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BOOK REVIEW

Esmond, B., Schmees, J. K., & Wedekind, V. (2026). Emancipation and Vocational Education: Skills, Bildung and the Subject.

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Falko Schmidt[a]
[a]Friedrich Schiller University Jena, Jena, Germany

1 VET as *Bildung* Beyond Neoliberal Utilisation

Bildung is a philosophical, educational, social and economic phenomenon. In the tradition of Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Bildung* is the stimulation and development of all of a subject's faculties to become a self-determined personality. Beyond that, *Bildung* is an acquisition of the ability to judge and the ongoing development of the subject, with the aim of emancipation (Hentig, 1999). From a philosophical point of view, *Bildung* is therefore a sophisticated form of education. In the German tradition of vocational education and training (VET), the emancipatory primacy of *Bildung* is embodied above all by Herwig Blankertz (1963/1985). In his critical-emancipatory theory, Blankertz regards vocational training as true education in the sense of *Bildung*. However, and this is likewise part of the truth, *Bildung* is also, and increasingly, cultural capital and thus a resource for economic exploitation. The functional relationship between *Bildung* and economic exploitation is particularly evident in the postmodern neoliberal era. What is promoted in today's economic world is not the maturity of the subject as a foundation of emancipation but rather the productivity as a worker based on vocational skills. Therefore, VET focuses on acquiring functional skills rather than liberating the subject from external control and utilisation.

Against this background, the objective of the book is an attempt to place *Bildung* at the centre of VET and to establish international VET as an emancipatory educational project based on the German tradition. For that purpose, the book challenges the neoliberal economic rationale underpinning VET in today's social, economic and political context. It examines how neoliberalism undermines the pedagogical integrity of VET and seeks alternatives to the reduction of VET to fragmented, market-oriented notions of skills. To this end, the authors focus on the relationship between vocational skills, vocational education, the subject and society in their theoretical considerations. In doing so, they aim to "explain how the world might think of vocational education differently" (p. IV), based on the critical-emancipatory theory in German VET. Thus, the three authors — Bill Esmond, Johannes Karl Schmees and Volker Wedekind — are continuing the ongoing project of contributing to the international debate on the theorisation of VET.

Contact Falko Schmidt , falko.schmidt@uni-jena.de

As the discursive foundation of the book, the authors draw on discussions regarding the theorisation of VET in the English-speaking world, which were most recently reflected in particular in a special issue of *Berufs- und Wirtschaftspädagogik – online (bwp@)* (Esmond et al., 2023). Their contribution to the theoretical discourse should be viewed against the following background: Whilst VET in German-speaking countries has a long-standing theoretical tradition, the success of the German dual system is often attributed internationally solely to economic or socio-political factors, without taking the underlying pedagogical concepts into account. Globally, VET is strongly influenced by a liberal educational tradition and neoliberal economic reforms. This has led to VET often being reduced to a purely instrumental function, i.e. mere teaching of skills needed for the labour market. Critical approaches that emphasise personal development, as in the German concept of *Bildung*, struggle to prevail against this utilitarian view. However, in a time of social and economic crises, the theoretical responsibility of VET becomes apparent. Against this backdrop, it is important to address the theoretical deficit in English-language research on VET. Moreover, previous debates have been confined to the German-speaking context (Esmond & Wedekind, 2023).

2 Brief Overview

The book is divided into three parts. **Part I** (Chapter 1–2) provides the context for the theoretical study. In the Introduction (**Chapter 1**), the authors critique the dominant neoliberal discourse on VET from an educational theory perspective. They begin with the empirical observation that nearly half of all European secondary school students enrol in vocational programmes, within a paradigm that reduces VET to the acquisition of market-oriented skills and defines employers as the primary target audience. Historically rooted in neoliberal reforms of the 1970s and 1980s, this paradigm has since been institutionalised by international organisations such as the OECD and has reinforced structural inequalities. The authors attribute this disparity to a fundamental epistemological conflict between abstract, academically valued knowledge and practical, experience-based knowledge. In contrast, they advocate an understanding of vocational education as a holistic project promoting social justice and human emancipation.

