

Hard times for education in England

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Abstract

*This paper summarizes a ten-lecture Open Access course in the post-war politics of education in England which can be accessed, together with supporting reading, lecture notes and videos of the lectures via our website at <http://radicated.wordpress.com/>. It is submitted to BESA journal in hopes that it will be used by students of education studies and, to help them follow the argument of the course, key concepts are emboldened below. These are generally related as pairs of 'binaries' that, while recognizing with Bourdieu the limitations of such 'paired concepts', are offered to readers as things to think with; hopefully simplifying reality as much as possible without making it too simple, as Einstein is supposed to have said. For the same reason, citations are kept to a minimum although references can be found in the full lecture notes and supporting materials for the course which are provided on-line. The paper also updates and develops the argument of our 2010 book *Lost Generation? New strategies for youth and education* (London: Continuum).*

Key words: welfare state, free market-state, class structure, education and training, students and teachers, the corrosion of learning

Summary

In the UK today the Anglo-American economic model implemented by the new market- state that has been introduced since 1979 is unraveling but return to the post-war, national welfare state is impossible. In this necessarily condensed summary the English education system is taken as a lens through which to focus what has happened to the wider society and state, as well as to consider new ways forward, rejecting the habitual nostrum that countries can educate themselves out of recession.

Introduction

Unrealistic hopes have been repeatedly invested in English education. First, that selective state secondary schooling would sustain traditional industry in the 1940s and '50s and then in the 1960s and '70s that comprehensive school reform would overcome notorious class divisions to modernize society. Today, English education and training exemplifies the new market-state (Bobbitt 2002) introduced by the Thatcher governments in which power contracts to the centre whilst responsibility is contracted out to semi-privatised but state-subsidised 'delivery units', as schools, colleges and universities have become. Thus, the old compromises of a national system locally delivered have been forsaken for a national system nationally delivered to combine a strong state with a 'free' market in place of the consensual compromises of the welfare state and substituting governance for government.

These changes to the state have been accompanied by Party political changes. The former welfare state was brought in by an (Old) Labour government but was taken over and run more efficiently by the Conservatives who had initially opposed it. Similarly, the Conservatives could not maintain Thatcher's market-state which was taken over and developed by New Labour. With the important exception of £1,000 a year higher education fees, introduced in 1997 and subsequently twice tripled, most services remaining in the public sector, although they were thoroughly marketised, were not yet monetized; nor were they privatized, though this process has now begun in the Health Service. New Labour even took advantage of relatively strong fiscal conditions to increase spending on education, particularly on schools, both absolutely but also as a proportion of GDP.

Cameron's Conservatives with their privileged social and educational backgrounds represent the reversal that has occurred, especially in education where the current Education Secretary, Michael Gove, openly seeks a return to the 1950s. However, lacking an overall parliamentary majority and forced into a coalition, the Tories are identified too closely with the bankers who have bankrupted the economy. They have thus lost the claim to be the natural party of government, while the indecisive election result showed New Labour also widely discredited.

The country thus faces an impasse that renders it incapable of meeting multiple social challenges headed by the prolonged under- and unemployment that impacts most severely upon young people. Incipient constitutional crises, ranging from Europe to Scottish independence – and including the future of UK multiculturalism, also threaten a peculiarly English identity crisis that cannot be subsumed forever under Royal pageantry, sporting triumphs and desperate hopes for the national football team! And, of course, there is the national debt that passed £1trillion in May 2012, equals a deficit of 66% of GDP.

Meanwhile, 'The conditions that gave rise to citizens taking to the streets and capable of the scenes we witnessed' are unchanged since the riots of 2011 and have still not received the explanation which Professor Gus John demanded in an *Open Letter to Prime Minister Cameron* that August. In our account below, these latest in a long series of insurrections (see Pitts 2011) mark the crystallization of an on-going process of class reformation in which education and training has played a crucial role.

But first, as ever with England, some history

Since Medieval times, England's two antique universities (compared with five during the same period in much smaller Scotland) have monopolized legitimate knowledge to form an essential part of the status symbolism of all English elites. After only a brief Republic, hereditary monarchy was restored so that citizens remain subjects and there is no entitlement to education such as was established in America and France. Nor is there much respect for non-professional vocations; indeed, such 'trade' occupations betoken inferior status. Instead, a series of tests at earlier and earlier ages divine superior mental qualities which are assumed to be inherited only by a minority of children, while the majority fail at every fence and are made to feel that they are failures.

