
Labour's Pedagogic Project and the Crisis of Social Democracy in the English Labour Party

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ABSTRACT This article contends that the implementation of government policies is mediated principally by the state, the economy and social class but that these have all changed so markedly since 1945 that education can no longer be seen as having the reforming role attributed to it in the post-war years. The continued assumption that it does means that, were policies based upon Labour's characteristic pedagogic project to be implemented in government, they may well lead to disillusion. This would only contribute to, rather than help resolve, the crisis of social democracy in the British Labour Party.

The Labour Party's Pedagogic Project

Labour was established as a social democratic party in opposition to revolutionary communist parties. Backed by the trade unions seeking a better deal for their members, it proposed to reform society in the interests of working people through governments that socialised the means of production and exchange to expropriate the employing class gradually and legally. This *parliamentary socialism* (Miliband, 1961) was neither revolutionary nor necessarily socialist since it did not give workers control but relied upon an alliance across the then main division of knowledge and labour in the employed population by which middle-class professionals administered the growing Welfare State introduced after 1945 on behalf of the industrially manual working class.

For nearly 30 years after 1945, the reconstruction of the economy using Keynesian demand management, and subsidised by the remnants of Empire, enabled virtually full employment to be maintained, with progressive taxation financing the introduction of the Welfare State. Economic growth boosted the expansion of white-collar, managerial and professional employment and this

allowed limited absolute upward social mobility from the largely skilled sections of the manual working class, first through the grammar schools introduced in 1944 and then through the comprehensives from 1965, augmented by expanded further, higher and adult education. This was a civilising mission but, more than that, it was vital to Labour's pedagogic project of continued commitment to social progress through representative democracy against the materialism of mass commercialism described by, for example, Hoggart (1957). This would be a 'long revolution' (Williams, 1961) in which stress was placed upon increasing access to a traditional academic curriculum. So, when it came, comprehensive reform was limited to structural change, leaving the new schools in competition with surviving grammars and private schools that were largely untouched and linked through the exam boards to the antique universities. Academic education therefore remained dominant in this unequal competition, despite more comprehensive schools opening sixth forms in an effort to get more of their students into university. Successive governments thus also ignored technical training, which they failed to establish to anywhere near the level of other European countries, notably Germany, compared with which, Britain's apprenticeship system, though extensive, remained both ad hoc and inferior.

This period of education reform, especially the move towards comprehensive provision, is generally considered a 'golden age', but the post-war education reforms did not increase relative social mobility because for more working-class children to move up, significant numbers of middle-class children would also have to move down! It should also be recalled that up until the start of the 1970s around 40% of young people left secondary school with few or no qualifications, entering unskilled or semi-skilled employment in a buoyant labour market without any of the 'vocational preparation' subsequently deemed necessary. Consequently, the raising of the school leaving age to 16 in 1972/73 met with opposition from many working-class parents and their children because they saw it as disguising youth unemployment.

Nevertheless, Labour's pedagogic project assumed a new emphasis at the end of the long boom. In his 1976 Ruskin College speech, James Callaghan, the last Old Labour prime minister, called for greater accountability and for heightening what would now be called 'employability skills'. Meanwhile, youth training schemes were hastily cobbled together to mop up rising youth unemployment as further and then higher education (HE) continued to expand. Labour's 1965-1992 polytechnic experiment doubled the number of HE students, with young women especially progressing from school and college to gain higher qualifications. This reflected the quickening erosion of the manual-mental divide among employees as new technology continued to be relentlessly applied. Meanwhile, it came to be assumed by all parties that the country's economic future depended on investment in its 'human capital' and that the state and the growing army of educational professionals should work together to achieve this.

Yet as nationalised industries were privatised and state spending rolled back by Thatcher's governments, a new form of new market state was

improvised in which responsibility for delivery was contracted out while power was contracted to the centre. This was also a new form of the mixed economy now indiscriminately mingling the formerly distinct and mutually sustaining public and private sectors of post-war corporatism. The new state form would not easily be reversed since control over the national economy was ceded to global capital, to which the now largely service-based and financialised UK plc remains indebted.

Education, Education, Education...

The New Labour government attempted to accommodate the national to the global economy, obscuring the abandonment of gradual social democratic reform by espousing 'modernisation'. This meant adopting large parts of Thatcherism but with some redistribution (see Hills et al, 2009) funded largely by debt – what Hall (2003) referred to as 'New Labour's double shuffle'. Under Blair and then Brown, 'education, education, education' became the new economic policy. Globalisation would, it was argued, create 'more room at the top' (quoted in Allen & Ainley, 2013), opening new doors for those with qualifications while those without were warned that they would likely be condemned to a new NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) 'underclass' as unskilled employment continued to decline.

Education reformers and practitioners, Labour's long-time allies, welcomed education's new and inflated status, particularly with increased funding, but were soon alienated by the target- and inspection-driven methods characteristic of the new market state (as above) that New Labour adopted for 'raising standards', substantially altering the culture of both primary and secondary schools. At the same time, New Labour backed a further expansion of HE but also introduced and then raised home undergraduate tuition fees. As a result, by the time of the 2008 crash when – unable to borrow any more – Labour left office, it had alienated its traditional allies within the teaching profession but was also accused of 'dumbing down' standards by a resurgent Tory right.

