

## THE CROYDON ASSEMBLY 15/11/14 EDUCATION WORKSHOP

Thanks but an apology – no one from NUS which only seems to have one person working on apprenticeships that I hoped they would talk about, but also university fees and anyone from Croydon College? However, it means that I can talk about the whole of education ‘from primary to post-graduate schools’. This is increasingly necessary to understand what is going on, as well as – even more importantly – to relate education as a whole to the economy.

In relation to this whole, Martin Allen and I have argued that there has been an attempted *Great Reversal* (2013) of education policy at all levels. Both Gove and Willis – even though they reportedly hated each other – agreed that too many kids were in academic education, or rather, that too many of the wrong sort of kids had gone to the wrong sort of universities under Blair’s parentally popular policy of widening participation to higher education, and that academic education should only be for a selected few. Gove was deluded enough to believe that everyone could have an equal chance of being unequal through academic selection by schools providing ‘a grammar school education for all’ in Harold Wilson’s weasel words. This would, Gove thought, restart the limited upward social mobility via grammar schooling from the manual working class to the non-manual middle class that was expanding post-war with a developing economy and growing welfare state.

Similarly, Willetts – a far more doctrinaire free-market fundamentalist than Gove – thought that tripling fees to £9,000 (or higher but for the Lib Dems) would freeze many people out of HE but – apart from adult students who have become an extinct species at universities – this did not happen; numbers increased after initially falling back. Being a free-market fundie, Willetts accepted this decision of the market, even at the cost of adding to the debt the Coalition are supposed to be reducing an incredible £330 billion in unpaid student loans by 2046 when outstanding balances begin to be written off. Anyway, if the punters were willing to pay... and anyway, what else was there for them to do?

Gove has also been defeated in his essential aims but can depart to edit *The Daily Mail* secure in the knowledge the structures of schooling he has put in place pave the way for finally removing schools from remaining local authority control. This now fits with the regionalisation agenda that Cameron is forcing through in England as his response to the Scottish referendum to establish what Peter Latham in his 2014 *Imminent Demise of Local Government* calls ‘the optimal internal management arrangement for privatised local government services’ with elected mayors etc. It would not take much either to invite in private provision for profit as Gove promised, if not vouchers. (Student loans already function as *de facto* vouchers for autonomous universities competing for students with their various specialist course offers that present a model for schools and colleges to follow.)

So, I imagine that with its local authority concern this Croydon assembly will focus, as far as education and many other former-local authority services are concerned, on returning all schools to LA oversight as the NUT’s *Manifesto* demands as the best way of guaranteeing a good local school for every child, so ending competition and contracted out management to academy chains and free schools. To this end, it might look at the shared vision for school education that is being developed in Birmingham in the wake of the ‘Trojan Horse’ affair. (See Richard Hatcher’s *Children’s zone approach – local area-based partnerships between the schools, the local authority and the community* or rather with local people, since ‘communities’ are often fractious and ill-defined so that competition is easily encouraged

between them; as in Tower Hamlets recently but also by ‘Faith Schools’ as another choice for parental consumers.) However, at a regional or sub-regional level, there is a case to be made for what Ken Spours and Anne Hodgson have called a *unified and ecosystem vision* for further and higher education, as well as for MacFarlane’s previous recommendations (rejected by Thatcher in 1980) for tertiary colleges that could unite sixth forms and FE (see Simmons 2013). Such a system could make real contributions in education, training and research alongside local and regional government-led economic regeneration and would extend downwards into localities through linking also with primary and secondary schools.

However, as both Gove and Willetts are widely discredited, there is now a new policy and professional consensus in support of what was a minority tendency under Gove, namely Kenneth Baker’s revanchist programme of University Technical Colleges and the division of all 18+ year olds (when they reach the end of their compulsory ‘participation’ in school, college or training next year) into two officially permitted types of young people: students or ‘apprentices’. This pledge of ‘rebalancing’ the numbers of students against apprentices being repeated on all sides, eg. by Ed Miliband at this year’s Labour Party Conference, and linked to ‘ending youth unemployment’ by cutting benefits for unemployed under-25s. It is not going to happen however, if only because c.40% of 18-21 year-olds are undergraduates while only c.10% are apprentices (both c.60% women). Nevertheless, with a new vocational route to ‘technical A-levels’, leading on to renamed FE ‘colleges of technical excellence’ and reinvented foundation degrees, this could see not only the return of bi- or tri-partite schooling but also of the polytechnics. More substantially, as Martin Allen argues in *Another Great Training Robbery or a Real Alternative for Young People? Apprenticeships at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century*, most employers don’t want apprenticeships and if they do they run them themselves. Also, except for a minority of these ‘proper’ employer-supported apprenticeships with employment guaranteed on completion etc., e.g. Rolls Royce at Derby that is reputedly harder to get onto than into engineering at Oxford, these are not apprenticeships but subsidized job placements.

This brings us to the nub of the matter in the way that calls from politicians for greater ‘productivity’ and to restore ‘the march of the makers’ pursue another magical solution to real problems – just as bringing back grammar schools or ‘grammar schools for all’ would supposedly restart social mobility, so bringing back ‘apprenticeships’ will supposedly turn the UK into a German economy that produces things (not that the Germans have found it very easy lately to sell their commodities to other European countries they have screwed down by austerity). Again, this won’t happen because, even if investment raises overall production of manufactured goods, productivity increases enabled by automation and digitisation, mean less people are employed to produce them. Global finance capital is so dominant that, even before new trade agreements like TTIP, capital invests where it likes, influenced only by state subsidies that include the provision of a ‘skilled’ workforce which it is increasingly the role of education to provide. But often capital requires only flexible and semiskilled workers, so that the TUC has reported repeatedly that the majority of jobs created since the ‘recovery’ from the 2008 recession are part-time.