This legacy was intensified by the industrial revolution which England also pioneered. As this started from a low technical base, there was little need for scientific application and vocational training. This only grew outside the established system and came to be derided by a capitalist class which aped the manners of the landed aristocracy whose classically educated sons commanded the empire. Mass elementary schooling, when it was eventually completed in 1902, was always concerned more with regimenting the working class than educating them since there was not even the necessity faced by more polyglot nations to get everyone speaking the same language. As to universal literacy, this has never been achieved for the c.20% of the population remaining 'functionally illiterate'.

Another constant is the 7% of children in private (so-called 'public') schools closely linked via the exam boards to the antique universities. These schools were 'shunted' by the Conservative author of the 1944 Education Act, Butler, 'into a vast siding' where they were forgotten about. This, despite the influence they exercised over

what became the state grammar schools selecting the next 20% by supposedly scientific 'Intelligence Quotient' (IQ) testing. In a pale shadow of the German 'dual system', secondary technical schools were intended to provide traditional heavy industry with skilled craftsmen but this never happened due to underinvestment. Instead, apprenticeships were supplemented by day-release to further education (FE) colleges supported by employers and agreed with trades unions.

So in the post-war decades, most children left school without any qualifications at 15 after only five years in primary and five in secondary moderns for early marriage and **lifelong earning** – for men at least, in jobs without education by contrast with today's 'lifelong learning' and education without jobs! Half of women had their first child before the age of 21 as recorded in the 1971 census, returning to work at best part-time and supported by the 'family wage' of male full employment thereafter. Unemployment persisted only in depressed regions of the North, Scotland and Wales so labour demand was met by immigration from the former-colonies of the Empire, such as the Indian sub-continent, Africa and the Caribbean – although throughout the period emigration to the former-dominions exceeded numbers coming in.

This is the golden age of the 1950s to which the Coalition's Schools Minister, Michael Gove, now seeks to return by reintroducing grammar schooling to restart the limited upward social mobility that a growing economy then allowed for a minority of 'bright working-class children' (boys mostly). However, this period came to an end coincident with the introduction of non-selective comprehensive schools from 1965 on. That this was a coincidence and not a consequence is shown by the end at the same time of similarly limited upward social mobility in the USA where non-selective high schools had been established since the war.

The 1972 oil crisis ended what the French call 'the thirty glorious years' of economic expansion, faltering though this was in the UK. Since this time, the decline in manufacturing has accelerated and this has had huge implications for young people and for the education system. The remainder of this article examines how developments in the education system have reflected these 'hard times'.

From a German model to an American one

A growing economy and developing welfare state led to pressure for higher education (HE) reform. The 1963 Robbins Report was the first official recognition that more than a 'limited pool of ability' were 'educable' beyond basic levels and proposed new universities alongside colleges of advanced technology elevated to university status. Wilson's Labour government accepted these recommendations but then modified them by establishing also new urban polytechnics, widely seen as expanding HE on the cheap. A 'binary division' was thus introduced at tertiary level just as selection was being phased out at secondary level as comprehensive schools

Some surviving grammars joined the private schools which remained at the apex of what was still academic selection to the elite universities via the domination of the exam boards over an unchanged schools' curriculum. Without curricular reform the new comprehensives, which grew by the 1970s to c.80% of all English schools and more in Scotland and Wales, were thus battling on an uneven pitch against traditional academicism assessed by traditional O- and A-level exams. Combined with the rising unemployment facing school leavers, this meant that the optimism of the comprehensive period was short lived. Youth unemployment was only disguised by raising the leaving age to 16 in 1972 and then by a series of 'youth training schemes', created to prepare for resumption of normal economic growth.

When it became apparent this was not going to happen and there was 'no alternative' to neo-liberalism, the Thatcher government at first paradoxically attempted to develop a German model of vocational training supported by the trades unions. Like the previous technical secondary schools, this was done on the cheap and, anyway, represented only *Training Without Jobs* (Finn 1987) as government laid waste the UK's industrial heartlands.

As well as striking for an increase in the youth training allowance, many young people voted with their feet and either remained in new school sixth forms or went to further education colleges. From there more began to work their way up to the polytechnics, if not to the new and old universities, in a system that looked increasingly Americanized with high schools and community/ FE colleges feeding state universities beneath an Ivy League elite plus some liberal arts universities. Thus an underfunded American model replaced the previous, watered-down German model.

