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**For Danny Harvey**



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# The Ends of Higher Education

*A. Salem, Gary Hazeldine and David Morgan*

## 1. University Education in a Neoliberal Climate

If we look at the English university system today, what we may see are the results of an all too familiar process: fees for students have greatly increased, with many facing a depressing mix of high debts and low-paid work; more and more academics, employed on casualised or short-term contracts, face economic insecurity;<sup>1</sup> the proportion of lecturers to students has almost halved,<sup>2</sup> with serious consequences for the quality, type and quantity of academic work; government auditing and managerial surveillance have become entirely standard, producing deep distrust, and fundamentally weakening academic freedom; above all, and this underlies all of the other developments, public subsidy for the universities is in continual decline—most clearly seen in the complete withdrawal of state funds for courses in all but the most business-friendly subjects.<sup>3</sup>

What has conditioned these developments? Part of an answer lies in the GBP 1000 fees for international students introduced in 1980 under the Thatcher administration. This was an early development of neoliberalising policy towards university education, partly because it suggested that academic study—which as a long history of student protests shows has always allowed some room for self-critique, and thus social critique—can be bought and sold like any other consumer product, and partly because it broke the social-democratic consensus that had held in the UK at large since

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1 Noted in Anna Fazackerley, “Why are Many Academics on Short-Term Contracts for Years?”, *The Guardian*, 4 February 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/feb/04/academic-casual-contracts-higher-education> (as of 1 September 2017).

2 As pointed out by Sarah Amsler and Joyce Canaan, “Whither Critical Pedagogy in the Neo-Liberal University Today? Two UK Practitioners’ Reflections on Constraints and Possibilities”, *Enhancing Learning in the Social Sciences* 1:2 (November 2008): 3.

3 The allusion is to science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).

1945.<sup>4</sup> From being committed to funding universal access to higher education as part of a wider set of social benefits, and by extension to the idea that academic study is worthwhile in itself and necessary for self-development and self-expression, the main parties began to develop ways of making the universities more directly useful to state and economic interests.<sup>5</sup> There followed a marked shift of responsibility for funding university education away from the state to students. Over several decades, successive UK governments formed and maintained a policy of cutting back and finally withdrawing grants, while at the same time introducing and then gradually increasing loans and fees; in 2012, of course, the Cameron government greatly increased fees, opening the way for almost all universities to charge well over GBP 9,000 annually for access.<sup>6</sup>

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- 4 The term ‘neoliberalising’ is used here to suggest that the neoliberal model, while it has certainly globalised itself and strengthened its hold, is not a once-and-for-all development but, as Joyce Canaan and others have argued, a varied and uneven process which brings about resistance to it, and which also opens the door to alternatives. For more on this use of the term see for instance Canaan, “Resisting the English Neoliberalising University: What Critical Pedagogy Can Offer”, *Journal of Critical Education Policy Studies* 11:2 (March 2013): 19–23, <http://www.jceps.com/wp-content/uploads/PDFs/11-2-02.pdf> (as of 1 September 2017).
- 5 Northern Ireland, Wales and especially Scotland do not readily fit into this account, since from the late 1990s onwards these countries gained greater autonomy from the Union, and were able to make undergraduate study either free or much cheaper than it is in England, doubtless due in part to their commitment, within certain limits, to social-democratic governance. This illustrates Canaan’s point that neoliberalism, or ‘neoliberalisation’ as she prefers to call it, is neither irreversible nor inevitable. See Canaan, “Resisting the English Neoliberalising University”: 19–23.
- 6 There is a great deal of critical writing on this subject. See for example Roger Brown with Helen Carasso, *Everything for Sale? The Marketisation of UK Higher Education* (London: Routledge, 2013); Stefan Collini, *What are Universities For?* (London: Penguin, 2012); Stefan Collini, *Sold Out*, *London Review of Books* 35:20 (October 2013): 3–12; John Holmwood, *A Manifesto for the Public University* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011); Fred Inglis, “Economical with the Actualité”, *Times Higher Education*, 6 October 2011, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/economical-with-the-actualit/417654.article> (as of 1 September 2017); and Andrew McGettigan, *The Great University Gamble: Money, Markets and the Future of Higher Education* (London: Pluto, 2013).

