Chapter 8

Can the ‘Lost Generation’ find its way? 
Young people, education and society

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to confront with sober senses the real conditions of our existence

Introduction

As recognised by the parents, teachers and school pupils who joined F&HE students demonstrating against fee rises and for a restoration of Educational Maintenance Allowances, the Coalition’s reception of the Browne Review of undergraduate fees, combined with their cuts to HE funding in the Public Spending Review, marked the end of higher education as it has developed since the war. More broadly, it closed a phase of progressive reform aimed at changing society through education that began with the official introduction of comprehensive schools from 1965. These freed primary schools for child-centred education and prepared the ground for expansion of further and higher education, including the polytechnic experiment.

Unlike 11+ selection, which became a thing of the past in eighty per cent of English secondary schools and more in Wales and Scotland, reforming education at all levels no longer aimed to reinforce existing social hierarchies but to break down class divisions by opening equal opportunities to careers for all. The logic of comprehensive reform carried forward to inclusion of children with special needs, a common exam at sixteen and a National Curriculum sold to teachers as an entitlement for all, as well as more recent widening participation in HE to nearly half of eighteen to thirty year-olds.

Now the traditional order of academic excellence is to be reasserted, educational selectivity re-established and the division with vocational learning widened. The market for higher education with universities competing on price for various specialist options becomes the model for schools given increased autonomy. This paper places Coalition policies for upper secondary education and beyond in this wider economic and social context, beginning with...
New Labour’s record

New Labour devoted considerable attention to the reform of education from the upper secondary years. In response to increased levels of staying on at school or in college, the ‘Curriculum 2000’ reforms in particular tried to make A-levels more accessible and to reduce, if not remove, the differences in status between academic and vocational (soon to be re-labelled ‘applied’) routes by bringing them into a common framework. These reforms aimed to create a more coherent fourteen to nineteen year-old progression. As part of a commitment to ‘lifelong learning’, New Labour also sought to create new levels of participation in higher education, with the aim of fifty per cent of eighteen to thirty year-olds experiencing some sort of HE by 2010. Though failing to honour its commitment not to raise tuition fees, New Labour brought in a means tested Educational Maintenance Allowance for post-sixteen school and college students.

Increasing the rate of participation and performance was seen by successive New Labour governments as essential for economic survival. Central to their commitment to ‘globalisation’ was the acceptance that individual nation states had lost their ability to control, or even regulate, economic activity as capital flowed across borders and multi-national corporations uprooted and ‘outsourced’. Keynesian ‘demand side’ management of the national economy had to give way, it was argued, to a concentration on the ‘supply side’. Thus, the supply and level of qualifications had to be increased to meet the demands of the new global economy, creating social mobility with ‘more room at the top’ for all those who succeeded—as Gordon Brown argued in his first speech on education as Prime Minister at Greenwich University on 1 November 2007.

If judged in terms of its own criteria, in many respects New Labour policy was successful. Pass rates at both GCSE and A-level rose to levels that would have been previously considered unimaginable; the number of students obtaining 5 GCSEs at A-C grade reached 67% in 2009 – a 20% increase since 1997. As initial staying-on rates in sixth form or college reached 80%, A-level entries approached 840,000 with pass rates of 97%. Finally, 44.5% of 18-30 year-olds (47% of women, 42% of men) participated in higher education with many graduates obtaining the once rare first class degree and over half obtaining upper-seconds.

Elsewhere, despite a huge financial outlay, New Labour did not fare so well. The specialist vocational diplomas were an expensive disaster (see Allen and Ainley, 2008). Despite schools and colleges enjoying a funding premium of
£1,000 per student and over £7 million spent on marketing and promotion, barely 12,000 students—a fraction of those targeted—enrolled in the first cohort for September 2008. Whole areas like Further Education were also largely ignored, while in all sectors of education, teachers and lecturers, to whom responsibility for delivery was devolved while power to set and monitor targets contracted to the centre, found their professional autonomy severely curtailed. If it raised participation and ‘standards’, this heightened competition increased inequalities in both compulsory and post-compulsory education. Neither was, as we explain below, New Labour able to use education as the agent for the social mobility it had promised.

