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Joe Moran 

The Humanities and the University: a Brief History of the Present Crisis

The humanities in UK universities are under attack on two fronts. The first is economic. A new government orthodoxy has emerged: the New Labour target for increasing participation in higher education led to too many young people attending university. Arts and humanities courses at lower-ranking universities have come under scrutiny for offering students a poor return on their financial investment and for contributing little to economic growth. Current policies or proposals to reform higher education look to divert demand away from these 'low value' courses: the lifelong loan entitlement, allowing adults to study short courses flexibly or build up to a full degree over time; minimum grade requirements for student loans; lowering the threshold for repaying those loans; and cutting funding for arts courses.

The second front is cultural. The humanities have been dragged into a culture war, driven partly by the shift in the Conservatives' electoral base towards the older, non-university graduates who voted for Brexit, especially those who occupy the 'red wall' seats gained from Labour in 2019. According to the crude caricatures deployed in this war, the over-expansion of higher education, and especially of the 'low value' humanities degrees, has exposed young people to 'woke' ideas. It has birthed a generation consumed by identity politics and its language of 'preferred pronouns', 'white privilege' and 'decolonising the curriculum'. The *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph* have often used Freedom of Information requests to inspect university humanities syllabuses for evidence of trigger warnings, 'cancelling' white authors, or national self-flagellation about our imperial and slave-trading past.

To humanities lecturers, particularly those in former polytechnics fearful for their jobs, these attacks can seem scarily unprecedented. In fact, they draw on resilient themes, rehearsed in various iterations for more than sixty years. Since the 1950s, powerful and vocal groups have lobbied against mass higher education, and governments have tried to redirect higher education's priorities away from the arts to science,

technology and vocational subjects. At first, these critiques were separate; opponents of university expansion wanted to preserve the humanities against the dominance of science and technical subjects. From the late 1960s onwards, the critiques began to align: opponents of expansion began to focus on the over-provision of arts subjects at less prestigious institutions. Today's educational culture wars also have their roots in the late 1960s, when radical student movements emerged. As student numbers expanded and universities assumed more prominence in British public life, they became caught up in wider debates about education, the state of modern society and the future of its young people.

The Fight Against Expansion

Arguments for and against the expansion of universities were a constant of British public life in the 1950s. In Kingsley Amis's 1954 novel *Lucky Jim*, Alfred Beesley, Jim Dixon's housemate and colleague from the English department, enters this debate. He begins by praising a professor in his department for failing almost half of his first-year students. 'All the provincial universities are going the same way ...', he complains. 'Go to most places and try and get someone turfed out merely because he's too stupid to pass his exams – it'd be easier to sack a prof. That's the trouble with having so many people here on Education Authority grants, you see.' Dixon agrees with Beesley but 'didn't feel interested enough to say so'.¹ W. Somerset Maugham, while praising the 'ominous significance' of *Lucky Jim*, condemned its cast of characters, made up of this new breed of men going to university on government grants. 'They are mean, malicious and envious ...', he wrote in the *Sunday Times*. 'They are scum.'² Amis's views were closer to Maugham's than many realised, and he was soon identifying Beesley's views as his own.³

Lucky Jim, often seen as a redbrick satire, is more accurately a satire on the university college, a rung further down the educational hierarchy. The fear of expansion was often directed at these institutions – not-quite-universities in unglamorous provincial cities, more likely to let in first-generation interlopers into higher education. The university in *Lucky Jim* is based less on Swansea than on University College Leicester, where Amis's friend Philip Larkin was librarian and Larkin's girlfriend Monica Jones lectured in English. According to John Sutherland, it bothered all three of them that they were 'condemned to work in these lowly not-Oxford institutions'. When Sutherland arrived as a student at Leicester in 1960, three years after it was granted its Royal Charter, it remained 'the hopeful undergraduate's third, "safety net", choice' and 'the campus air was porridge-thick with inferiority

complex'. Jones carried on calling Leicester 'the college' until she retired, believing it did not merit the title of university.⁴

In July 1960, in *Encounter*, Amis attacked the 'university numbers racket', the fallacy that 'there are thousands of young people about who are capable of benefiting from university training, but have somehow failed to find their way there'. On the planned expansion of universities he warned, with emphatic caps: 'MORE WILL MEAN WORSE.' Amis's piece relied more on memorable phrasing and anecdote than argument. It had two key assumptions. First, academic ability is rare and finite. Unlike 'cars or tins of salmon', students could not be increased at will in a productivity drive. They were like 'poems or bottles of hock ... you cannot decide to have more good ones.' Second, students needed to arrive at university with sufficient knowledge for meaningful learning to begin. In the past, his students could be expected to discuss 'the niceties of Pope's use of the caesura', but now he was having to spend time on 'the niceties of who Pope was'.⁵ A student who starts a university English course knowing nothing about Pope should not be there.

