CHAPTER 6

The Idealisation of Apprenticeship

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1 Introduction

The past few years have seen a major resurgence of interest in vocational education generally and apprenticeship specifically. This is true for South Africa, where the research in this volume is focused, but equally true in other countries around the continent and elsewhere in the world. The reasons for this renewed interest are manifold, and dependent to some extent on context. One of the reasons focuses on a growing interest in the relationship between knowledge underpinning work, and the best ways in which people learn and apply knowledge to work situations. How a curriculum is designed in order to equip people for work through the appropriate transfer of knowledge and skills sits at the heart of educational and policy debates. The idea that the best way to prepare people for work is through exposure to the workplace has increasingly become the new consensus, for the classical trades and also for professions (Gamble, 2001). One of the oldest forms of this workplace-based education mode is the apprenticeship system, and it is this particular model that is examined in this chapter.

Apprenticeships locate the primary site of learning in the workplace, under the guidance of a master or mentor. This model, arguably, enables the apprentice to pick up the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required to master the tasks associated with the specific work process by immersing the learner directly and deeply in productive activity. It is a model with deep roots in many cultures and is possibly the oldest form of vocational training, in that all societies have at some point passed on skills and knowledge to the next generation through a process of slow immersion in the task under the guidance of an elder. Its centrality to most effective vocational education systems suggests that it is effective in facilitating the transfer of knowledge and skills most relevant to the workplace.

The idea of apprenticeship has not, however, evolved in a similar fashion in every society. Therefore, when the concept is used in policy and political pronouncements, or is borrowed across contexts, it needs to be carefully considered in terms of its institutional setting and how it aligns with local understanding of the concept (Turbin, 2001). That apprenticeships have
worked well in the past, or work well in other contexts, does not necessarily address the appropriateness and effectiveness of this pedagogical model in preparing students for the tasks they need to perform and for learning the knowledge they need to master in their local context.

This chapter sets out to examine how the institution of apprenticeship has evolved in a specific context drawing on an expanded Cultural Political Economy framework (Sayer, 2001). By examining how the concept of apprenticeship has evolved over time in South Africa, the chapter seeks to illustrate the complex relationship between education and the labour market, and how this is always embedded in historical, economic, political, institutional and cultural processes, many of which fall outside the fields of knowledge, education or work. The chapter concludes by making a case for the centrality of contextual institutional analysis as an important parallel line of enquiry alongside pedagogical, curriculum and knowledge debates in understanding education and work.

2 Theoretical Framing and Methodology

The chapter draws on the historical sociology tradition as its overarching approach (Collins, 1979; Elias, 1978). It is a tradition that holds that much contemporary sociological analysis does not pay sufficient attention to the historical processes that led to particular social formations. Critical to understanding formations is exploring the sociogenesis of a particular phenomenon over the *longue durée* so that one can make sense of the ways in which particular patterns have emerged over time. This is particularly important because much contemporary policy analysis and policy development looks at the immediate context and often searches for best practice in other settings, without understanding the ways in which the context has been shaped over time (Elias, 1987). This orientation aligns with new institutionalist perspectives on organisations and institutional processes (Scott, 2008).

The analytical concepts that I draw on are from the work of Susan Robertson and Roger Dale and their reworking of Cultural Political Economy into Critical Cultural Political Economy of Education (CCPEE) (Robertson & Dale, 2015; Sayer, 2001). CCPEE provides a set of lenses through which social formations and their social relations and subjectivities (in our case the education ensemble that constitutes apprenticeship in South Africa) can be examined, and the mechanisms and processes explored. Instead of the classical political economy perspective, which gives pre-eminence to the economic base, CCPEE adds a cultural and educational dimension to understanding policy and practice from a critical theory axiological, and critical realist epistemological vantage point.