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# We are fighting for everyone's future

David Ridley

What is coming for English higher education this academic year? Who is coming for English HE is perhaps the more appropriate question, given the Conservative Party's war on education since the beginning of the year, a war that, of course, it has been waging for decades. As analysed in the last issue of *PSE*, further education has become the first front for the new authoritarians. If the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill is passed, which it looks likely to be, colleges in England will have to draft skills improvement plans with local businesses. If they don't, the Secretary of State will have the power to remove funding, college status and even close colleges completely.

Meanwhile, the reactionary wing of the Tory party continues its 'culture war' on the 'woke' left, taking aim at academics and students in particular. Manufacturing entirely a free speech crisis within British universities, the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill gives people the right to sue universities that don't protect their free speech rights. What's interesting about this particular skirmish is that the Government is using the notion of academic freedom against itself, restricting academic criticism to research expertise, while conferring the reputational benefits of speaking at universities to anyone with a loud voice and thick skin.

As always, if you want to know the future of higher education, look to FE. It seems to me that, what the Government wants out of English HE, it will try and get by brute force. The overall project of opening up all public services to private capital and turning universities into multinational human capital machines will be advanced by interventionist policy and backed up by new state powers. That means there's a serious battle ahead, one that could decide the shape of English HE once and for all. To predict the specifics of what is to come, however, as well as what should be the appropriate left strategy in response, requires a bit of theorising, which I attempt below.

## The Corbyn effect

Before we do any theorising, we must understand the context. In 2010, the coalition government came in and increased tuition fees to £9,000. There was significant

protest from staff and students, which, linking with the anti-austerity trade union movement, culminated in one of the largest marches through the centre of London in recent history. Because the deed had already been done, however, this protest movement had little effect. Before long, students were accumulating tens of thousands of pounds of debt to get a degree that was, thanks to the economic depression caused by the 2008 financial crisis, worth less and less.

While the 2010 student movement failed to achieve its aims, its legacy proved explosive. When Jeremy Corbyn surprised everyone by becoming the leader of the Labour Party in 2015, the graduates of this movement, along with the anti-austerity veterans in the trade unions, all flocked to the Party and staffed its new election machine. With thousands of Corbynistas organising themselves in local Momentum branches and going out into communities to spread the new left-wing gospel, Labour came within a whisker of winning the 2017 general election.

This near miss sent shudders through the ruling class, which had been caught off-guard. The election had the material effect of wiping out Theresa May's parliamentary majority, while Corbyn's radical manifesto pushed the policy agenda further to the left than it had been for a long time, even forcing the Tories to embrace a minimal form of economic planning - historically an absolute red line for neoliberals. Corbyn's promise to scrap tuition fees, alongside a growing awareness of student debt and taxpayer contributions via loan write-offs, also forced May to do something about HE.

As already noted, May's political position meant that set-piece policies were out, so she kicked the can down the road instead, initiating a review into post-18 English education. The subsequent report was wide-ranging, but the most important things to note are its criticisms of David Willetts's free market approach and recommendation to reduce tuition fees to £7,250. While the Augar Review was keen to stress that this fee cut should be matched by public support for universities, how this top-up would work in practice proved to be the real kicker. May's suggestion was that this top-up would be dependent on proving 'value for money' for individual courses.

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Because of post-referendum Brexit wrangling and the coronavirus pandemic, this threat has loomed over the sector for two years now. With the student numbers cap lifted, universities have been scrambling for home students to offset the impact of both Brexit and COVID-related travel bans, while shifting teaching online at breakneck pace. On the one hand, this has meant academics being pushed to breaking point on over-subscribed courses. On the other, universities have used the situation as a pretext for post-Augar rationalisation, making staff redundant and closing courses.

### Carrots and sticks

I think that, if anything, the Augar Review is just more honest about the Tory vision of higher education. Willetts's mistake was to confuse ideology and reality. He really thought that free markets existed, and that if he could create one in the sector through competition and consumerism, it really would 'lift all boats'. But old 'two brains' tried to be too clever, and made a mess.