Yet with the 1988 Education Act, England seemed to follow the French by introducing a National Curriculum for the first time to all English state schools from primary on. Although presented as an entitlement and with common exams at 16 also increasing attainments, this was a very academic curriculum which offered 'a grammar school education for all'. This was a contradiction in terms since grammar schooling, following the private school elite, was designed only for a minority. (As part of growing devolution, Welsh language was included in a Welsh National Curriculum, whilst Scotland had always been different and became more so; for example, still today without university fees – for Scots and EU-students at least.)

Repeated tests for different stages of the National Curriculum, despite industrial action against them by teacher unions, were set for pupils and teachers from nurseries on. They reproduced league tables of results for parents to choose schools in what became a 'market' in state schools given increasing independence from the democratically accountable local authorities that had previously administered them. With greater control over their admissions, some schools were able to choose

parents in order to meet their academic targets more easily, increasing social segregation.

However, universal illusions in education as a way out of persisting economic malaise and now permanent and structural unemployment were sustained by another expansion of higher education, which was announced to meet the demands of 'the knowledge economy'. The New Labour government of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown continued to insist that there was 'more room at the top' for those who are well qualified whilst those at the bottom had only themselves to blame for not taking advantage of the opportunities for education and training that an 'enabling state' made available to them.

This added to rising national hysteria about education, which – like a classically Freudian 'return of the repressed' – is a way of talking about class in an officially 'classless society', as Major declared it. For his part, Blair announced 'the class war is over' but did not tell us who had won! In fact, social class has changed (see below), only adding to the confusion.

The Major government had already doubled the number of university students overnight by declaring the polytechnics 'universities' and then Blair aimed to 'widen participation' further so that 'half of 18-30 years-olds had some experience of HE'. This target had nearly been achieved – for young women at least – before the latest fee rise to £9,000 *p.a.* in 2012 cut home applications to English universities by 10%. Most universities are charging close to this cap to make up for central funding that has been cut, except for the STEM subjects of science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

So there is still no market reflected in prices for HE save at post-graduate level and for the more than one million non-EU overseas students (16% of all UK students, 47% of post-grads). There is also little competition yet from the private providers and FE colleges that are being encouraged by government to offer cut-price deals, including two-year degrees. Colleges and training agencies, as well as a few employers also offer apprenticeships but most of these have now been so devalued and are so short (weeks instead of years) they are confused with compulsory workfare. The logic of competition for prestigious university places however, favours those institutions that can afford to privatize themselves out of reliance upon government funding, though this has not happened yet save for one pre-existing private university.

Recent changes to the school system mirror the increased differentiation of universities as growing numbers of 'academies' and 'free schools' independent of local government compete for parents with various more or less specialist course offerings, including 'faith schools' teaching 'Creation Science' together with biology! These atomized schools exist in a semi-privatised market, supplied and supported

by global edu-businesses run by multi-media moguls, like Murdoch who – until recently! – had been in close negotiations with Gove. Or Pearson Publishing which owns *The Financial Times* as well as Edexcel, the largest English exam board, annually testing 3.8 million English 11 year-olds, plus schoolchildren across the USA, as well as funding Oxford University's Centre for Educational Assessment. 'Free schools' and academies are accountable only to the Secretary of State for Education, who has made clear his intention that such schools would be opened to private investment for profit should Cameron win a second term.

Today, as in the rest of a post-welfare society, the state-subsidised private sector of education dominates the semi-privatised state sector in a new mixed economy (as compared with the old mixed economy in which the private and state sectors were generally clearly separated if mutually supportive). This reduces citizens to consumers. As suggested in the 2011 *Open Public Services White Paper*, all public services are now open to contract from private bidders so that government no longer directly provides services and, thus, as with the nationalised industries privatised by Thatcher, absolves itself of responsibility for them. This reduces local and national democracy towards occasional plebiscites on who should award tenders at the lowest price for the greatest profit to lightly regulated private contractors. The loss of representative democracy is replaced by 'property owning democracy' and market participation by those who can afford it, so that – like the encouragement of home ownership by Thatcher – 'widening participation' to HE was presented by Blair as professionalizing the proletariat but actually disguised a proletarianisation of the professions. This relates to a long-term and on-going reformation of the class structure.

The class structure goes pear-shaped

Teaching is an example of a trade craft with training in specialist FE colleges that became a profession by association with higher education in the 1960s and '70s. Now, although a degree is required, the one-year training that follows – even though it takes place in universities – follows central government prescription and is a prime case of FE in HE. Now Gove seeks to abandon it altogether, along with national pay agreements and any controls over entry to what is becoming a para-profession at best. Academics are also included in the new styles of management with an emphasis on performance targets and relentless inspection imported from the private sector. So, 'professional' workers have been deskilled in the same way that specialist craft was turned into flexible labour in the 1980s when traditional industries were dismantled.