Widening participation in HE exemplifies this. Although its target of fifty per cent of eighteen to thirty year-olds was nearly met for women at least and it proved popular with parents who saw their children being ‘given chances’ they did not have, as an authoritative summary of the results of this initiative declares, ‘systemic and systematic forms of inequality for individuals and institutions across subjects and levels of education have increased since 2000’ (David, 2009, p. 150. Emphasis in original). ‘Simultaneously, U.K. HE is strengthening and will continue to strengthen, the distinction between an upper-middle class and the rest of the middle-[working] class.’ (Roberts, 2010b). Indeed, the entrenched tertiary tripartism between Russell, Campus and New Universities reflects exactly the polarising divisions in society, so that the phase of widening participation now drawing to a close, far from ‘professionalising the proletariat’ as it had promised, may have disguised a ‘proletarianisation of the professions’—including the academic profession—while softening up the system for a free-market in HE fees differentiated by subject and institution.

By the time New Labour left office education was already experiencing what we have referred to as a ‘crisis of legitimacy’ (Ainley and Allen, 2010, p. 95). Rising examination pass rates have been more a response to declining employment opportunities and consequent qualification inflation than a reflection of new found enthusiasm for learning. The instrumental motivation underlying most students’ drive to gain educational qualifications, for example, is demonstrated by the way increasing numbers of them seek to flout the rules. According to the government watchdog Ofqual, more than a quarter of all examination malpractice involved various forms of plagiarism (TES, 20 March 2009); while a survey of sixth-form teachers by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers revealed that a quarter of them thought half of their students’ work contained plagiarism (ibid). Any internet search engine quickly leads to sites
with assignments and dissertations to purchase. According to The Telegraph (20 June 2010), the on-line essay industry is worth £200 million with ‘half of university students willing to cheat’.

‘Education for employability’ continuing into ‘lifelong learning’ has filled the vacuum left by the decline in ‘youth jobs’ and in particular the collapse of the traditional, ‘front-loaded’, industrial apprenticeships that nearly a quarter of young workers (mainly boys) entered annually at their peak in the 1960s (FECRDU, 1978, pp. 34-5). Despite the expansion and extension of secondary education in the post-war period, until the 1970s the vast majority of working-class students left school at the earliest opportunity. In this respect school played little part in transition to employment—even in some cases being seen as a barrier to it (Willis, 1977). Since then we have gone from ‘jobs without education’ to ‘education without jobs’ (Ainley and Allen 2010, p. 13 et seq.). Despite the decline in manufacturing, it might be expected that the four million-plus service jobs that have been created since the 1970s would have provided alternative employment for young people, but much of this has been part-time and deskill as employers have preferred ‘mature’ adult workers, such as married women returning to work on ‘twilight’ shifts. As a result, youth unemployment has remained higher than for the population as a whole, although it should be noted that structural labour surplus has remained permanent since monetarism replaced Keynesianism in the 1980s.

Social immobility: The class structure goes ‘pear shaped’

For years socialists and reformers have campaigned for increased educational opportunities for working-class students, yet rates of ‘relative’ social mobility—the rate at which children from the working class ‘move up’ and replace those from the middle class in professional and managerial occupations—have remained static. In the post-war period of full employment up to the 1970s however, the number of these sorts of jobs increased at a greater rate than the size of the middle class, so some working-class students moved up alongside their middle-class counterparts rather than displacing them. That this period came to an end coincident with but not as a consequence of the growth of comprehensive schools is shown by comparison with the U.S.A. where Aronowitz (2008) records a similar period of limited upward social mobility from all-through high schools after the war. As recalled above, New Labour argued that increased globalisation of a ‘knowledge economy’ would demand revived social mobility to fill the more highly skilled and better paid jobs it would create. Those with
qualifications would benefit at the expense of those without, as the number of low skill jobs, particularly those in the manufacturing sector that were often filled by young people, continued to disappear. If they did not take advantage of the opportunities afforded by an ‘enabling state’, young people only had themselves to blame. The reality however was to be rather different.