No one really understood the income contingent loan system that shielded HE funding from austerity, least of all students, who didn't treat the £9,000 fee as a price tag but also saw the £40k+ debt as a huge burden on their future prospects. Meanwhile, all universities immediately charged full price, for fear of looking 'budget'. This meant there was no price competition on the HE supermarket shelf, and the for-profits that were supposed to challenge the monopoly power of incumbents were shut out exactly because they looked like knock-off versions of the real thing.

Subsequent reformers like Jo Johnson understood that competition must be created via state intervention, especially in those 'markets' where competition cannot 'naturally' appear, like in public services. During his tenure as universities minister, Johnson oversaw the creation of an elaborate system of 'excellence' frameworks - the (tweaked) Research and Teaching Excellence Frameworks, and the Knowledge Exchange Framework - which would together 'nudge' universities towards economically useful ends.

As Andrew McGettigan presciently argued in 2015, the TEF sat at the centre of this project with a new metric that he thought, rightly, would come to 'dominate all others'. By crunching student loan repayment and graduate employment data, the Government is now able to achieve what Lionel Robbins only dreamed of in the 1960s. Experimentally, at least, institutions, even courses, can be judged according to their 'value for money', providing for the first time a concrete, economic proxy for 'quality'. If matched by variable tuition fees, a market, albeit it rigged in favour of the already powerful, could finally be created within the English HE system.

### Human capital

Underpinning all this is a theory of education as 'human capital'. In the early days, neoliberal economists were keen to stress that economic growth was an outcome of wise investment by industry in workers and technology. On one level this is, of course, true. But this theory was also designed to hide the origin of all economic growth - which is to say an increase in the rate of profit - in the more and more efficient exploitation of the only real source of value: labour power. In other words, the theory of human capital - of education- and technology-driven growth - was, ultimately, an attempt to answer Marx's highly influential and politically explosive critique of capitalism.

In the post-war period, a consensus had emerged that it was the duty of the state to invest in education, health and social welfare. Against a background of really existing communism, human capital became a weapon in the Cold War. This can clearly be seen in the 1963 Robbins Report, often held up as a paradigm of progressive, public HE. Noting the huge investment made in education in the US and USSR, the report concludes that free, public HE for those that qualify is a 'probable condition' for the maintenance of the UK's material position in the world, and an 'essential condition' for the realisation in the modern age 'of the ideals of a free and democratic society'.

In the 1980s, however, state intervention went out of fashion, and was replaced by a neoliberal obsession with individualism, privatisation and deregulation. Over the last half century, human capital has been reimagined as an individual investment in future earnings. Michel Foucault captured this shift nicely when he described neoliberal subjects as 'entrepreneurs of the self', for which 'consumption is an enterprise activity'. As a sophisticated form of capitalist ideology, human capital theory also has the benefit of placing the blame for poverty and inequality squarely on individuals, who have failed to make wise investments or are unwilling to gamble on their future by taking on the necessary debt in the present.

After the 2008 financial crisis, human capital theory took on a renewed importance. Facing persistent economic stagnation, the UK government turned to higher education as a kind of economic resuscitator, pumping taxpayer money into university R&D to prop up private sector investment and lifting the student numbers cap to flood the already competitive job market with work-hungry graduates. Meanwhile, reflecting yet another subtle but important shift in neoliberal ideology, Thaler and Sunstein's 'libertarian paternalism' seized the imagination of both UK and US politicians and policy makers during the post-crisis years, and 'nudging' became the main means of aligning human capital objectives with the goals of the new 'light touch' industrial strategy.

