, it is fair to say that in the UK at least, we have lost the war against marketised education. At this juncture, all that seems to remain for those of us who remain deeply antagonistic to this phenomenon, is quasi-resistance or counter-conduct. For this, it is crucial to turn the employability agenda on its head, to make students realise what it entails from a negative and failure side of life rather than just success, to make them realise what they risk, what they should protect themselves from.

A counter-conduct of employability is a pedagogy for exploitability, where the power relations of the 'embedding employability' discourse are reversed and where the current focus of the alternative academic literature on a broader set of liberal values is questioned as insufficient to counter the reductionist and exploitative effects of the neoliberal agenda. The more critical and radical objective is to put the onus back onto employers, i.e. not to think whether students are employable and what they need to do to successfully transition, but instead how to make them better able to judge whether the employer is worth working for, to what extent selling one's labour is to the detriment of one's health (mental and physical) and of the health of those around us (including the environment), whether promises of success and fulfilment are realistic, and what tools, mechanisms and institutions are available to help graduates in case of a problem (e.g. trade unions and local campaigns). Thus, the HE sector needs to involve trade unions, labour lawyers, citizens' advice initiatives, political representatives, and activists in our teaching and advice about employability and careers.

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