The applications of new technology and the growth of services have similarly recast both traditional middle- and working-class employees into new divisions of knowledge and skill so that the majority of the population are now part of a **new** 'working-middle' / 'middle-working' class, 'between the snobs and the jobs' as has

been said. Through qualification inflation, education to all levels has been complicit in 'upgrading' what are now paraprofessional occupations in expanded services, sales, middle-management and administration.

Education – or rather, training – has also contributed to 'degrading' jobs requiring no or largely worthless vocational qualifications at the base of the occupational structure. In the 'low skills equilibrium' that has characterised the flexible labour market to which successive governments have been committed since the 1980s, 40% of jobs and rising have been estimated to require only two or three days to perform effectively as deregulated outsourcing deskills work into a succession of repetitive and mindless tasks undertaken by interchangeable employees. Rather than resembling the 'diamond' that would result from upward social mobility pulling more into the middle, the former class pyramid has gone pear-shaped.

For increasing numbers of young people in education and for older people in employment, who are forced into perpetual training and retraining just to keep their jobs or else to find new ones, this is like running up a down escalator. You have to run faster and faster simply to stay still. So, in schools, colleges and universities you are expected to work more and more to achieve less and less. Rather than helping young people 'move up', inflated educational qualifications are now essential to avoid downward social mobility.

It is the absence of work, particularly the disappearance of specific 'youth jobs' that has been the reason for young people staying in full-time education for longer; not because most employment has become generally more demanding – in fact, the opposite is the case. As a result, they also experience a prolonged transition to adulthood – that is if they are able to make a transition at all. In the absence of work, education plays a larger part than ever before to become not only the main instrument of social control over youth, but also a new source of division amongst young people.

Students, for instance, are divided from non-students but also amongst each other in a competing hierarchy of post-16 and higher education institutions. Only those from elite universities are likely to be guaranteed 'graduate jobs'. Many others – according to some estimates, up to 1 in 3 – find themselves 'overeducated' but 'underemployed', having to take jobs previously done by non-graduates, that is assuming they are able to find a job at all.

Dependency upon parents lasts longer faced with a housing market which, despite moving from boom to bust, remains difficult to enter. Rather than making a new type of 'prolonged transition', with up to one third of men and one fifth of women between 20 and 34 years old still living with their parents, many may not make any transition to independent living. Compared with just 40 years previously, when half of women had their first child in their early 20s, nearly half of women do not have their first child until they are in their 30s, two 'breadwinners' now being necessary to maintain a

family as many men's wages and conditions have been 'feminised' by service and office employment.

At the base of the new class structure, an augmented reserve army of labour has been ratcheted up in size to include more than the grand-children of the YTS generation. Alongside housing, social security, policing and regional policies, this unskilled and 'rough' section of the formerly manually working class has been relegated by worthless vocational training in schools and colleges into a peripheral so-called 'underclass' of NEETs (Not in Employment Education or Training). They were the main focus of New Labour concern and were reduced to a claimed 8% of 16+ year-olds but are now nearly doubled to 15%.

The urban rioters – *The Guardian* (12/08/12) estimating that almost 80% of those in court were under-25 – responded to their marginalisation from society. Failed by an academic education system, without work and without hope, they no longer play by any rules. Not having any commitment to 'fairness' or any faith in 'social justice', they have become youth's new 'underclass'. It is widely anticipated the riots will recur, some even predicting them as an annual summer event.

Even if FE college students joined the university student protests against fee rises in 2010 and to demand the restoration of their Educational Maintenance Allowances, this does not mean there is any real long term unity amongst young people. Moreover, the riots may have tipped those in the middle towards the worst of both worlds. In desperate hopes of a secure job in three or four years – 'when the economy has picked up', they are prepared to take on 'a small mortgage', as the National Union of Students' President described degrees estimated at £60,000 with living expenses. Thus, they continue to scramble up the down-escalator of devalued qualifications so as not to fall into the 'underclass' beneath; but they may not be as far from it as their parents think!

The corrosion of education

Given the lack of alternatives, it is no wonder so many school and college leavers still apply to universities which in September 2012 rejected 100,000 despite the fall in applications. For the most part they do so without much interest in what they will study beyond the prospects it offers for employment. Nor can many except the wealthy afford to continue the heady rounds of binge drinking that have become central to a commercialized youth culture, especially for university students living away from home. Yet it does not appear that so many as expected applied to local universities so as to save money by living at home whilst studying, leaving these mainly former-polytechnics especially liable to course closures and mergers.