As well as imposing a secondary curriculum modelled on grammar schooling to squeeze out creative arts and technical learning, the coalition government further undermined local democracy, pressuring all schools to become Academies and creating a new category of Free Schools. In the pursuit of austerity, Cameron and then May ransacked school services, at the same time preparing a schools funding formula intended to have the same effects as 'fair funding' for further education (FE) from 1992 onwards which had led to college and course closures. Meanwhile, further and adult education face potential collapse just as some HE institutions near bankruptcy. Yet, rather than reducing student numbers, the tripling of undergraduate tuition fees has led to astronomical levels of unpaid student debt. McGettigan (2017) suggests the Treasury seeks to recoup these losses by 'unleashing the forces of consumerism ... to restore high academic standards', as he quotes Willetts (2013). The

massive number crunching being undertaken by academics at Cambridge and Harvard to merge data from the Student Loans Company and HM Revenue and Customs to predict labour market outcomes of similar courses at different institutions might be foregone if Labour scrapped fees but could survive in what McGettigan identifies as 'a cross-party consensus growing around the need to boost tech skills, through degree apprenticeships and Labour's idea of a new dual track system'.

...or Education without Jobs?

Despite ferocious attacks from within his own party, Jeremy Corbyn restored Labour's electoral fortunes in June 2017 – and in a 'progressive alliance' with Nationalist parties and Greens may well have been in government! Evoking the spirit of the 1944 Act and the comprehensive reforms that followed, Corbyn's Labour promised a 'cradle to grave' National Education Service. More specifically, the hurriedly constructed 2017 manifesto (Labour Party, 2017), in which education is again accorded a prime position, set out policies to: reverse spending cuts; improve pay for teachers and other education workers by ending the cap on public-sector pay; restore accountability; and encourage cooperation rather than competition between schools, as well as a major review of primary school assessment and – perhaps most notable of all – the ending of university tuition fees. This latter may be being rethought, perhaps along the lines of free two-year 'technical and vocational degrees' in FE colleges paying an educational maintenance allowance (hopefully not like the allowances once paid for YTS [Youth Training Scheme] and YOP [Youth Opportunity Programme] schemes). Despite this and other uncertainties, as the Tories' education agenda runs out of steam, nobody would dispute the significance of these commitments. They have stimulated discussion about education within the Labour Party as activists in the teacher trade unions mobilise around them. However, returning to its opening themes, the remainder of this contribution focuses on the dangers of retreating to Labour's habitual emphasis upon education (reinvigorated by both Blair and now by Corbyn) as part of the party's wider social democratic approach.

First, due to the primacy of its pedagogic project indicated above, Labour thinking on education up until the present has taken place without any real appreciation of its economic context – the material conditions in which it takes place. At best, it continued to be assumed that education reform takes place against a background of an expanding economy. It was also assumed that continued economic prosperity inevitably requires a more highly skilled and highly educated workforce (the assumptions about returns from investing in 'human capital' referred to earlier). It is true that, historically, developments in technology have eventually resulted in occupations requiring more highly skilled and knowledgeable workers, proving 'Luddite' concerns unjustified, but there is a growing acceptance that, left to the market, the automated jobs of the 'Second Machine Age' (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014) are more likely to be low

skilled and low paid than they are to be highly skilled and professional. If they continue to exist at all!

There are new professional and managerial jobs at the top, but fewer than expected and not enough for those qualified to do them (Susskind & Susskind, 2015). 'Middle' jobs are being 'hollowed out' (Goos & Manning, 2003), while at the bottom a new reserve army of labour has re-formed, relying on largely unskilled precarious employment. Low-qualified and 'left behind' urban youth, prominent in the 2011 riots, constitute an important constituent of this new reserve army, but it stretches further to include many who are well qualified yet forced to work at 'mini-jobs' – two, three or more part-time, semi-skilled and precarious occupations undertaken simultaneously. This growing pattern of employment and 'self-employment' makes nonsense of government claims to record levels of employment. It also contributes to the class recomposition and general downward social mobility that in the present century has replaced the limited absolute upward social mobility of the last one. Instead of the post-war manual/non-manual divide in the familiar class pyramid, a polarised, or 'pear shaped' (Ainley & Allen, 2010), occupational structure has emerged. To insist in these conditions of 'general downward social mobility' (Roberts, 2010) that modest interventions in education and training will bring about radical redistribution of life chances is as deluded – if not always as deliberately so – as David Cameron's ludicrous non sequitur in the 2015 general election promising 'Three million more apprenticeships – that means three million more engineers, accountants and project managers' (Cameron, 2015).