This connects to another thing that has been happening in this Great Recession and which picks up on what happened after the Thatcher-induced unemployment of the 1980s – a reconstitution of what Marxists call the reserve army of labour. This in turn is part of a wider reformation of social class in which the traditional upper-middle-working division of knowledge and labour has pulled apart at the same time as the gap between rich and poor has

widened. In this new pyramid gone pear-shaped class formation, a middle-working/ working-middle class is no longer divided by manual industrial and non-manual office labour but finds itself working in sales and services using computers and new so-called 'interpersonal skills'. The new middle-working/ working-middle class is intermediate between an internationalized ruling class of employers and financiers and an 'unskilled' section of the traditionally manually working class relegated to so-called 'underclass status'. The numbers of this reserve army of labour vary as they 'churn' in and out of successive insecure and short-term jobs but have been ratcheted up with every crisis and now include perhaps half the population working irregularly and often part-time. They have little investment in the system and the consolidation of their position in this new social structure was perhaps marked by the 2011 riots.

It is to those in the respectable middle that politicians address their appeals to 'hard working people', who still aspire for their children to climb the down-escalator of devaluing qualifications that education offers them, so as not to fall into the new and 'unrespectable' 'rough' of – by implication – not hard-working people beneath. (Actually also the 'working poor' who suffer 'the cost of living crisis', ie. poverty with two to three million resorting to food banks). This aspiration turns education which has been substituted for employment, or rather is proffered as an eventual hope of employment, into cramming for regurgitation in mainly literary exams that function as proxies for more or less expensively acquired cultural capital. Widening participation to higher education was presented as professionalising the proletariat but actually disguised a proletarianisation of the professions, including notably the academic profession. Now most qualified school leavers apply to university in hopes of secure semi-professional employment at best. Suppressed hysteria fuels the competition between schools and universities measured in league tables of academic 'kwality' as Ted Wragg used to call it. This exam industry and the policing of 'standards' in SATs by Ofsted drives teachers to coach students ever more closely to exam and test performance. While regimented and listless students study harder but learn less as millions are turned off from 14+ onwards, 'sending the naughty boys to college' as Woodhead forthrightly said – only many of them don't arrive there!

In these circumstances it makes no sense to reintroduce tripartite divisions lower and lower down the system, relegating at least half to inferior 'vocational' options. Rather than delivering promises of upward social mobility, education functions to keep everyone in their place. Moreover, relating education to work at earlier and earlier stages contradicts uncertainty about what people will eventually do and 'flexibility' is encouraged by the repeatedly predicted end of the job for life (eg. Liverpool-Victoria 14/11/14). Instead of this 'vocational education', the starting point should be a common general but not academic schooling up to age 18, linked to the assumption of democratic citizenship. This would include learning about work but not just learning to work, to educate 'fully developed individuals, fit for a variety of labours, ready to face any change in production, and... giving free scope to their own natural and acquired powers', as Marx suggested in *Capital*. This implies confronting the possibilities of flexibility but avoiding the current situation where there are more people in the workforce but many are paid little for their unregulated employment. An expectation of, and an entitlement to, local/regional adult further and higher continuing education should be integral to school leaving, just as it is for US High School graduates, especially with more students likely to be living at home, as is the case in other European countries. This should be the aim even if not everyone wants to go to higher education immediately – including many who are already there! Vocational considerations

could then be balanced with the claims of personal interest (the ‘education for its own sake’ many teachers persist in impressing upon the largely deaf ears of their students), especially if a return to progressive taxation meant those who earn more pay more. (This is different from the ‘graduate tax’ that NUS once advocated and which is how many of today’s students look at their debt.)

Rediscovering the purpose of higher study within and across disciplines includes the relation of such study to an academic vocation dedicated to learning critically from the past and with research and scholarship enabling change in the future. Undergraduate participation in that continuing cultural conversation can restore a sense that many have lost of what higher education is supposed to be about. As UNESCO’s 1997 *Resolution on Higher Education* states: ‘higher education is directed to human development and to the progress of society’. The problem remains however that, while universities may subscribe to this ideal, their often exaggerated claims to make their graduates ‘employable’ – like those of schools and colleges – cannot guarantee employment. So, fundamentally the perception of ‘the problem’ needs to change from being one where young people are seen as having to be readied for ‘employability’ by earlier and earlier specialization for vocations that may not exist when they graduate.

All this needs some thinking about! And we have not mentioned the NewsCorp-Pearson diet of Massive On-line Open Courses and teaching programmes, already evident in so many private tutorial corner shops, presented as the way to catch up with Singapore and South Korea in the PISA rankings of international test performances while further deskilling teachers. They pose a challenge to those teachers who think that with one teacher in front of a class of 30 all is well with the world. Instead, teachers need to develop a new professionalism along with a new conception of education as fostering and informing democracy. This relates to the NUT’s project of socially active trades unionism. We therefore need alternatives as well as critique, such as those related to each sector of education Martin Allen and I invited from contributors to our *Education Beyond the Coalition* last year. We thus hoped to contribute to the debate which Christine Blower called for in our introduction ‘that all teachers want and need to have about what education is for’. In a democracy, deciding on society’s future direction – which will increasingly involve recognizing and ensuring what is necessary for human survival – should be the common practice of all citizens. It should be a practice for which a general education in schools not only prepares citizens but engages them in from the earliest years. Such a foundational education can be informed by the discussion, research and scholarship preserved and developed by post-compulsory further, higher and adult continuing education in a process of critical cultural transmission, creation and recreation.

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