

Education is a duty

The 2010 movement against education cuts in Britain presents itself as composed of at least two tendencies. On the one hand, there are voices which seem to soberly defend their quality of life against an attack by the government, making little attempt to disguise their materialism for something else.¹ Confronted with the prospect of a £9,000 annual tuition fee they seem to realise that they cannot afford it or would rather spend it on something else if possible. They seem to realise that their own interest in education is secondary to other goals in this society and express anger about it; however powerless their actions might seem. On the other hand, there are voices which appear to be very concerned about education cuts damaging society, transparent and fair implementation of cuts and not to 'obstruct students or staff in any way'.² They advise the government that it is making a mistake³, that education is a right⁴ and that 'our' problems could be solved without overly harming higher education – for instance by taxing tax-avoiding companies. Taken seriously, it is not their blunt materialist interest which drives these protesters to the streets. It is rather their concern for the values of this society in which their access to education is denied more and more, i.e. which values their interests little.⁵ Obviously, the two approaches have a common denominator. Both tendencies are the first big response to the cuts across the board in the UK. In fact, the general public and the authorities seem genuinely surprised by the advent of this movement, puzzled about how strongly people are opposing these cuts on the streets.⁶ The Metropolitan Police even predicts a new era of riots after a fire extinguisher didn't hit anybody⁷ and an old police van was rattled. What a large part of the published opinion in this country finds puzzling is the extent to which people expressed their anger openly about a restriction of their basic life needs. Immediately, these cuts mean that people have less money in their pockets and thus have less access to the stuff they need. But these cuts also mean that more people will find it harder to even pursue a university degree. This limits their potential earnings in the future – however uncertain those are to begin with. These are uncertain since a university degree allows one to earn a better salary if and only if one finds an employer in need for one's services after graduation.⁸ The possible material perks of education can only be collected if that education benefits a company's business. This is a first hint that the state does not (and did not in the past) provide education as a service to its citizens but for a different purpose.

The democratic state and its interest in education

That the state has a strong interest in basic education of its subjects is pretty evident. The state even mandates that children are educated: education is a duty.⁹

Compulsory school education was introduced in the late 19th century in the UK mainly for two reasons. First, in order to prevent capitalists and parents from ruining young workers so fundamentally that they are unemployable when they reach adult age. Second, in order to satisfy the demand of companies for skilled workers. While companies have an interest in using trained workers they do not have an immediate interest in training them – training workers might be a means but is not an ends. The investment necessary for teaching young workers to read, write and calculate does not pay off especially in a society with a free labour market. Furthermore, when

companies do train their own employees they have no interest in teaching them general knowledge as such. Their interest is only to provide them with the skills immediately relevant to their job. Thus, the state provides free school education for every citizen in order to produce a workforce with a general knowledge applicable to a variety of jobs.¹⁰ This way the state also gets to teach its young citizens about the benefits of being dominated. Both educational goals are laid out in the 'National Curriculum'.¹¹