What is ignored in many litanies to lost youth – whether graduate or non-graduate – is the corrosion of education itself, which is in danger of losing its validity as a way

forward in young people's lives. Unconnected to possibilities for practice, displaying knowledge for assessment has replaced learning with test-taking. Broken down for quantifiable evaluation and behavioural manipulation at one end and cramming for traditional exams at the other, this simulacrum of learning disguises the decline in achievement all teachers recognize.

It is ironic that after so much talk about 'education education education', there is pervasive evidence of so-called 'dumbing down' rather than of any 'wising up'. Undergraduate essays are randomly sprinkled with apostrophes even at Oxbridge, where students relentlessly churn out assignments to stay ahead of the competition. As every marker sees, students at all levels rarely spell, punctuate or paragraph properly and often have only a shaky grasp of grammar. These are symptoms of reading only 'bits' cut and pasted from the internet with inevitable plagiarism. As a result, 'These students are not illiterate but they may never become true expert readers... [and] their false sense of knowing may distract them from a deeper development of their intellectual potential.' (Wolf 2008, 225 and 226)

These realities were ignored in the recent *furor* over arbitrarily raised GCSE exam grades, although making the exam harder to pass in June than in January was Gove's crude and academic answer to them.

The need for a university foundation year, like those in the four-year programs of US and Scottish universities, is widely recognized by academics. This is especially necessary in subjects requiring an understanding of mathematics, leave alone to induct all students into an academic culture that has not (yet) completely abandoned its struggle to survive. The delusions of Vice-Chancellors, exam boards and recent governments persist, however, in their assertions of ever rising standards. Critics are derided as grumpy, old and soon-to-be-retired under-raters of all the 'experiences' students/customers are consuming on-line; or denounced as elitists seeking to revert to minority HE.

Meanwhile, students remove themselves from any meaningful involvement in a university education that is often little more than a random collection of Business Studies modules that have only vocational relevance at best – more FE in HE. 'Let's make like I give a shit!' a student T-shirt proclaims as students are conditioned since earliest schooling to connecting their self-esteem and what they may achieve in later life to their test scores. As one Education Studies undergraduate at Greenwich wrote, 'Over-assessment has made subject knowledge and understanding a thing of the past as students are put through a routine year after year, practicing exactly what to write and when in preparation for exams.' (quoted in Ainley 2005)

Staff collude in the charade and at worst share the illusions in the quality they supposedly maintain, pandering to parents less concerned with what their children learn than with the certificate and what they will earn.

A recent book on higher education in Ireland punctures this pretense. Deirdre McArdle-Clinton's *Capsule Education* is a general cultural critique, sparked by the observation of pre-packaged potatoes in a supermarket 'presented for sale in capsule form'. Like medicine 'absorbed without the distress or effort of chewing or tasting', learning is sugar-coated and drip-fed fed to customers/students on-line instead of in books. While blaming neo-relativist twaddle for this descent into the ubiquitous irony of the new postmodern academic orthodoxy, what McArdle-Clinton describes is an outcome of commodification which in England is about to take a great leap forward with *Students at the heart of the system*, as the latest government White Paper introducing the still higher fees was entitled (DBIS 2011). Her call for a national commission on Irish HE is being echoed in England by calls for an independent inquiry into the whole of education from postgraduate to primary schools.

Perhaps especially in the latter, the recent government instructions on how to teach reading through 'synthetic phonics' exemplify McArdle-Clinton's 'capsule education' and will have the same predictably disastrous consequence of constricting the ability to make meaning by making connections. Instead, a tyranny of transparency explains to students/customers/consumers exactly what to do and when so as to turn their outcomes into quantifiable and thereby comparable commodities for audit and sale. This behavioral training, which also prescribes to teachers exactly what to teach and when, effectively dumbs down learning to reduce rather than raise standards as teachers are too busy assessing students to teach them anything.

Conclusion: education in a declining economy

Despite all of the above, many assumptions about education continue to go unchallenged. Most educationists have come to accept a 'human capital' model of education. This assumes the more qualifications possessed by the population, the greater the national economic benefit. So by contrast with the early post-war period when the content of education was largely left to teachers, as the economy declined, governments intervened more closely to promote a more 'work-based' curriculum for some students. Under New Labour, human capital theory took another turn with education set a succession of national performance targets to raise 'standards'. And, although there are clear differences in education systems across the world, politicians and their advisors still pour over the details of schooling in fast growing economies as education continues to be seen as the engine of economic growth.