Blair and Brown put their faith in an expanding middle class but the increase in the level of qualifications held by the population was not met by increases in employment opportunities. Quite the contrary, rather than turning ‘diamond shaped’ as the expanding middle class thesis implied, the class structure has gone ‘pear shaped’ as the bottom drops out of the traditional post-war class pyramid. Whilst it cannot be disputed that there has been an increase in the amount of ‘white collar’ employment, up from just thirty per cent of all jobs in 1965 to over fifty-five per cent today, the middle has ‘hollowed out’ and ‘dropped down’ with the growth of a new raft of low-paid casualised jobs at the bottom of the service sector—not to mention the emergence of a new ‘customer services’ proletariat in jobs that require little prior-knowledge, just a low level of generic competence that most people already have: ‘keeping paper work to a minimum and instructions simple’ as ex-Tesco boss Sir Terry Leahy described the skills his supermarkets need (Daily Mail, 14 September 2009). This is what Roberts (2010b) calls ‘the new class demography’ in which ‘the new situation is that the majority of young people who succeed in education today start life in positions from which ascent is difficult to achieve. For them, any mobility is likely to be downwards.’

The decline of manufacturing—now providing only about twelve per cent of employment, has also meant a decline in the skilled manual occupations on which post-war apprenticeships were based, while new ICT has facilitated automation, outsourcing and downsizing. These trends, which have been evident in the United States since Braverman described them in 1974, have now reached up the employment hierarchy to affect professional occupations so that Labor Department figures (www.bls.gov/oco) show increases in the number of new professional occupations like ‘software engineers’, ‘management analysts’ and ‘medical scientists’ receiving salaries of $75,000 plus are much less significant than increases in ‘personal care’ and ‘home aids’ on salaries of around $20,000—what Scott (2008) calls ‘technicians and para-professions’ who now undertake ‘many of the kinds of tasks … once performed by mainstream professionals’.

U.K. statistics also show that, even if the ‘average’ gross income is still over £450 a week, the ‘middle’ income comes out at £375. The Guardian (8 May
2009) reported that in the last five years, the bottom 10% of households have experienced a £9 fall in weekly income compared to almost a £50 rise for those in the top ten per cent. The Hills Report, (www.equalities.gov.uk) sponsored by New Labour, shows that at the bottom of the income tree, more than a fifth of all employees earn less than £6.75 an hour, with the greatest concentration of wages in the £6.00 to £6.99 band. This is even more the case amongst Britain’s eight million part-time workers but the report still shows ten per cent of full-time workers earning less than £14,500.

The extent to which the bottom has fallen out of the graduate labour market is demonstrated by Higher Education Statistics Agency (www.hesa.ac.uk) figures showing that out of 205,000 2009 graduates, 18,000 worked in ‘customer services’, 8,100 in ‘personal services’ like hairdressing, 13,720 were in administrative and secretarial roles and 8,400 in ‘elementary occupations’ like hospital porters or road sweepers. Even if graduate unemployment remains high (with over one in ten 2009 graduates reported to be still looking for a job six months after leaving university), it is this graduate ‘underemployment’ that has a ‘bumping down’ effect, resulting in unemployment being concentrated amongst young people with fewer or no qualifications. According to The Financial Times (7 November 2010), thirty per cent of those young people without A-levels were unemployed. Despite the recession having supposedly ended, ONS figures (November 2010) showed an unemployment rate of fourteen per cent for eighteen to twenty-four year-olds ‘not in full-time education’ with over twenty-five per cent of these out of work for a year.

The statistics also show over 1.15 million people having to work part-time because there is no full-time work available. According to the Institute of Public Policy Research (www.ippr.org), one in five of these involuntary part-time workers are aged between sixteen and twenty-four. Another startling development, illustrated by the ONS statistics, has been in the number of people now classed as ‘economically inactive’ standing at over nine million and almost a quarter of the sixteen to twenty-four year-old population. If ‘economically inactive’ eighteen to twenty-four year-olds are added to those unemployed, then, not counting those who are full-time students, the unemployment rate for this age group is well over twenty-five per cent. ‘Economic inactivity’ includes the long term sick, those who are full-time carers but also those who have simply ‘given up’ looking for employment.
Coalition policies—young people on the receiving end

