

Peter Scott on the crisis in H.E.

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Peter Scott *Retreat or Resolution? Tackling the Crisis of Mass Higher Education*, Bristol: Policy Press 2021. 781-1-4473-6329-3, 212pp, £14.99

'The argument in this book is that mass higher education, for all its multiple and irreversible achievements, is experiencing a general crisis' (p.150). It is well timed. UCU members in 58 UK universities struck for three days in December joined by more than half that number taking action short of a strike. Reballoting may in the New Year see more institutions join them in UCU's continuing struggles against casualisation and pension cuts, and for reduced workloads, raised pay and equality. Supported by students, academic and non-academic staff alike also aim to prevent various restructurings, the announcement of which triggered their actions as they will result in the closure of several departments if not mergers of whole institutions. Burst by Covid-19, the bubble of market-led higher education expansion funded by fees/loans certainly appears to have ended in 'general crisis'.

Scott's detailed narrative of how this has occurred derives from his extensive experience: as editor of *The Times Higher Education Supplement* he ran serialised editorials debating postmodernism over summer vacations; he was a professor at Leeds and now again at UCL, with 'a 13-year interlude' (p.xii) as Vice-Chancellor of Kingston University. A board member of the Higher Education Funding Council for England, he also advised the Scottish government as a Commissioner for Fair Access, adding the dimension of that country's HE to the book to show it was always different from England's and is becoming more so.

This active involvement informs Scott's history of UK higher education from Robbins to Browne, interwoven in alternate chapters with thematic revisitings of events. This makes for a dense analysis interspersed with comparative perspectives on the simultaneous development of HE globally. His penultimate chapter addresses the immediate challenges of what he calls 'the faltering of England's experiment in applying market principles to the organisation of higher education' (p.xv) and the last 'inevitably' suggests reforms he derives from 'My values as a somewhat old-fashioned social democrat in the European tradition' (p.xiii).

This intricately interwoven but readable record will be essential for future scholarship of higher education. It leads to the two alternatives of Scott's title: 1/ the

'tactical retreat and elite consolidation' advanced by a 'conservatively inclined' minority in the Council for the Defence of British Universities, or 2/ his own advocacy of 'a renewal of growth towards a universal (or, better perhaps, tertiary) education' (p.15). This latter qualification is ambiguous, drawing on Martin Trow's 1973 and 2010 typologies from elite to mass to universal HE - the last defined as 50 per cent+, but mixed with 'tertiary education' makes it different.

Especially if tertiary education is taken as a lifelong entitlement to free further and higher, adult/continuing, education and training in or out of employment and including community access to creation and recreation, such as UK FE or US community colleges in California's Master Plan once aspired to. The progression is more logical in terms of levels of learning in which tertiarism follows but is different from primary and secondary schooling. (In the 2019 Labour Manifesto it figured in a proposed National Education Service - although in effect this was a National Secondary Schools Service.) However, tertiary entitlement could not be a comprehensive provision (since with increasing specialisation not everyone would study the same subjects as they may do in comprehensive schools). Nor would it be compulsory as it too often is today with 'university' monitoring systems that do not assess students but merely record their attendance.

The pressure to 'go to uni or die' would be relieved for school leavers if there were opportunities to earn and learn through real apprenticeships - as opposed to the current largely phony promise of them. This third option can be added to Scott's two policy choices above, so that such a tertiary entitlement might be exercised by a smaller number of applicants. It would obviate exorbitant fee/loan debts - even if most never repay them - for often irrelevant courses and increasingly platformed provision of sometimes dubious quality leading to uncertain employment outcomes. Many might take their entitlement to free education and training (not more career development loans) later in life in response to new employment opportunities or just out of interest and for recreation. The current around 50 per cent 'universal' UKHE in fact comprises around 40 per cent of young men and around 60 per cent of young women with few 25+ 'adults' participating as they used to.