Although Amis's examples came from his own subject, his broader aim was to defend the humanities against some future university geared towards the sciences, by command of those 'quantitative thinkers' who feared that Britain was 'falling behind' America and Russia and needed to 'catch up'.⁶ In February 1961, Amis and four Swansea colleagues published an *Observer* article, 'The Threat of the Practical'. It was in reply to a piece by A. D. C. Peterson, Director of the Department of Education at Oxford, calling for university expansion and the creation of more 'relevant' courses, 'in tune with the realities of the world outside'.⁷ Amis and his colleagues objected to this 'strident rhetoric about the importance of science for the sake of its *practical* ends' and argued that 'the greatest current threat to education is that of practicality'.⁸

These battlelines were already familiar. One side of the battle was led by C. P. Snow, whose 'two cultures' lecture of 1959 had criticised the scientific illiteracy of Britain's elites.⁹ Authors broadly on the left such as Anthony Sampson, Michael Shanks and Anthony Crosland suggested that Britain's economic decline was being hastened by a disdain for science and a lack of state planning for skills shortages.¹⁰ On the same side sat most university heads – such as the Swansea Principal, John Fulton, a keen supporter of expansion who went on to be the first Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sussex. Amis had viewed his initiatives at Swansea as 'splashy and modish'¹¹ – a fairly common complaint about university leaders, then and now.

The other side was led by F. R. Leavis who, in his caustic reply to Snow, had defended the idea of the university as 'a centre of human

consciousness: perception, knowledge, judgment and responsibility'.¹² Leavis placed the humanities (and especially his own subject, English) at the university's heart, as an antidote to the soulless utilitarianism of 'technologico-Benthamite civilisation'.¹³ As early as 1953, before the post-war expansion of higher education had really begun, Leavis attacked the egalitarian tendencies of the 1944 Education Act, arguing that 'Oxford and Cambridge cream the country' and that 'for a good long while before the well-known postwar education reforms associated with the Welfare State, very few in Great Britain capable of justifying their presence at a university had failed to get there'.¹⁴ The pre-eminence of the ancient universities had to be preserved, for they made possible 'not merely a cloistral vegetation, but also a free play of spirit and a concentration of humane forces impossible anywhere else'.¹⁵

This was broadly Amis's position too. Universities should not be tools of manpower planning or vocational training but self-governing centres of learning, moral and intellectual beacons for the rest of society. He and his colleagues clarified that they were not against science *per se* so much as the effort to judge it 'not by its power to increase understanding, but rather by contributions to our prosperity'.¹⁶

Snow's 'two cultures' argument was heavily weighted towards the elite universities and metropolitan literary life. Britain's further and higher education at this time was in fact dominated by the sciences – especially at the Redbricks, which had always been more open than Oxbridge to applied science and links with local industry.¹⁷ The share of students taking A-levels in maths and science had steadily increased after the war, up to a peak of 64.5% in 1960.¹⁸ This rise in share translated to universities. Between 1949 and 1961, the number of science and technology students rose by 63%, and the number of humanities students by only 30%. Since most science students were men, this exacerbated gender disparities.¹⁹ In the early 1960s, women made up 23% of students, a fall from nearly 30% in the 1920s.²⁰

From the early 1960s onwards, though, the share of humanities and social sciences students began to rise. The abolition of National Service in 1960 was one factor, because science graduates going into industry had been exempt. Another was the 1962 Education Act, which required local authorities to pay tuition fees and maintenance grants. This support broadened young people's options away from the vocational. Working-class students no longer needed to train as teachers to study the humanities.²¹ Women who would have gone to teacher training colleges (where tuition fees were less than half those at universities) now went to university. By 1966–7, women made up more than 40% of students in the new plate glass universities of Kent, York and UEA.²²

Amis's confession in his *Encounter* piece that he did not fancy teaching in 'something that is called a university but is really a rather less glamorous and authentic training college' was 'a significantly feminized indictment', as Peter Mandler points out.²³ Amis meant teacher training colleges, where about 70% of students were women.²⁴ Beesley's lament in *Lucky Jim* about the 'pressure to chuck Firsts around like teaching diplomas' is similarly gendered.²⁵

The swing away from science became known as 'the Dainton swing' after Fred Dainton, the University of Nottingham Vice-Chancellor whose inquiry reported on it in 1968. The historian of education Harry Armytage complained in that year that most 18-year-olds were 'like lemmings ... plunging under some compulsive hallucination into the already over-crowded waters of the arts and social sciences, leaving the dry lands of the pure and applied sciences'.²⁶ But there was nothing lemming-like about it. The new knowledge and service economy was not dependent on subject-specific skills. The boom graduate careers in these years – in the media, local and central government, teaching, social work, the law, accountancy, commerce, industrial management – were mostly happy to take both arts and science graduates.²⁷