School content – the National Curriculum¹²

Technical skills are a requirement for any worker. Basic Mathematics is central for understanding a wide range of issues relevant to business and bureaucracy; without the basic knowledge such as simple arithmetic operations with rational numbers most office and many blue collar jobs could not be performed.¹³ Science allows for a better understanding of nature and prepares the student for understanding production processes. Geography teaches how local, national and global production and reproduction processes in nature and human society interact. In Design & Technology students are specifically introduced to research processes, they learn to design products and relevant practical skills for possible future jobs.¹⁴ Information & Communication Technology teaches to interact with computers such that students are capable of performing the basic tasks almost all companies require from their employees these days.¹⁵ Command of the English language allows students to become able citizens and employable workers since it allows them to interact in spoken and in written form – reading manuals, writing reports etc.¹⁶ Modern Foreign Languages provides the student with the skill of conducting business with people who speak different languages. Yet, technical skills do not suffice in this economy. The state does not command workers to work in a particular company but they are free to pursue their own happiness on the labour market. In fact, they have to. The state simply sets the rules, excludes first of all everybody from the means of living through private property, and then allows everybody to find employment (or some other source of income), i.e. to sell his own skin at a price such that it is profitable for a company.¹⁷ Workers must show initiative both when looking for a job and quite often on the job. This economy needs individuals who can on the one hand critically assess their skills and who can on the other hand deal with the inevitable setbacks produced by universal competition: if everybody competes, there simply must be losers and those losers are also expected to get up on their feet after each defeat. Music¹⁸ and Art & Design¹⁹ are subjects which are quite explicitly focused on developing this kind of personality. Physical Education teaches kids the constant need for self-improvement. Also, being healthy is an advantage on the labour market. But the state does not only provide school education to produce able workers. It is also interested in loyal subjects. Students are provided with the fitting ideology in their Citizenship classes. They learn to appreciate their rights, learn about their duties and to pursue their interests according to the rules the state sets.²⁰ History teaches students to identify with the nation by providing material for this identification.²¹ Students are also taught to appreciate the English heritage, to develop national pride. Modern Foreign Languages serves the same purpose and teaches students to distinguish between their and other cultures and to identify with 'their own'.²² Geography provides further material for this identification and also provides the basic information and appreciation needed to follow world politics.²³

School form – just domination and selection

Schools also contribute to the formation of modern democratic subjects by their mere form. Compulsory school education forces children to be at certain places for certain times and to direct their attention towards a topic picked by someone else. The school form teaches subordination. It teaches acceptance of the rules set by the state and that punishment is meted out if those rules are broken. It teaches to accept that others may dispose over one's time, whether it be the state or an employer with whom one signs a contract. Yet, schools are not lawless places, children are not completely subject to the arbitrariness of their teachers; the teacher only confronts children as an agent of the state. Through the limited power of their teachers students learn that at the end of the day, authority does not rest with the personnel but with the state, its rules and regulations. But even these rules and regulations are not arbitrary. They are designed to enable students to learn the kind of qualifications necessary to survive in the 'real world' and to become the kind of subjects the state needs. If certain practices turn out to be counter-productive for this end, they may be dropped.²⁴ Since students do learn the skills necessary to pursue their own competitive interests, school appears like a service to them. Their will is broken in their own interest – as the agents of the state (teachers, principals and social workers) do not get tired pointing out. The message of this is that schools, like any other institution of the state, is not just domination but just domination, not merely but fair. This way the school form is a successful contribution to the production of the kind of subjects a democratic state demands: subjects who insist that domination over them is a service to them.²⁵ The economy does not only need common workers, but also workers employable in higher positions, positions in management or performing more complicated tasks. Schools separate those 'suitable' for higher jobs and those heading for the minimum wage jobs at best. The school system has a double task: education and selection. The task of selection stands in conflict with the task of education. For instance, education or knowledge transfer is not merely measured by its success. Somebody who does not get long division is not given the time and peace to learn it, perhaps even a reason why they should care.²⁶ The pace is not determined by those who ought to learn the material. If education was the sole purpose of the school system, those having most trouble learning would be given the most time to learn. Yet, in this society 'good' students get to spend more time in school than their peers. Through regular tests and grades a hierarchy of students is produced which prepares the way for a hierarchy of jobs. Contrary to feudal times the social hierarchy in a bourgeois society shall not be determined by heritage or favours but instead by skill and toil. This way, a just selection of the elites ought to be accomplished: the 'smart' people get the best jobs and those stuck with minimum wage can take solace in knowing that they tried their best; at least they got equal opportunity, right?²⁷ Yes and no. Selecting people according to their performance at tests might contribute to but does not ensure a performance based hierarchy. 'Smart' kids from poorer backgrounds have it much harder to excel at these tests due to lack of financial resources and peace to conduct their studies. In order to offset this disadvantage the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) was introduced which throws students from poorer backgrounds some breadcrumbs (up to a generous £30 a week!) to ease their financial worries. The current government decided that this investment was not worth the price, i.e. that the recruitment of the elite can easily take place without it. Of course, the government could in principle be making a mistake. But when protesters advise the same government that pushes through these measures, they conceal the purpose of the EMA and how ridiculously low it was to begin with.

