

# Consolidating education

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'Wisdom is sold in the desolate market where none come to buy.' (William Blake)

## Introduction

Karl Polanyi's *Great Transformation* returned to the early nineteenth century to offer an explanation for its subtitle of *the political and economic origins of our time* (1944). It did not find this starting point in industrialisation and the emergence of new classes so much as in the ideas of economists. In particular, Adam Smith's misconception of trade or barter as the basis of exchange between rationally calculating individuals from which markets in goods spontaneously arise. Unless confronted by 'a counter movement' in reaction against it, this idea of society as a self-adjusting market 'implied a stark utopia [which] could not exist for any length of time without annihilating the human and natural substance of society' (p3).

A market therefore has to be created and 'free markets' have to be constrained and maintained. They do not just appear when all restraints on their development are removed. Markets require, on the one hand, money, and, on the other, commodities or goods produced for sale that can be bought for money, not merely exchanged with each other for use. Money is clearly not a commodity but, as is always said, a means for the exchange of commodities. The two essential commodities are labour and land, the former another name for human activity that goes with life itself' and the latter 'another name for nature'. Neither are produced for sale. That they are is a fiction of the private owners who have claimed ownership of them.

This fiction of a commodity form is imposed upon all goods and services privatised for sale in a market. In the UK this has been seen as the means to resolve crises of profitability since deregulation by 'Big Bang' in 1986 when ailing domestic productive capital was opened to investment by speculative global capital. This led to domination of the latter over the former by finance capital seeking immediate profitable returns leading to successive collapses of market providers and their regulation. The only remedy to these repeated failures that governments committed to free-market solutions to their crisis of profitability applied was to reregulate by 'increasing transparency' in a fresh round of bidding from private contractors. In the end, government is forced to incorporate the state-

subsidised market providers by taking them over directly into state control, even though the semi-privatised state is also increasingly marketised.

This article suggests that, having been *Dismantling Education* (in the title of Carl Parsons and Tony Edwards 2020 book), at every level from primary to post-graduate schools, as well as in training and out of employment, with concomitant market failures at every level (as above), government is preparing to 'remantle' education and training so as to bring it under the direct control of what is becoming a corporate state (following Mussolini and Gentile's definition of a state in which employers and politicians are indistinguishable). This 'typically involves a mixture of crony capitalism, authoritarianism and ethnic nationalism - a mixture that can be found, albeit in very different forms, in Putin's Russia, Assad's Syria, Modi's India, Bolsonaro's Brazil, Hungary and Poland, or the Brexit and Trump tendencies in the UK and US', as Mary Kaldor said in her LSE blog (11/2/22).

## Beyond the 1944 compromise

To grasp the current situation in education, all sectors need to be considered as a whole, so that compulsory primary and secondary schooling are not separated from post-compulsory tertiary level learning. The last Labour Manifesto pointed in this direction with its proposal for a National Education Service although it was largely limited to a national secondary schools service. Yet state schooling has never been the whole of education.

This was clear in the post-war settlement of education when the private schools were 'shunted into a large siding' and forgotten about despite their links with the antique universities and some colleges within them. Together, these schools and colleges still function as cadre schools for the ruling class with some mandarin 'meritocracy' extended beyond ability to pay to the grammar schools beneath them. Selective academicism was preserved without the curricular reform that should have accompanied comprehensive structural reform and was finally cemented in place by the National Curriculum. Sold to teachers as an entitlement curriculum, this actually ranks pupils by largely literary examination of their previously more or less expensively acquired cultural capital.

The technical schooling that might have afforded

an alternative to this persisting academicism proved too expensive and so was only extended to day-release on industrial apprenticeships in FE, entered in 1950 by 33 per cent of boys and 8 per cent of girls. This 'vocational' training was distinguished from 'academic' education by a division of labour in the employed population between the skilled and unskilled manual working class and middle-class managerial / professional non-manual labour. Technical HE expanded at redbrick universities and elsewhere, including later polytechnics. With the collapse of heavy industry, unemployed school-leavers were subjected to a series of youth training schemes in hopes their 'skills' would create jobs. So, they migrated from new sixth forms to YTS to FE and finally to HE as para-professional employment - especially for women - expanded in what became a predominantly service economy.

Efforts at creating a market in education had begun under Thatcher both with overseas student fees and as school choice undermined allocation by local authorities so that only some primaries maintained the ideal of a good local school while state secondaries became increasingly differentiated. Free-market Tories aimed at reversing Labour's unenacted intention for the state to take over the private schools by privatising the state schools using vouchers for a basic entitlement that could supplement private fees in a schools market. To complete this process, academies and 'free' schools that had opted out of local authority control (currently some 70 per cent of secondaries and around 25 per cent of primaries) would be allowed investment by their sponsors to operate as private companies - as Gove proposed for inclusion in the Tories' 2015 Manifesto. Meanwhile, incorporated FE offered an example to both schools and universities of a functioning education market, albeit a 'quasi-' one since it was state subsidised. This became the model for HE but subsidised by twice tripled fee/loans, the majority of which were never repaid in full and so now total a £160b+ drain upon the state that 'consolidation' seeks to address.

### Market failure leads to consolidation

The market in education has failed to 'raise standards' with distortions of learning at every level due to the reduction of education to training through the quantification of qualifications. This commodification afflicts every level of learning and so must be opposed across the whole of education. In H&FE particularly, it prevents judgement of student progress towards professional or technical expertise save as itemised competence presented in 'skill sets' for tasks eroded by automation and merged in deskilled para-professional and precarious occupations.

This extends to repeated attempts to replace long-lost apprenticeships by 'rebuilding the vocational route' as Major's 'Modern Apprenticeships' were augmented by Cameron's 'professional' ones. Now vocationalism is to be expanded as part of 'levelling-up' with new Technical-level qualifications provided from 14+ in schools, sixth forms and colleges as alternatives to A-levels. Such a reversion to type also aims at reducing applications to HE, particularly in the arts and humanities, where proposals for closures and mergers of courses, departments and institutions have provoked the current strikes, alongside retraction of pensions. Yet students running up a down-escalator of devaluing certificates know that only GCSE and A-level scores - not new vocational qualifications for non-existent jobs - guarantee access to degree courses with chances of semi-secure, para-professional employment as against relegation to permanent precarity. Training without jobs is therefore once again rejected even as universities are pressed into expanding their technical provision.

Like the 'educational research' restricted to monitoring results and mandating methods to improve them, this reordering of education from top to bottom is increasingly centralised, reinforcing the more diffused market mechanisms previously employed. For example, university departments of education are slated for closure while instructed to bid against private contractors offering on-the-job teacher training in schools through cut-price platformed provision. Centralised control is mirrored in individual institutions where management contracts out responsibility for delivery to agents, i.e. teachers and lecturers, dedicated to improving qualifications for 'employability', even if they cannot guarantee employment. This intensifies relentless selection in pursuit of illusory upward social mobility while entrenching the failed human capital model of education with the latest suggestion that universities gain funding on the basis of graduate job placement.

Resistance to such 'performativity' is manifested by teachers and students as both strive to meet their targets with increasingly rote learning and competent performance. Certainly, the current 'counter-movement' in which striking lecturers are supported by students to resist the dysfunctions of the state-sponsored market in education is inflected by visceral reactions to the erosion of their academic vocation of research and scholarship. In response, the state steps in to manage the market directly through ruthless consolidation. That is what 'the counter-movement' is up against.