Drawing on three historical vignettes — the transmission of expertise in early societies, Athenian civic education, and changes in guild training during the early modern period — the next chapter (**Chapter 2**) then reconstructs how the devaluation of practical knowledge in favour of academic knowledge was, in each case, politically constituted. It is demonstrated that the transmission of knowledge was always embedded in specific power and social relations. Thus, the devaluation of practical knowledge proves not to be a natural phenomenon, but rather a politically produced one. These developments show that changes in the transmission of knowledge have always been linked to conceptions of humanity, social formations and power struggles within society. This refutes the neoliberal claim that an eternal market logic underpins VET.

Part II (Chapters 3–4) examines three key moments in the history of German VET theory. The starting point is Humboldt's neo-humanist concept of education at the beginning of the nineteenth century (**Chapter 3**). Humboldt's concept of education aimed to develop all human faculties, while also distinguishing between general and vocational education. At the start of the twentieth century, Georg Kerschensteiner addressed this issue by conceptualising vocational education as a 'gateway to general human education', thereby linking civic education with vocational work. In that regard, the second part of the chapter explores the extent to which Kerschensteiner's approach has

emancipatory potential while remaining constrained by his positive view of the state and conservative attitude towards society.

The focus of the next part (**Chapter 4**) is Herwig Blankertz's critical-emancipatory synthesis of education and work, which he developed in the 1960s and 1970s. He deconstructs the supposed necessity of a separation between general and vocational education by demonstrating that the formal educational goal—the ability to exercise free judgement and criticism—can also be achieved through the medium of work. Drawing on critical theory, Blankertz calls for a higher level of reflexivity in dealing with technology and work in vocational education. The critical-emancipatory theory thus forms the argumentative foundation of the subsequent chapters.

Part III (Chapter 5–7) builds on this critical-emancipatory theory tradition. First (**Chapter 5**), the authors analyse the decline of critical-emancipatory theory in vocational education and training in the context of neoliberal restructuring since the 1970s. Historically, this conflict has manifested itself in the failure of the *Kollegstufe* in the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia, which sought to combine general and vocational education but was defeated by organised resistance from employers, conservative politicians and conservative scholars of education. The chapter then moves on to discuss current objections to an emancipatory theory of VET, including issues of contingency and the contradictions of emancipation within a non-emancipated social context. It is concluded that collective democratic action is a prerequisite for emancipatory action.

The authors then broaden the debate beyond the European economies to the postcolonial context of the Global South, where emancipatory ideals are confronted with the reality of largely informal labour markets (**Chapter 6**). It is shown how colonial power structures constituted formal VET systems and supplanted existing traditions of qualification. However, the contemporary export of the German dual vocational training model reproduces similar asymmetries, as it occurs in a decontextualised manner. Therefore, postcolonial counter-proposals are discussed as not fully realised yet theoretically substantial alternatives.

The final chapter (**Chapter 7**) presents a brief synthesis of the conditions under which VET could take on a progressive, humanising character as an alternative to neoliberal discourse. The authors highlight two key areas of conflict. Firstly, they criticise the unitary nature of neoliberal education policy, which they argue reduces vocational education and training to the acquisition of market-oriented skills. This obscures structural inequalities. Secondly, they challenge the universalism of supranational institutions whose standardised solutions negate context-specific educational traditions. In contrast, the authors advocate an expansive approach: They argue that vocational education and training should not be limited to qualifications relevant to the labour market; rather, it should promote personal development, civic participation, and democratic values, linking these with theoretical and vocational knowledge. According to the authors, achieving this requires collective action by relevant stakeholders, particularly teachers, learners, researchers, and trade unions, moving beyond employer-dominated partnership models.

3 Emancipation and Vocational Education

The book situates the question of the emancipated subject in VET within the tension between structural marginalisation and the educational-theoretical claim to human self-determination. In neoliberal discourse, the vocationally educated subject is systematically constructed as deficient, as it fails to meet the normative standards of general education and is thus subsumed into the logic of exploitation of the labour market. The devaluation of the vocationally educated subject is made clear,

among other things, by the historical vignettes. These, however, refute the neoliberal premise that the purely instrumental conception of vocational education is an eternal fact. Instead, this conception is shown by the authors to be a contingent historical construction.