### Postcolonial melancholia

Separately, entrepreneurialism had also been working its way through the English HE system from the bottom up, so to speak. In the 1980s, Thatcher transformed publicly owned and local authority-run polytechnics into quasi-private corporations, to be subsequently run by business-minded CEOs egged on by industry-heavy governing boards. Since then, entrepreneurial VCs have been aggressively expanding their institutions, borrowing heavily and investing in student accommodation and fancy new campus buildings, while setting up foreign partnerships and exploiting the loopholes of charity law to create for-profit subsidiaries that can circumvent trade union agreement and offer bargain 'no frills' HE at bargain basement prices.

This new generation of ambitious university leaders has been quietly preparing a second front of the Tory war on public HE. Again, real neoliberals hold no illusions of free markets. They understand that competition results not in freedom and innovation, as Willetts believed, but in monopoly and class power. As Will Davies explains in his 2016 book, *The Limits of Neoliberalism*, the trick of neoliberal ideology is to show that monopoly and class power is a positive outcome of competition - reimagined as 'competitiveness' - not as an example of market failure. The monopolist is the entrepreneur that plays the game well and their reward a 'temporary' advantage over rivals.

For hardcore marketisers, then, a smaller number of larger universities is OK. Fewer, larger universities will also help the UK 'become great again'. English HE now represents not only a significant chunk of UK exports - roughly £40bn a year - but also a means of promoting and extending the UK's 'soft power' across the globe. As Willetts laments in his memoir *A University Education*: 'The world now has fifty mega-universities, several with around a million students. But there is only one British institution on the list - the Open University with around 200,000 students. There are global university chains such as Amity, Phoenix, Laureate, Manipal and Kaplan but none of these are British'.

### Socialism or barbarism

So now we know the real plan, what are we going to do about it? Well, the first thing is to find its weaknesses so that we - the education left - can sow our own dissent within the ranks of the ruling class and find points of political pressure to focus our collective action on. The most glaring contradiction, I think, is between the promise of human capital theory and the economic reality that this theory tries to hide. Expanding HE is good for business, and also democratises a system that was historically extremely

elitist - we should recognise this. But, as the Augar Review notes, this has also created an over-supply of graduates, driving down wages and reducing the value of HE as a 'positional good', which is to say: something that marks you out as 'special' in the job market.

This is only a contradiction within a neoliberal capitalist system, of course. In a socialist or even social democratic one, a more educated workforce is a social good, and is paid for in part by industry which also benefits from this good. But because neoliberals smashed the unions and allowed British capital to flee the country to the sweatshops and tax havens of the new globalised economy, there are not enough good British jobs to go around. A degree is now becoming a minimum qualification for precarious and badly paid work in the service industries, which means that in-work poverty is rife and young people are becoming poorer, and poorer than their parents.

Add to this the effects of the coronavirus pandemic, which has exacerbated these inequalities, and climate change, which threatens the very existence of humankind, and you paint a pretty depressing picture for young people today. But it's not just students and parents that are worried about this. The Tories are also very worried. They are worried about the political effects of intergenerational inequality on voting patterns, which in recent years have seen a polarisation towards left and right among young and old respectively. And, since Corbyn, they are also worried about another youth-driven, election-oriented social movement exploding 'out of nowhere'.

These anxieties reflect divisions among the ruling class and the Tory party that represents it. On the one hand, polarisation has led previously moderate conservatives to sympathise with right-wing populists and neofascists. This has historical precedent, is extremely dangerous and is evidenced by the rabid attack on academic freedom - which has always been a breeding ground for communists, according to neoliberals - and public references to neofascist ideas like 'cultural Marxism' by Tory parliamentarians. On the other hand, this polarisation has made many conservatives open to state intervention along progressive lines, on the basis of an FDR-like New Deal for example. In the middle of all this sits the neo-Thatcherite leadership of the Tory party, which sees Brexit as an opportunity to 'make Britain great again' by establishing the UK as a deregulated free market dystopia.