Higher Education

While for the higher sort of education the state's educational goals do not change much, it does not rely on direct command.²⁸ Since the state does not need everybody to receive higher education, it relies on a speculation by its young citizens: "If I invest 3-4 years of my life and enough money for study fees and supporting myself, then I might be able to find a company which requires my services. In that case, I can then use my salary to pay the debt I took on to earn it." However, this speculation – as any speculation – has an uncertain result, as students have come to realise in recent years through increasing numbers in graduate unemployment.²⁹ The fact that the livelihood of workers is dependent on the success of companies presents itself directly even to those pursuing a graduate career. These unemployment numbers indicate that workers with university degrees are produced which are not needed by capital. At least too many people get degrees in the wrong kind of subjects. The proposed increase of the maximum tuition fee presents new conditions on which aspiring students must base their speculation: the price of studying something 'useless' becomes higher. First, because in the proposed scheme tuition fees for arts and humanities would rise more quickly since these subjects are about to lose their teaching grants. Second, the better the prospects of a job the better the chances that the 'investment' (the debt taken on to finance it) in one's own education is worthwhile.³⁰ Earning an English Literature degree, for example, becomes less appealing since the gap between debt and possible income gets bigger. There is no reason to doubt the government when it expresses its wish that no one should simply be turned away from universities.³¹ What it wants is human material that matches the requirements of capital. This is not different from 1963 when the massification of higher education was introduced in the UK. The difference between 2010 and 1963 is that back then the state expected more students to be useful for the growth of the national economy. On the contrary, the government's opinion in 2010 is that the burden of financing education can be placed more on those being educated, since university graduates are not deemed as critical for the national economy any more, even those who study the kind of subjects the government appreciates: mathematics and the sciences.³² If the current trend continues we might see another student movement in a few years defending the £9,000 tuition fee caps against an 'unjust' increase. Because, however grim the prospects of a good life with a university degree look, the prospects of a good life without a degree are usually much worse in this society. However bad the conditions for studying are, it is probably still worth it financially for the individual.

Protest

What is strange about the current movement is that it on the one hand demands that education is a right. Yet on the other hand it naturally accepts that food, shelter and entertainment are not.³³ We see protests against a Government decision to allow more freedom in pricing education but silence about the fact that there are prices on food, flats and fixie bikes. This is particularly puzzling since for most people the main reason to go to university is to get a job and thereby a salary in order to buy these things. Also, we see protest against education cuts but no mention of how this education sorts people into a wage hierarchy, excluding most people from the stuff they need.³⁴ The apparent blunt materialism expressed on the streets is not that blunt after all. It is a strangely mediated and submissive materialism. It is mediated because it demands access to

university education (usually) not because it is an end in itself but only because uni is a means to get a better salary. It is submissive because it accepts being excluded from the means of living and accepts the established rules for overcoming this exclusion: getting a university degree, getting in debt for it and finally working for some company's wealth to pay that debt off. The idealism expressed in university occupation declarations ('education is a right') and by those who suggest a redistribution of the cuts in whichever way, is ignorant of both the material reality and the purpose of education for state and capital. If those who protest against the cuts agree with the principles which produce those cuts, they invite defeat, regardless of how 'radical' their tactics are.

Footnotes

... else.¹

'We have to make a statement, ... We're not having it!' some guy at <http://bit.ly/dSu21G>.

... way'.²

Leaflet distributed by Royal Holloway students to explain their sit-in.