Kingsley Amis's interventions on universities continued through the 1960s. In 1961 he had become a Fellow of Peterhouse College, Cambridge, with, he later wrote, 'the hope of a kind of a displaced return to Oxford, an echo of the romantic view of it which intervening time had enhanced'.²⁸ But he was disillusioned by Cambridge and resigned in 1963 to become a full-time writer. On one level he was still concerned about standards. In response to the 1963 Robbins Report, which called for universities to draw on the untapped talent in the population, he complained that university teachers were already dealing with 'the pool of tapped untalent'.²⁹ In a letter to the *Observer* in April 1965, he criticised an article about university dropouts for ignoring 'the almost invariable cause of failure – *insufficient ability* or, alternatively, *excessive stupidity*'.³⁰ He claimed that in today's university classrooms, where the lecturer took up valuable time having to explain who T. S. Eliot was, 'the thicks get what they need' while 'the bright people doodle'.³¹ These were more ill-tempered and colourfully-phrased versions of what he had said before.

But Amis's emphasis was now shifting, away from fear of the domination of the sciences to the ideological axe-grinding of the arts and social sciences. In a *Daily Telegraph* article of July 1967, 'Why Lucky Jim Turned Right', he explained how his disdain for left-wing thought on a subject on which he had some expertise – university expansion – had spread to a disdain for left-wing thought in general, from 'the Chelsea

poems attacking South African apartheid' to 'the first twangings of the protest song industry'.³² The first student sit-in had been staged at the London School of Economics three months earlier. Over the next two years there were demonstrations in about half of all UK universities.³³ The unrest originated in arts and social science faculties; science students rarely got involved.³⁴

Amis was not alone in seeing new, voguish university courses as breeding grounds for subversion, and proof of the folly of expansion. In a speech in June 1968, the Conservative MP Enoch Powell dismissed as 'bunkum' the Labour government's idea that increasing student numbers led to increased economic growth. This came two months after his 'Rivers of Blood' speech, which had led to student demonstrations against Powell in several university cities. Amid rising student discontent, he argued that viewing students as 'furnishing the means of future economic growth' had led them to bargain for the terms and conditions on which they were willing to perform this service, copying the methods of strikes and lock-outs from trades unions.³⁵ Powell's solution would be mooted more and more in the decades to come. The market alone, he said, should prescribe how universities developed: 'If a lecturer is incompetent, then his lecture theatre will be empty; if a course is futile, it will have few enrolments; if a qualification is irrelevant or excessive, it will not be sought – or so it should be.'³⁶

In the same month as Powell's speech, Philip Larkin, now the University of Hull librarian, wrote to the novelist Barbara Pym about a student sit-in of the administration building in which he had briefly been held captive. The universities had expanded 'suicidally', he told her, and 'must now be changed to fit the kind of people we took in: exams made easier, place made like a factory'.³⁷ In his letters, Larkin had long been misanthropic, perhaps overegging it for comic effect, about students invading the place and destroying his peace.³⁸ Now he tied this Eeyorishness to a sense that the country was being held to ransom by decadent and ungrateful youth. As students became more visible, they focalised anxieties about wider societal changes. 'It may sound snobbish,' Larkin wrote to Pym again in March 1973, 'but I do think that now we are educating the children of the striking classes.'³⁹

The Black Papers and the 'Comprehensive University'

Both Larkin and Amis contributed to Brian Cox and Tony Dyson's *Black Papers on Education* (1969–77). These papers anticipated much of the educational policy agenda, and many of its motifs, of the next half century. In the first Black Paper, Amis blamed the recent spate of student

sit-ins on ‘an academically-unfit majority’ who were ‘painfully bewildered by the whole business and purpose of university life; more has meant worse’.⁴⁰ That first Black Paper was conceived specifically as a response to the student sit-ins. As it developed, though, its remit expanded to include the general perils of progressive education: child-centred learning and free play in primary schools, the shift to comprehensive schools, and experimental courses at the new universities.⁴¹

Anticipating current concerns about de-platforming and ‘cancel culture’, the Black Papers feared that ‘universities show signs of a student and staff intolerance of free discussion which threatens a new Dark Age’.⁴² They also diagnosed a student mental health crisis in strikingly similar terms to how Generation Z students are characterised today: as fragile, coddled and hyper-sensitive. Dyson attributed this collective undergraduate neurosis to ‘a bankrupt and dangerous romanticism’ which saw self-expression and self-fulfilment as ‘inalienable goods-in-themselves’.⁴³ The ‘all must have prizes’ mentality of progressive teaching had contributed to this lack of resilience in young people, by failing to challenge them intellectually and separate them clearly in ability. The Black Papers were sceptical about increased pass rates at O- and A-level, a complaint that has since become a ritual of the August results season. Cox linked grade inflation to the growing preference for coursework over exams. Exams, he argued, prepared young people ‘for the realities of adult life’ by measuring them against set standards ‘rather than inclinations spun lazily out of the “self”’.⁴⁴