Although New Labour, under pressure from the Russell Group, would almost inevitably have also raised the cap on university tuition fees if it had remained in office, as argued above, the Coalition’s endorsement of the Browne proposals combined with its cuts to HE funding in the Public Spending Review signified a major reversal of higher education policy. It moves nearer to a situation where fees function as *de facto* vouchers (Ainley and Allen, 2010, p. 92), effectively privatising the majority of the sector, as some universities will have to rely almost entirely on fee income to survive. Institute of Fiscal Studies data (www.ifs.org.uk) show that, regardless of government promises of ‘scholarships’ and bursaries, students from the poorest backgrounds will still pay more than they do under the current system. IFS estimates fifty per cent of graduates will be saddled with repaying nine per cent of their income for the whole thirty years, with those in the middle deciles paying back almost as much as the top ten per cent, whose superior incomes mean they will pay off their debts much earlier.

It is still true that graduates earn more than non-graduates and Russell graduates more still, but speculation continues about just how much of a premium graduates may enjoy. For while the relative advantages of being a graduate might hold up in the employment queue, there is constant downward pressure on graduate salaries so that the ratio between graduate earnings and graduate costs will fall as the balance between what Nico Hirtt refers to as Mac-Jobs and Mc-Jobs continues to tilt and as the costs of gaining a degree rise dramatically (www.mediapart.fr/club/blog/nico-hirtt, and see his chapter in this volume). Again, the Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that under the new system of fees, only one in four graduates—the bottom twenty-five per cent—will pay back less than they do currently, but it has to be said that many of these would probably not consider going to university if they knew they would earn so little!

If many decide not to go, arts and humanities will be left to overseas students and others who are seriously rich at élite and surviving campus universities. For the rest, with more vocational courses contracted out to the private sector, only Science, Technology, Engineering and Medicine will survive as many of the remaining universities and colleges collapse and merge into local e-learning hubs proffering part-time and distance provision since not all will be able to charge the maximum £9,000 for all their courses, though there will be financial pressure for them to try to do so. In any case, it is plainly the government’s view that too
many people who do not belong there have gone into higher education and that the red carpet that New Labour rolled out to working-class participation should be rolled in again and ‘the horny-handed sons of toil’, as Gove seems to think of them—disregarding the fact that most HE students are women—should be enrolled on apprenticeships instead.

Within a month of the publication of Browne’s proposals came Michael Gove’s White Paper *The Importance of Teaching*. Although most attention was given to its intention to expand Academies and Free Schools, the White Paper also reaffirmed Gove’s policies for restructuring the school curriculum. Amongst the first to denounce the growth of ‘soft subjects’ at GCSE and A-level as a ‘flight from quality’ (*Daily Telegraph*, 18 November 2008), Gove has continued his attack on the way that under New Labour A-levels and GCSEs have, he asserts, been made deliberately easier so that targets can be met through ‘illusionary’ improvements in performance (Allen, 2010). The White Paper therefore sets out its opposition to ‘modularisation’ and ‘resits’—approaches that have become popular with students.

While Gove wants leading universities to be directly involved in the design of A-level syllabuses, he is also encouraging the introduction of alternative ‘élite’ qualifications like the Cambridge Pre-U and—something included in the first policy document published by Cameron and Clegg on 20th May—allowing all schools to teach the International GCE (IGCE), a qualification more in common with the old GCE O level and previously restricted to the independent sector. Pre-U and IGCE constitute the beginnings of a new ‘upper track’ for a more direct route into Russell universities.

With the White Paper disdainful about the way schools have been allowed to use vocational qualifications as equivalent to academic qualifications in league tables, Gove wants to re-emphasise the difference between academic and vocational learning with the latter becoming more practical and work-based. The troubled fourteen to nineteen diplomas have not been abolished but have already had their additional funding withdrawn. Central to this new approach to vocational learning will be an emphasis on ‘apprenticeships’, although without sufficient employer take up—like the youth training schemes of the 1970s and 1980s, described as *Training Without Jobs* by Finn in 1987—many of these will be delivered in colleges or by private training organisations and constitute ‘apprenticeships without jobs’. We have to await the publication of Wolf’s report for the details but the clearest example of vocational education as a separate and more distinctive activity can be seen in the Coalition’s support for Kenneth
Baker’s University Technical Colleges, referred to as ‘technical academies’ in the May 20th Cameron/Clegg policy statement. Baker’s proposals represent a return to 1944 ideas about separate schools for different types of students. Recasting Baker’s failed 1986 City Technology Colleges initiative, they represent the latest attempt to create a ‘technical stream’—the post-1944 technical schools that only ever constituted four per cent of all English secondary schools basically because they were too expensive to equip and run.