... mistake³

Or alternatively that university management is making a mistake: 'We find the dismissive attitude of UCL management towards the aims and demands of this occupation frankly inexplicable. The fight against cuts to education is the fight for the future of UCL.' – <http://ucloccupation.wordpress.com/demands/>

... right⁴

'Education should be universally available by right and not according to privilege. We believe that its core aim should be to enable the critical, creative and independent thinking that is essential for any healthy democracy. Since the mid-1980s we have witnessed a marketisation of higher education that has steadily taken us away from this conception of education.' – <http://lseoccupation2010.blogspot.com/p/public-statement-and-demands.html>

... little.⁵

'As members of a social sciences institution we are particularly outraged that these cuts aggressively discriminate against the arts, humanities and social sciences, showing an unacceptable disregard for these disciplines' immense contribution to society.' (LSE Occupation)

... streets.⁶

'The scale and reach of this month's student protests have shocked the authorities, who fear that mobilisation against government austerity cuts could spread.' – <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/dec/01/student-protests-day-three>

... anybody⁷

'On Wednesday, the riot cops at Millbank were reported to have been 'bombarded' with short poles from placards, sort of grown-up lolly sticks. The one exception was the fire extinguisher dropped from the roof which, we are told, 'almost killed a policeman', which is another way of saying it didn't hit anybody.' – <http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php/site/article/9885/>

... graduation.⁸

Of course, learning about something can be motivated by something else than employment. However, since all access to wealth in this society is mediated by money, the question of how to get it takes precedence for many people.

... duty.⁹

Among citizens any right is a duty because what is a right to Alice in relation to Bob, is a duty for Bob in relation to Alice. In the relationship between citizen and state, a citizen's right is a self-commitment of the state. However, education is not just a right, the state has made it mandatory. It is one of the few areas where the democratic state directly commands its subjects. Another example of direct command is conscription.

... jobs.¹⁰

'The Government believes that our universities are essential for building a strong and innovative economy.' – ConDem coalition agreement.

... Curriculum!¹¹

Another education goal, not discussed in this text, is international competition among states for recognition of their education systems. The UK was 'stagnant at best' in the most recent PISA study which in itself presents a problem to nationalists. To them the PISA study revealed a potential problem in the future – British workers not skilled enough – and a current problem – national disgrace for being overtaken by other countries. The Browne Report – commissioned by the previous government and partially implemented by the current – speaks the same language: 'The current system puts a limit on the level of investment for higher education. As a consequence we are at risk of falling behind rival countries.'

... Curriculum¹²

This section talks about the state's interest in education and not about what individual teachers might think about their job. There might be teachers who do not agree with these educational goals, however, the possibilities of those teachers are rather restricted and their students need the skills required by the National Curriculum.

... performed.¹³

'Mathematical thinking is important for all members of a modern society as a habit of mind for its use in the workplace, business and finance, and for personal decision-making. Mathematics is fundamental to national prosperity in providing tools for understanding science, engineering, technology and economics. It is essential in public decision-making and for participation in the knowledge economy' – <http://curriculum.qca.org.uk/key-stages-3-and-4/subjects/key-stage-4/mathematics/index.aspx>

... jobs.¹⁴

'In design and technology pupils combine practical and technological skills with creative thinking to design and make products and systems that meet human needs.' – <http://curriculum.qca.org.uk/key-stages-3-and-4/subjects/key-stage-3/design-and-technology/index.aspx>

... days.¹⁵

'The increasing use of technology in all aspects of society makes confident, creative and productive use of ICT an essential skill for life. ICT capability encompasses not only the mastery of technical skills and techniques, but also the understanding to apply these skills purposefully, safely and responsibly in learning, everyday life and employment.' – <http://curriculum.qca.org.uk/key-stages-3-and-4/subjects/key-stage-3/ict/index.aspx>

... etc. ¹⁶

‘In studying English, pupils develop skills in speaking, listening, reading and writing that they will need to participate in society and employment.’ – <http://curriculum.qca.org.uk/key-stages-3-and-4/subjects/key-stage-4/english/index.aspx>

... company. ¹⁷

See ‘Private property, exclusion and the state’ in Kittens #0 for a more developed argument on this.