The problem with marketisation, as theorised above, is that it will only make things worse. The monopolisation and financialisation of the sector will undo once and for all the ameliorative function of higher education, with universities, degrees and graduate outcomes becoming 'classed' according to what people can afford. The micromanagement of human capital via elaborate metrics will also do nothing to

address the sorry state of the economy. Even if the Government does manage to create a system with variable fees, and graduates are funnelled towards the 'skills gaps' in the digital economy, this will only bring down wages for Data Analysts and Chief Information Officers. Only demand-side policies can help with the over-supply problem, and a 'Green New Deal' - whether capitalist or socialist - offers a way to solve this problem while also addressing the other issues facing young people. The kind of state intervention required to keep global warming to 1.5 degrees centigrade would create millions of new jobs in every country in the world. The policies and technologies to save the planet are all there and would provide purpose for a new generation of graduates, as well as the millions of adults thrown out of work by COVID and increasing automation. All that is required is political will, and a new political coalition willing to choose hope over despair.

### **Municipal socialism**

New coalitions can also be built at a local level. The rapid growth of universities has been bought at the cost of the health of local communities. Demand for student accommodation in many university towns and cities has vastly outstripped the ability for either universities or privately owned student accommodation companies to meet it. Over time, this has led to an accelerating rise in house prices and rental costs, resulting in housing crises in many areas where young people cannot afford to buy or even rent where they grew up, and are forced out of these areas completely. Those that manage to stay are hit by secondary effects of 'studentification', such as burglaries, fly-tipping and parking problems. This may seem trivial, but it all intensifies tensions between 'town and gown', which can in turn be mobilised by local UCU branches to build support for local campaigns and struggles.

While MPs of all stripes are beginning to embrace progressive ideas like the Green New Deal (albeit under different names), local politicians have also been open to exploring new forms of municipal socialism under the innocuous banner of 'community wealth building' (CWB). In the North West, for example, a coalition of activists, organisations and councillors have been quietly building a network of social enterprises, community organisations, and cooperatives designed to keep wealth within the region, raising the standard of living for local people while shielding them from austerity. Offering an alternative, more progressive vision of 'taking back control' - a trope that has proved devastatingly effective in both the UK and US - CWB has proved very popular with voters. In Preston, for example, where the 'red wall' has collapsed around it, Labour retains its significant majority.

Within this moderate version of bottom-up

socialism, universities are reimagined as anchor institutions - economic actors rooted in place-based communities - that can play a key role in regional regeneration by redirecting procurement and offering financial support and training to worker- and community-owned cooperatives. In my own work, I've been pushing this idea a bit further, imagining universities of the future as ecological 'social centres', where local activists, organisations and communities can come together to work on and design collective solutions to social and ecological problems, with academics as facilitators of a new 'collective intelligence'. Work already done by academics and activists linked to the UK Cooperative College suggests a blueprint for how universities can be democratised by staff-student-community coalitions and 'converted' into socially useful, democratically-run higher education cooperatives.

Community wealth building and the Green New Deal provide, then, the mutually reinforcing aspects of a radical alternative to the marketisation of English higher education. Another key policy from the incredibly fertile Corbyn years - the National Education Service - also provides a framework for bringing higher education together with other education sectors within a truly holistic vision of 'cradle to grave' education. Making education at any point in life a social right, such a system - if properly funded and also democratically run - would be able to manage the transition to a green economy, provide security and hope for people impacted by such a transition, and remove the commodification and profiteering currently working its way through our institutions.

### **Tooling up**

How do we win such a radical alternative? In general, if we want to win, we must politicise the educational and linked generational crisis sketched above. To do this, we must stage and win set-piece battles in a way that rams these issues down the throats of politicians, raises them clearly and in a sustained way in the public sphere and gains support across a broad spectrum of interests. This requires a narrative that will secure a hegemonic position for the education left and draw in all the individual struggles at a local and sectoral level together so that each one feels like a life-or-death battle in a war for the life and soul of education and for the future of society.