Labour also does not often recognise that training and education of themselves do not produce jobs. The June 2017 manifesto (Labour Party, 2017) brushed away any possibility that, left to the market, the latest applications of artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics might intensify deskilling; although since then Corbyn's speech to Labour's Conference mentioned meeting 'the challenge of automation' with 're-training and management of the workforce' in tandem with funded development of 'a sustainable transition'. This has to be more than repeating past failed efforts to modernise apprenticeships, maintaining as it does the cross-party consensus on 'rebuilding the vocational route' along the lines suggested in the 2016 Sainsbury Report (Sainsbury, 2016). It needs to support the proposed National Transformation Fund to be more than a means of applying estate-agent-like labels such as 'Northern Powerhouse' and 'Midlands Engine' (see Latham, 2017 on the latter and elected mayors in the former).

A Crisis of Legitimacy?

Most analysis of the effects of globalisation on education concentrates on the commodifying effects of neo-liberal policies (e.g. Davis, 2017), destroying the professional expertise of teachers and turning students into consumers. This is only half the story: globalised production aggressively using new technology has destroyed traditional labour markets, replacing them with precarious ones. Following the disappearance of 'youth jobs' narrated above, 'going to uni' has

become the new norm for nearly half of young people, turning post-war elite higher education for the few into mass higher education for the many. Although the GCE A level has been sustained as the main vehicle for university entrance, it has been transformed from a 'gold standard' qualification for less than 5% of 18-year-olds when it was introduced in 1951 into one with 750,000-plus entries today. Neo-liberal education policies are enacted against but are also reinforced by these developments that turn schools, colleges and universities into 'exam factories'. Indeed, disillusion is already endemic as training to the test substitutes for education at all levels of learning for pupils/students and their teachers alike (Ainley, 2016).

Far from examinations becoming 'too easy' because of a dumbing down of standards by the boards, the increase in performance levels (Michael Gove's 'grade inflation') has been as much a consequence of a situation where young people, faced with an increasingly difficult and prolonged transition to adulthood but desperate for at least some sort of secure employment, run up a down-escalator of devaluing qualifications, studying harder but learning less. One outcome of this is the way in which so many jobs have become 'graduatised' (a situation where you need a degree to apply rather than actually do the job), with graduates who are 'overqualified but underemployed' pushing those without degrees further down the jobs queue into precarity.

Post-war economists defined education as both a 'public' but also an individual 'merit good'. It was Old Labour's creed that as a public benefit education should not be dependent upon market forces. As the twenty-first century wears on, however, in an increasingly precarious labour market, education has become a 'positional' or 'zero-sum' good, with high-status qualifications sought to secure a better position at the expense of others. In this respect, although they are generally linked together as important post-war gains, the education service and the health service will always differ. More resources devoted to the NHS (though not those nowadays skimmed off by the private providers of its services) improves the health of everybody, both individually and collectively. However, expanding academic education does not necessarily grow the general intellect, nor does it contribute to 'social justice' defined in terms of Old Labour's education slogan of increasing equal opportunities, since this has been reversed into opportunities to become unequal in academic competition with those having more expensively previously acquired cultural capital.

All of this has serious implications for education policy makers, not least for an incoming Labour government with a popular mandate to reduce social inequalities. Rather than depend on absolute upward social mobility to achieve this by providing increased opportunities for more working-class admissions to higher-status courses and institutions without seriously challenging the power of those higher up, Labour would have to redistribute educational resources. This would entail ending the existence of different types of schools to introduce funding by social need rather than student numbers, so challenging educational privileges head on – for example, by restricting access to private schooling and

introducing legislation to ensure that elite university admissions reflect the population at large. These types of policies would be considered well outside mainstream social democratic politics, although it should not be assumed they would not be popular!

Above all, in a volatile and uncertain future, a new dispensation needs to think through how its National Education Service could contribute to 'fully developed individuals, fit for a variety of labours, ready to face any change of production, and to whom the different social functions they perform are but so many modes of giving free scope to their own natural and acquired powers' (Marx, 1971, p. 494). This ideal of a general intellect could be fostered in comprehensive primary and secondary schools and developed by lifelong learning throughout a democratic society. It should be raised at least as a subject of discussion to present a new horizon of possibility. This may sound as idealistic as the adherence of many teachers to the notion of education being about much more than just preparation for employment. This often ignores the fact that, with young people's labour market prospects largely determined by the type of educational credentials they hold, and – particularly with higher education – by the type of institution awarding them, there will necessarily be limited interest in the insistence upon 'education for its own sake' not linked to high-status credentials.

Conclusions

As globalisation stutters and public support for the austerity policies of the coalition government and the Tories collapses, Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell have countered with an economic strategy based on 'intervention' by what remains of the national state apparatus. This is a welcome development and, if accompanied by an 'international' stimulus, it might delay some of the changes to the occupational structure described above by creating and preserving some high-quality jobs, particularly in the public sector. However, truly tempering social production with social foresight (Jasanoff, 2016) to use automation and AI constructively and imaginatively could allow 'work' to take on a completely new significance and education to be reconstructed accordingly. A new approach must therefore break with Labour's traditional social democratic pedagogic project and put the horse before the cart so that education is part of a real, coherent and sustainable economic development.

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