...Music ¹⁸

It might seem strange to almost ignore the content of the subject when it comes to its purpose for the state. However, this ignorance towards the content is not our invention: ‘Music is a unique form of communication that can change the way pupils feel, think and act. Music forms part of an individual’s identity and positive interaction with music can develop pupils’ competence as learners and increase their self-esteem. Music brings together intellect and feeling and enables personal expression, reflection and emotional development. As an integral part of culture, past and present, music helps pupils understand themselves, relate to others and develop their cultural understanding, forging important links between home, school and the wider world. Music education encourages active involvement in different forms of music-making, both individual and communal, helping to develop a sense of group identity and togetherness. Music can influence pupils’ development in and out of school by fostering personal development and maturity, creating a sense of achievement and self-worth, and increasing pupils’ ability to work with others in a group context. Music learning develops pupils’ critical skills: their ability to listen, to appreciate a wide variety of music, and to make judgements about musical quality. It also increases self-discipline, creativity, aesthetic sensitivity and fulfilment.’ (<http://curriculum.qca.org.uk/key-stages-3-and-4/subjects/key-stage-3/music/programme-of-study/index.aspx?tab=1>, emphasis added)

In all that personality building, it's hard to find references to music. It is plausible that most music teachers do not share the disinterest in music expressed in the National Curriculum. However, the fact that teaching music is justified this way is telling about what the authors expect to be the state's interest in school education.

... Design ¹⁹

Art gets slightly more appreciated in itself by the state: ‘In art, craft and design, pupils explore visual, tactile and other sensory experiences to communicate ideas and meanings. They work with traditional and new media, developing confidence, competence, imagination and creativity. They learn to appreciate and value images and artefacts across times and cultures, and to understand the contexts in which they were made. In art, craft and design, pupils reflect critically on their own and other people’s work, judging quality, value and meaning. They learn to think and act as artists, craftspeople and designers, working creatively and intelligently. They develop an appreciation of art, craft and design, and its role in the creative and cultural industries that enrich their lives.’ (<http://curriculum.qca.org.uk/key-stages-3-and-4/subjects/key-stage-3/physical-education/index.aspx>, emphasis added)

... sets. ²⁰

‘Education for citizenship equips young people with the knowledge, skills and understanding to play an effective role in public life. Citizenship encourages them to take an interest in topical and controversial issues and to engage in discussion and debate. Pupils learn about their rights, responsibilities, duties and freedoms and about laws, justice and

democracy. They learn to take part in decision-making and different forms of action. They play an active role in the life of their schools, neighbourhoods, communities and wider society as active and global citizens.’ <http://curriculum.qca.org.uk/key-stages-3-and-4/subjects/key-stage-4/citizenship/index.aspx>

... identification. ²¹

‘It helps pupils develop their own identities through an understanding of history at personal, local, national and international levels.’ – <http://curriculum.qca.org.uk/key-stages-3-and-4/subjects/key-stage-3/history/index.aspx>

... own’. ²²

‘Languages are part of the cultural richness of our society and the world in which we live and work. Learning languages contributes to mutual understanding, a sense of global citizenship and personal fulfilment. Pupils learn to appreciate different countries, cultures, communities and people. By making comparisons, they gain insight into their own culture and society. The ability to understand and communicate in another language is a lifelong skill for education, employment and leisure in this country and throughout the world.’ – <http://curriculum.qca.org.uk/key-stages-3-and-4/subjects/key-stage-3/modern-foreign-languages/index.aspx>

... politics. ²³

‘Geography inspires pupils to become global citizens by exploring their own place in the world, their values and their responsibilities to other people, to the environment and to the sustainability of the planet.’ – <http://curriculum.qca.org.uk/key-stages-3-and-4/subjects/key-stage-3/geography/index.aspx>

... dropped. ²⁴

For instance, corporal punishment was banned in UK state schools in 1987.

... them. ²⁵

Of course, ‘produce’ cannot be understood in a strict sense. If the school system was that successful in producing submissive citizens this text and some forms of student protest would be impossible. Indeed, the authors of this text learned reading, writing and perhaps a bit of how to argue in a school. That the school system teaches skills that are also applicable beyond and against what they are intended for is a nice effect but nothing more.