Scott does not consider these possibilities and so ignores the question of what the mass of students are all supposedly learning. His top-down, policy-driven

approach sees in the expansion of HE following the Robbins reforms only a progressive response to the demand for more higher technical and professional education and training prompted by an expanding economy. He does not acknowledge that when this demand faltered after 1973 deskilling began to rationalise craft labour as surely as it subsequently reduced professional to paraprofessional employment. As a result, in Crosland's polytechnics that divided the system, as certification increased, skill and knowledge, despite contesting 'more means worse' by being shared more widely, were later lost in competence-based training and rote retention of information.

Certainly in schools, entry to the polarising hierarchy of tertiary institutions was by academic examination in a national curriculum selecting students on the basis of their previously more or less expensively acquired cultural capital. From the 1980s on, school leavers who failed migrated from youth training schemes to 'new sixth' forms and thence to FE and HE-become-FE. Moreover, as skill and knowledge were absorbed through automation in more complex and expensive machinery (most lately by AI), larger investments by speculative global capital were needed, leading to its dominance over dwindling national productive capital as the economy changed in what became a predominantly service society.

As Scott notes, financialisation accelerated exponentially after 'Big Bang' in 1986. Nevertheless, it can be added that there is another alternative to Scott's *Retreat or Resolution* - a title that is possibly intended as a deliberate affront to those 'utopian idealists', as he calls them (p8), who would substitute 'v' for 's' to make the same 'revolutionary' challenge as Scott says late 60s New Left students did 'in often juvenile and debased Marxist language' (p74). This third option is the policy trajectory upon which government is now embarked. It follows the general crisis resulting from the 'stark utopia', as Karl Polanyi called it, of attempting to turn society into a self-adjusting market.

Applied by the semi-privatised state to all public services, the consequences of this commodification are 'annihilating the human and natural substance of society . . . physically destroying humanity and turning our surroundings into a wilderness' (1944, p3). This, when the state-sponsored market inevitably breaks down - unless there is any 'counter-movement', as Polanyi called it, to resist its dysfunctions - the state must step in to manage it directly. As democracy is sacrificed to the free market, this is the general crisis of society of which the general crisis of (higher) education is but a part.

In contradistinction to the collapse of the free market state into a corporate state and to confront gathering climate catastrophe, a social mobilisation unparalleled in peacetime is demanded. This will

transform all existing institutions, including the university. In the time remaining, universities and colleges, together with the rest of tertiary education and alongside primary and secondary, must become part of a counter-movement to sustain and develop human survival against annihilation.

They might take the form of social cooperatives proposed by David Ridley in *PSE 96*, pioneering human-centred research and investigation alongside discussion and debate through which the various publics of post-industrial society could confront their shared situation. A 'democratic collegiality' could also provide the basis for academic self-governance sustained by a learning infrastructure linking schools, colleges and universities at local, sub-regional and regional levels.

To stifle such potential opposition, as well as to cut undergraduate numbers in another attempt to recoup at least some of the £160 billion student debt, the Johnson regime now seeks to reduce arts and humanities courses in favour of supposedly technical and scientific ones to 'level up' the economy - as ever ignoring the fact that 'skills' do not of themselves create jobs. Restructuring the whole of HE by central fiat, instead of via market mechanisms whose implementation Scott itemises, has implications especially for those universities threatened with relegation to their previous polytechnic status.

FE provision will also be restricted in training the 16+ year-olds passed on to them by schools from Technical-level courses, even if these T-levels will predictably only add to the long list of failed 'vocational alternatives' in colleges. Meanwhile, in school sixth forms and in sixth-form colleges, A-levels will be pruned to reduce numbers of students applying to 'elite' universities. Such a reversion to type must be opposed across the whole of education, not only in HE.

Instead of intensifying relentless selection in pursuit of illusory upward social mobility, the human capital model that Scott shows has determined UK government education policy for so long must be rejected. Yet the latest suggestion that universities gain funding on the basis of student 'employability' will entrench it more. Instead, a new vision for learning at all levels must be developed by all involved in the struggle for it. Scott's compendious policy study enlivened with personal memoir and journalistic account makes an invaluable contribution to this task.

Reference

- Polanyi, K. (1944) *The Great Transformation, the political and economic origins of our time*. Boston: Beacon Press.