A crisis for policy and theory

If the Coalition’s policies represent an abandonment of education’s reforming ideals, they also provide another twist to the ongoing debate about education, economy and society. In contrast to social democratic thinking about education being both an important driver of national economic prosperity and a vehicle for promoting social mobility, Marxist writers have remained preoccupied with explaining how education produces ‘labour power’ that ‘corresponds’ to ‘the needs of capital’, either in terms of the technical and cognitive skills required for adequate job performance, or in legitimising economic inequality and promoting and rewarding particular personal characteristics necessary for the various positions in the production system (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). Assumptions about the way capitalist production was perceived to be developing also resulted in attempts to construct a new ‘post-Fordist’ correspondence (Hickox and Moore, 1992) reflected in the growth of a ‘new vocationalism’ in schools and FE, which emphasised a more generic form of learning and a more ‘skills’-based curriculum.

We would argue that, on the contrary, during the New Labour project the devaluation of educational credentials—often blamed for ‘dumbing down’ standards—took on a logic of its own that was potentially dysfunctional to the ‘needs of capital’. Inflating and then deflating expectations about rates of social mobility, education risks losing its legitimacy as an agent for moving young people’s lives forward into a meaningful and productive adult world. This is a generational crisis as well as an educational one.

In attempting to reduce the number of young people entering higher education and increase the number of those participating in vocational learning, the Coalition’s programme acknowledges that, rather than reflecting the requirements of a new ‘knowledge economy’, the mass school system needs to revert to a much more basic level of provision. With young people increasingly experiencing general exclusion from production, rather than just transmitting
‘skills’, or rather behavioural competence however basic, ‘education without jobs’ (Allen and Ainley, 2007) now plays more of a role in the social control of what could be considered a twenty-first century version of Marx’s ‘reserve army of labour’ (Ainley, 2010). If reconstitution of the ‘reserve army’ is an integral feature of capitalist crisis (Gamble, 2009), in Grundrisse Marx describes surplus labour as the logical consequence of a production system that was becoming increasingly automated—leading to the emergence of what post-industrial socialist Andre Gorz referred to as a post-industrial ‘non-class’, ‘overqualified for the jobs it finds… and condemned to under use of its capacities’ (Gorz, 1982, p. 69). Rather than being able to identify themselves as making a particular contribution to society by reference to the work they carry out, they do ‘any old thing’ (Gorz, p. 71) so that at the start of the twenty-first century Gorz’s ‘neo-proletariat’ is taking on a new reality.

The loss of legitimacy in education is part of a more general crisis facing young people. In the post-war period, working-class youth tended to make relatively ‘condensed’ transitions to adulthood (Jones, 1995)—leaving school, starting work, leaving home and getting married in a relatively short space of time. Even if some middle-class children sometimes returned home temporarily after leaving university before beginning their careers, their transition from school to work and parental home to own home via sixth form and higher education ended with their ‘final degree’. This should not imply that the transition to adulthood was necessarily always a smooth one, but it did involve clearly defined processes that young people could ‘expect’.

Trebling undergraduate fees will push up debts and reaffirm a trend towards a ‘delayed’ adulthood as young people remain more dependent on their parents for longer periods; not only during university, where a 2009 government ‘student income and expenditure’ survey reported that parents contributed on average twenty per cent of student income, but also for some time after, as student debt and declining employment prospects combine with soaring accommodation costs. As the 2009 Social Trends reported, a third of men between twenty and thirty-four and a fifth of women still lived at home with the cost of housing being one of the key reasons for not being able to move. The average age of first-time house buyers was reported in The Independent (19 December 2010) as thirty-seven with many remaining in private rented accommodation.