... care. ²⁶

Meters of bookshelves are full with pedagogic literature are trying to figure out the trick to teaching somebody something they do not want to know. Yet, these books often do not even acknowledge this contradiction.

... right? ²⁷

Equal opportunity is a weird thing anyway. First, it does not even claim to provide a good living for everybody – just having a ‘chance’ at it suffices. Second, ‘equal treatment’ and ‘equal outcome’ are quite different things, since one only treats equally what is different. It does not make much sense to treat two identical things equally, since they are equal. However, treating two different things according to the same set of rules must lead to different outcomes. Since all this treatment does is to ignore the difference, it clearly favours one side by choosing to ignore its advantages. On the other hand, actively offsetting the differences by positive discrimination favours the other side. Thus, ‘equal opportunity’ and ‘equal treatment’ provides material for endless (moralistic) debates over what constitutes a corrective and what is positive discrimination.

... command. ²⁸

“Higher education matters because it transforms the lives of individuals. On graduating, graduates are more likely to be employed, more likely to enjoy higher wages and better job satisfaction, and more likely to find it easier to move from one job to the next. Participating in higher education enables individuals from low income backgrounds and then their families to enter higher status jobs and increase their earnings. Graduates enjoy substantial health benefits – a reduced likelihood of smoking, and lower incidence of obesity and depression. They are less likely to be involved in crime, more likely to be actively engaged with their children’s education and more likely to be active in their communities. Higher education matters because it drives innovation and economic transformation. Higher education helps to produce economic growth, which in turn contributes to national prosperity. OECD countries which expanded their higher education sectors more rapidly from the 1960s onwards experienced faster growth.” (Browne Report, p.16) The fact that graduates might know stuff is only relevant insofar it benefits the economy and the nation.

... unemployment.²⁹

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-11652845>

... worthwhile.³⁰

It is precisely this calculation the Conservative party appeals to on its ‘Tuition Fees – The Facts’ website when they write: ‘Graduates earn, on average, at least £100,000 more over their lifetimes than non-graduates, so it's fair that you contribute towards your education.’ – <http://www.factsonfees.com/index.php>. Compared to the alleged £100,000 ‘income’, the ‘investment’ is ‘fair’. The Labour commissioned Browne report agrees: ‘The return to graduates for studying will be on average around 400%.’ (Browne Report, p.5)

... universities.³¹

‘Liberal Democrats believe university education should be free and everyone who has the ability should be able to go to university and not be put off by the cost.’ – <http://www.libdems.org.uk/education.aspx> Similarly, in the foreword to the Browne Report Lord Browne writes: “In November 2009, I was asked to lead an independent Panel to review the funding of higher education and make recommendations to ensure that teaching at our HEIs is sustainably financed, that the quality of that teaching is world class and that our HEIs remain accessible to anyone who has the talent to succeed.” (Browne Report, p.5)

... sciences.³²

‘There is a critical role for public investment even if students are investing more. There are clinical and priority courses such as medicine, science and engineering that are important to the well being of our society and to our economy. The costs of these courses are high and, if students were asked to meet all of the costs, there is a risk that they would choose to study cheaper courses instead. In our proposals, there will be scope for Government to withdraw public investment through HEFCE from many courses to contribute to wider reductions in public spending; there will remain a vital role for public investment to support priority courses and the wider benefits they create.’ (Browne Report, p.27, emphasis added)

... not.³³

Leaving aside for the moment the fallacy of demanding a right as if right was something prior to the state.

... need.³⁴

When university students demand ‘the full living wage package for all cleaning, catering and security staff with no cuts to hours and jobs’ (UCL occupation) they accept the wage hierarchy and the miserable conditions of those who they prevailed against in school (or

those who did not even attend a British school). That the demand is a long standing demand of the workers at UCL themselves (and that management at one point gave in to it) does not change the fact that the students' demands reach about as far as Boris Johnson's when people predominately without a university degree are concerned.

[Nicer PDF version](#) of this article.