Herwig Blankertz (1963/1985) provided the most significant alternative to a reductionist conception of VET with his critical-emancipatory theory. He views *Bildung* as the cultivation of the ability to exercise free judgement and critical thinking, which leads to the individual's self-determination in the face of social and economic coercion. This can be achieved through both vocational content and general education. In particular, VET expands objective opportunities and subjective scope for action, thereby enabling a break from relations of domination (Lempert, 1974). So, VET is emancipatory when it combines work activity with a theoretical understanding of work and society by making vocational activity the medium of education. A critical theory of vocational education clarifies that, in addition to the ability to perform specialised tasks organised within a professional context, further achievements are possible if vocational education is not confined to labour-market-oriented adaptation training but is instead recognised as part of an educational system committed to fostering autonomy (Kaiser, 2016).

That said, the concept of emancipation is still plagued by a fundamental contradiction. Emancipation always occurs within a society that is not yet emancipated itself. Moreover, in the neoliberal era, one must assume that the notion of an emancipated individual is being eroded, as people are increasingly defined by their role as consumers of an endless array of goods and services, and as passive observers of democratic processes. Due to its connection with the employment system, vocational education is particularly closely embedded in the reproduction of social relations, whereby economic conditions create significant dependencies. Consequently, vocational education currently tends to reproduce meritocratic ideology and adapt to given, unquestioned social power relations (Mausfeld, 2019). In times of skills shortages and economic uncertainty, it is likely that calls for labour-market-oriented training will continue to grow. The authors appear to be aware of this issue and address it, but they do not draw fundamental conclusions from it.

Nevertheless, the proposals put forward by the authors at the end of their discussion on how to deal with this situation are worth emphasising here. Although they are rather abstract and slightly euphemistic, they are no less relevant. In modern vocational education theory, and indeed in the practical implementation of VET, there should be a renewed and greater focus on reflecting on the meaning and possibilities of work that go beyond the mere fulfilment of the immediate needs of commodity production. Technological transformation, economic inequality, rising populism and the climate crisis require a working population that understands its involvement in these phenomena and can respond to them in a self-determined manner within the context of work itself, rather than merely implementing solutions proposed by others. This requires not only the rediscovery of the diverse educational traditions worldwide, but also the reduction of inequalities in order to lessen the dependencies inherent in securing economic livelihood. The authors therefore conclude by calling for an *expansive, emancipatory approach*: This aims to foster personal development rather than mere employability, anchors general knowledge and theoretical depth within vocational contexts, develops learners' capacity for political and democratic action, and defends against the neoliberal hegemony of the state and corporations through collective, democratic coalitions of teachers, trade unions and civil society organisations.

4 Final Remarks

It is certainly worth questioning whether the authors have actually succeeded in achieving their complex objective of revitalising the critical-emancipatory theory in order to encourage the world to take a different view of VET. On the one hand, this is because the central theme running through the chapters, as well as the connections between them, are not always clearly discernible. On the other hand, too many lines of argument are pursued, not all of which can be brought together to support the final conclusions. As a result, the genuinely compelling arguments lose some of their impact.

What is certain, however, is that the book makes an important contribution to the debate on emancipation and vocational education, even if one of the main questions, under what conditions vocational education could realise its emancipatory potential, is neither new nor can it be answered exhaustively. However, the interweaving of theoretical and historical discourse with a materialist analysis of the present offers a novel perspective on this question. In this regard, the reference to Blankertz's critical-emancipatory approach as a resource for the present is theoretically convincing. However, there is still a need for systematic research into how neoliberalism undermines the pedagogical integrity of VET in order to critically pursue emancipation as an educational goal in VET within the context of a non-emancipated socio-cultural environment.

Nonetheless, the book's contribution to the international debate on VET theory is substantial in several respects. Firstly, it provides a conceptual translation, introducing readers to critical-emancipatory theoretical discourse on VET. Secondly, it consistently situates educational theory in relation to social, political, and economic structural conditions. Thirdly, the chapter on postcolonial VET deserves special attention as it makes a serious attempt to broaden the Eurocentric discourse on VET. The fact that the authors have drawn on English-language sources wherever possible and have also had some of the original German-language sources translated further enhances its international appeal. Furthermore, for German-speaking vocational education scholars, the book could have a twofold impact: on the one hand, it counteracts the tendency to overlook their own theoretical tradition, and on the other, it encourages the re-examination of the link between vocational education theory and critical materialist analysis. The book is therefore also recommended as a foundational text for discussions on vocational education theory. In this regard, the brevity of the text facilitates its reception.

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Author Information

Falko Schmidt
Friedrich Schiller University Jena
Faculty of Economics and Business Administration
falko.schmidt@uni-jena.de
https://orcid.org/0009-0006-0364-1374