Predictability has been replaced by uncertainty. Rather than experiencing a ‘delayed transition’ to adulthood, many may not be able to make a transition at all, or at best only able to make it in a very limited form. This can only intensify the
instrumental and extrinsic motivations for continuing, or for not continuing, in full-time education, even as the social motor pushing so many to climb a down-escalator of deflating qualifications remains the fear shared with their parents of falling into the so-called ‘underclass’ beneath. Failure to provide the required rite of passage can only add to the increasing crisis in legitimacy referred to above—*Education make you fick, innit?* as one FE student explained his decision not to continue to HE (Allen and Ainley, 2007).

**New strategies for youth and education**

In 2010 students went from zeroes to heroes as far as their lecturers were concerned. They were not after all the bunch of instrumentalist plagiarising layabouts and drunks they had been widely supposed (though see Cheeseman, 2011). Instead, students and young people are resisting the theft of their promised futures and the attempt to return to a divisive education system like that of 1944. The protests, supported by significant numbers of school, sixth-form and college students and their parents and teachers but also by many current students who will not be affected by the increased fees, reflect a much wider feeling of discontent. If not being a ‘lost generation’—a rather derogatory media label—many young people, despite being the most qualified—if not educated—generation ever, are increasingly aware that they are ‘stuck’, unable to move on with their lives.

Writing at a time when students have been occupying their universities in opposition to fee rises, it might seem rather diversionary to be calling for new strategies for youth and education. However, the student resistance has yet to generate a coherent critique of existing education, partly because that is what they are seeking to preserve as it is without cuts. While the anti-fees campaign is obviously of crucial importance, at the heart of any alternative strategy for education must be the demand for new guarantees in relation to employment—part of a more general ‘green’ economic programme for restoring prosperity if not growth through a reinvigorated public sector (Ainley and Allen, 2010). Policies for economic regeneration and restoring employment need to be linked to new and more inclusive public housing programmes. Meanwhile, the strongest argument against raising fees and fully funding HE while restoring EMAs is what else are school and college leavers supposed to do?

Alternative education policies for young people might find their clearest expression in demands for an entitlement to free and local further and higher education, but if large numbers of young people continue to have reduced
employment aspirations then, rather than serving as a form of social control, education has the potential for becoming the ‘autonomous activity’ that Gorz outlined (p. 101)—where educational courses have an empowering ‘use value’ rather than just a ‘value in exchange’. In other words, there is a need for completely different approach to learning and the curriculum. This requires new sorts of working relationships between students and practitioners to enable learning to take place in a collaborative rather than an imposed framework.

This presents huge challenges for organisations like the NUT and UCU which, despite now being ‘proper’ trade unions regularly using industrial action to resolve disputes with school and college managements, remain wedded to the post-war ‘partnership’ model of education where teachers work with governments to achieve common social and economic objectives and in return enjoy the status of ‘professionals’ for whom interest in young people is restricted to what happens in the classroom. As Roberts remarks (2010a), ‘the ending of the link between education and employment and the collapse of any real opportunities for social mobility presents huge challenges for them’ and for a progressive politics for which ‘the old nostrums—‘expand GDP and become better educated, trained and qualified’—no longer apply.’ This is, he adds, a crisis for a generation and their parents since they can no longer expect, as successive cohorts since 1945 came to expect, continuous improvement in living standards.

A number of recent publications portray the crisis facing young people as ‘intergenerational’—in that one generation has been ‘jilted’ by another (Howker and Malik, 2010) or is paying the price of the excesses of the ‘baby boomers’ (Willetts, 2009). An analysis of youth’s current dilemmas must go well beyond these simplistic polemics to develop new sorts of unity and understanding between generations. Built by students whose resistance has gained support from parents, school and college students and their teachers whose futures are also threatened by the Coalition’s cuts, it must also reach out to the legions of young people who—despite the recession having officially ‘ended’—remain unemployed. This potentially very broad alliance stands alongside all those ‘who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital’ (Marx and Engels 1970, p. 41) and at whose expense the current crisis is being resolved.

References

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