Integral to the idea of education building human capital has been the commitment to extending and intensifying education, starting nursery school earlier at 3-4 with more terms and longer hours to raise the school leaving age with more going on to college and university. This is why recent reports of a small decline in participation rates for 16 year-olds caused such alarm. In fact, in a declining economy where reliable employment opportunities are very limited, the majority of young people have little option but to stay in full-time education. In this context, the cancellation of EMAs, for

instance, should be seen as an attack on young people's living standards rather than encouraging them to swap school for (non-existent) work.

Likewise, raising the 'participation age' to 17 in 2013 and 18 in 2015 is unlikely to meet the opposition from pupils and parents that met RoSLA1 (Raising of the School Leaving Age to 16) in 1972 and with schools and colleges now unable to threaten withdrawal of EMA payments for non-attendees, there are likely to be large numbers of students only nominally enrolled anyway. Large numbers will continue to work part-time while they study – although evidence suggests that even these sorts of employment opportunities are drying up.

As seen, despite the increases in fees and to the surprise of many – including the authors, the number of university applications from school and college leavers has not declined as much as anticipated. The explanation is that most youngsters aspire to 'something better than Sainsbury's jobs' (quoted in Allen 2004) and while most graduates will start on salaries well below the recent Association of Graduate Recruiters' survey figure of £26,500 average for leading graduate employers, it remains the case that those with degrees earn more than those without. In other words, having a degree still improves one's *relative* position in the jobs queue. The fact that students will not be required to make any loan repayments until they earn £21,000 – a figure close to the median wage – is also a key contributory factor.

Former member of the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee, David Blanchflower, argued in 2009 that an expanded university system could play an important role in 'keeping young people off the streets'. Of course, staying in education is better than 'doing nothing' but, far from vindicating the human capital argument, this illustrates how the collapse of labour market opportunities is the consequence of a lack of demand as the young become a 21st century version of the Victorian 'surplus population'.

The increasingly 'dysfunctional' nature of education – in other words, the lack of fit between official objectives for education and its actual reality – is unsustainable. While there are growing concerns about the costs involved, there is increasing ruling-class recognition that in a declining economy education needs to be openly championed as an agent of social control rather than presented as promoting illusory social mobility. Nico Hirtt (2011) provides an international perspective for this new kind of education-economy correspondence, arguing that in a period of high unemployment and labour market polarisation only 'basic' education is required for the majority.

For Michael Gove, too many young people have been doing too well in examinations. Rather than New Labour's '*excellence for everyone*', which involved trying to make everybody more 'qualified', educational success should be restored as something necessarily restricted to the few. This excludes all 'the wrong sort of

people' who have gone to 'the wrong sort of universities'. These 'students' should be returned to vocational learning in FE and on apprenticeships, to do things with hammers and chisels! Still thinking that Britain's economy is based on 'making things' in the traditional manner, Gove also disregards the fact that 57% of undergraduates are female and that most employers do not need apprentices and the few who do, run their own apprenticeships – in 2010 British Telecoms received 24,000 applications for 221 apprenticeships!

So, exams must become harder at every level and more status given to traditional subjects. If there had not been outright opposition from the Liberal Democrats, Gove would have reintroduced GCE O-level, long since replaced by the more universal and more student-friendly GCSE exam. 'Vocational learning' also needs to be overtly practical rather than being 'applied' versions of academic subjects and no longer allow progression to higher education. Ditching the pretence that vocational subjects have equal status with academic qualifications, they will soon be excluded from school league tables which will instead reflect success in the five 'English Baccalaureate' subjects – English, maths, a science, modern language, history or geography. As a result, many inner city schools that have done well in league tables as a result of success in vocational subjects like business and information technology will drop to the bottom.

Thus Gove's policies, while openly reactionary, also acknowledge – more realistically than many of his opponents – the changed relationship between education and the labour market outlined above. Such a change in direction poses new questions for students and teachers defending an education system set up to serve an expanding economy and an aspirational society. It also opens critical space to develop new strategies for youth and education. This is both a difficult and prolonged task, asking questions about what education should be for and how it should be organized. Without this, for many young people, the education through which they grind will continue to lose its legitimacy. Meanwhile, England – one of the last industrial countries to introduce mass state education – may become the first to abandon it for private provision of schools, colleges and universities.

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