I have great faith in UCU's general secretary, Jo Grady. She has overseen a shift towards organising over mobilising methods - a shift which seems to be reflected in other larger unions as well - and has made good progress in uniting factions under the banner of the 'Four Fights'. But the messaging is still too abstract and the campaign, which will enter a new phase with



the upcoming pay and pensions negotiations and the new academic year, needs a clearer politics. I think the 'Fund Our Future' campaign is much better, appeals to a much wider range of concerns - including climate change - and is embedded in an excellent analysis of the socio-economic function of education.

Something like the 'Fight for the Future' would combine the two strands and provide a rallying cry for not just staff but also students. It would unite more clearly the antagonistic divisions within higher education, for example between casualised early career academics and the more securely employed professoriate. The recent debate over how to fund social care shows the dangers of leaving these divisions unaddressed. Divisions allow the ruling class to divide and rule us. By emphasising the future-oriented nature of education, we can show how the fight for pensions is also the fight for good jobs in the present, and that if we don't fight things like subsidisation, which takes staff off USS and TPS schemes completely, then employment contributions are a moot point.

Such an overall strategy also highlights the stupidity, frankly, of arguments suggesting that UCU should be fighting for student numbers caps. Yes, the crisis is acute, with courses being closed, redundancies pursued and fought and academics at other, oversubscribed courses drowning under the pressure. But pitting courses and institutions, and potentially staff and students, against each other is doing the work of the Tories for them. Why shouldn't students go to the universities and courses that they want to? And where does it end? An overall cap on the number of students in higher education? And how do you fight for this anyway? By asking nicely?

A much better tactic would be to point to the staff-student ratios at the different institutions and courses, which are recorded and publicised online and in university rankings. Why would you want to go to an elite university when you are one of hundreds of students all vying for the attention of a handful of academics? Wouldn't you prefer a smaller course with smaller seminar groups and academics that can spend time on your essays? Of course, this is all still using the language of commodification. But we have to acknowledge where the politics of education today begins for students and turn this valid concern for 'value for money' into a battle over the very meaning of 'quality'. 'Working conditions are learning conditions' remains the very best slogan for this task.

We also have to make sure that local struggles are supported and generalised, even when national strike action is called. Local actions build solidarity with local communities, trade unions and political representatives and sustain national campaigns. They also have an important branch-building function. It can feel overwhelming when you are trying to juggle these two levels at the same time. But this is where the

politicising narrative comes in. To feel that you are fighting for the future of society is energising. It draws members into the struggle, dis-alienates them, and releases energy and determination that just isn't accessed by narrowly economic or professional campaigns. Fighting and winning battles that matter will be the best way to build a movement.

Piling into *every single fight* also applies to student-led actions as well. With every counter-movement against marketisation comes a wave of occupations, and innovative uses of traditional tactics, such as the recent rent strikes. These should not be treated like idealistic side projects, but opportunities to embed staff struggles within the very fabric of an institution's educational culture. 'Free universities' and teach-outs 'prefigure' the alternative we are fighting for and are excellent spaces for crafting and adapting the anti-marketisation meta-narrative with students and communities. These spaces don't have to be created within institutions either - take them out into the community and you also build the wider solidarity you need from the very beginning.

Organising works. I can verify this via my time at Coventry University, where we rebuilt the branch and won union recognition across the entire CU subsidiary group. We rebuilt our base by applying the same methods for building strikes to organising open meetings. But you only win when you also capture and retain the moral high ground and are strategic and smart about the tactics you use at key moments. The analysis above owes everything to the narrative we developed at the branch, in which subsidisation was explained in terms of corporatisation, with the struggle at Coventry framed as a struggle for the future of all our universities. We also combined organising with mobilising - embarrassing the university in public, in an article in *The Guardian*, for example, comparing Coventry to Sports Direct. The two methods are reinforcing, not mutually exclusive.

We have all the tools to win, but we need to lay them all out, sharpen them up and get the whole shed in order - ASAP. We need to think bigger and wider than ever before. This is the marketisation endgame. The future of education at all levels and the future of our planet are intimately linked. We need to start acting it.