Unsurprisingly, once university education is rated at a specific monetary value, once it is sold and consumed like any other consumer object, it becomes harder to see it as a learning process (by definition more or less chaotic, unpredictable and uncontainable). Instead students may view their education as speculators looking for investment gains, and/or as consumers with regular expectations of their purchase. Such attitudes are generally encouraged by the universities: what course does not now mention its bearing on career plans, or sport a list of ‘learning outcomes’, as if it were a definitively finished mechanical product capable of delivering predictable and repeatable effects? The attempt to remake students as investors and consumers is also sharply enforced by state bodies like the funding councils and their successors. These require that universities publish ‘key information sets’ about courses to meet the ‘needs’ of prospective students and interested parents, information made up of little more than prices, and performance, and employment and salaries.<sup>7</sup> Of course, what is included in and excluded from these data sets makes them as much a matter of prescription as objective statement. They encourage a particular mentality among students and, in an exemplary piece of interpellation in Althusser’s sense, play a role in creating the very student self-image that they claim to describe—one founded on consuming reliable, well-made goods, on speculative buying and, ultimately, on pursuing private wealth and comfort.<sup>8</sup>

Such tactics are bound up with vested interests, in that through them the neoliberal state may present what it has forced on students—costs, debts,

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7 See for instance [https://www.hefcw.ac.uk/policy\\_areas/learning\\_and\\_teaching/information\\_for\\_students.aspx](https://www.hefcw.ac.uk/policy_areas/learning_and_teaching/information_for_students.aspx) (as of 1 September 2017).

8 This is a very particular sort of freedom. In class-divided society, as Adorno notes, “the freedom of individuals is essentially private in nature”: “this freedom consists essentially of acquisitions at the expense of others, in a specific kind of sovereignty in which the freedom of others is always offended against a priori, and which therefore contradicts the meaning of freedom from the outset”. Theodor Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964–1965*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), 179.

risks, in short economic insecurity<sup>9</sup>—as a desirable consumer choice and a good investment opportunity. Whether students will buy into this attempt to refashion enforced poverty and insecurity as a choice and an opportunity is an open question, especially when set against what is happening now to so many who, in line with the state’s commitment to neoliberal policies, have been condemned to unemployment, under-employment and workfare.<sup>10</sup> What can be said is that the neoliberal project elicits thoughts and actions appropriate to its development, in part by appealing to our sense of being free individuals with our own purposes and agency—in a process that Foucault, with what he calls “technologies of the self”, would have found instantly familiar.<sup>11</sup>

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9 See for instance Keith Burnett, “We Need to Talk About Free Education”, *Times Higher Education*, 20 June 2017, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/we-need-talk-about-free-education>; Sean Coughlan, “Could Tuition Fees Really Cost £54,000?”, *BBC Online*, 21 January 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-38651059>; Angela Monaghan and Sally Weale, “UK Student Loan Debt Soars to More Than £100bn”, *The Guardian*, 15 June 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2017/jun/15/uk-student-loan-debt-soars-to-more-than-100bn> (all as of 1 September 2017).

10 Bourdieu is clear that such “generalised precariousness”, far from being a by-product of economic crisis, is the result of acts of political will, not least because it can serve as an effective tool of social control: “Generalised precariousness [...] is the basis of a new form of social discipline generated by job insecurity and the fear of unemployment”. Its victims “are found almost as often among occupations requiring a high level of cultural capital”, one example being “precariously employed teachers, overburdened with marginalised high school or university students who are themselves destined for casual work”. Pierre Bourdieu, *Firing Back Against the Tyranny of the Market*, Vol. 2, trans. Loïc Wacquant (London: Verso, 2003), 61, 62. For an elaboration of this point see the chapter, “Job Insecurity is Everywhere Now”, in Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance: Against the New Myths of Our Time*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), especially 85–86.

11 See for instance Michel Foucault, *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, Vol. 3, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (London: Penguin, 2002), especially 201–222, 326–348, 403–417. See also Steph Lawler’s insightful analysis in *Identity: Sociological Perspectives* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), especially 61–63.