A key preoccupation of the Black Papers has come to dominate government thinking on education up to the present: ensuring that the bright working-class child had a route to the elite universities. They worried especially that this child had been deprived of a traditional academic education by the ending of selection at secondary-school level. They objected to comprehensive schools partly because they tied poor, bright children to their neighbourhoods, making it harder for them to escape. They worried about the ‘non-academic’ children only insofar as they disrupted the education of the academic ones. Hence their opposition to the raising of the school-leaving age to 16 in 1972. One regular contributor, Rhodes Boyson, told a press conference on the 1975 Black Paper that a 14-plus test could serve for most pupils as a school-leaving exam: ‘If a non-academic child knew he could leave school at 14 if he was literate, he’d be literate.’⁴⁵

The psychologist Cyril Burt, whose research had underpinned the 11-plus exam, contributed to two of the Black Papers.⁴⁶ Underlying much Black Paper thought was Burt’s belief that differences in levels of intelligence were genetic, innate and measurable, and that a small

number of working-class children, with abilities that belied their class position, needed help to reach their true place in society. The 1975 Black Paper put it starkly: 'You can have equality or equality of opportunity: you cannot have both.'⁴⁷

This understanding of social mobility was rooted in the Black Paper authors' own experiences. As James Robert Wood points out, they were predominantly male and often from working- or lower-middle-class backgrounds.⁴⁸ Their lives had been transformed by grammar-school scholarships and university – an example of how the debate on selective education has been skewed by this small, visible and vocal group. Rhodes Boyson, the son of a Lancashire cotton spinner, had failed his 11-plus but attended Haslingden Grammar because an aunt who owned a chip shop paid his fees. Dyson, whose parents worked as assistants in a drapers' shop, won a scholarship to the Sloane School, Chelsea. Cox, the son of a coal exporter's clerk and a lady's maid, went to Wintringham Grammar in Grimsby.

Cox seemed especially prone to what Richard Hoggart calls 'the "Primitive Methodist syndrome"', the tendency to generalise and see singular stories, as the lay preachers in Hoggart's native Hunslet did, as 'moral parables'.⁴⁹ Cox's memoir, *The Great Betrayal*, reveals a deep-feeling man, ill-suited, unlike Amis, for the public confrontations of the education wars. He had been greatly affected by his mother's death from tuberculosis when he was 10 years old and the way that her long illness had plunged his family into poverty. As a sixth-former, towards the end of the Second World War, he studied in the evenings in the box bedroom of the family's small semi-detached on the outskirts of Grimsby. From this room, heated by a one-bar electric fire, he could see searchlights, flares and ack-ack fire lighting up the sky over the docks. Here he 'enjoyed much adolescent self-pity and romantic inspiration'. As his father's tense second marriage curdled the atmosphere at home, Cox discovered literature and classical music as a portal into another life. Reading Milton felt like 'an entry into a brave new world' and left him 'overcome with exaltation'.⁵⁰

It is a familiar story: the scholarship boy discovering high culture and plotting his escape from the provinces, and a constraining home life, via elite education. Cox pursued his academic ambitions doggedly. With little encouragement from his school, he applied to University College, London, but was scarred by a bad interview, having been given no advice on how to conduct himself. He then entered himself for and won a scholarship to Pembroke College, Cambridge. In *The Great Betrayal*, Cox recounts his alienation from the confident ex-public schoolboys there, with their established cliques. At the end of his first college

dinner, he realised he was the only one eating pudding with a spoon. 'I am proud to recall that I did not change over to a fork,' he writes.⁵¹ In the first issue of *Critical Survey*, the journal he co-founded with Dyson in 1962, he lamented that 'lack of knowledge causes great injustice in our university entrance system'. His article included useful advice for teachers about applications to Oxbridge colleges. But he was clear that only the brightest should bother: 'The average student who applies is wasting everyone's time, and the Colleges are likely to be very annoyed with his school.'⁵²

Cox's attitudes derived in other ways from his life story and his inability, as he admitted, to 'slough off the puritanism inherited from my Methodist upbringing'. In 1964 he was a visiting associate professor at Berkeley, when thousands of students, emboldened by Joan Baez singing 'We Shall Overcome', staged a sit-in against restrictions on academic freedom. Cox was sympathetic to the students' demands but discomforted by their methods. By the time a student of his was arrested for reading aloud from *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in a public place, he felt the protests had deteriorated into 'the making of satisfying gestures'.⁵³

After returning to work at the University of Hull, Cox found that he disapproved of the informal teaching methods at the open-plan primary school in Cottingham that his children attended.⁵⁴ He was a committed teacher, proud of his own skills as a lecturer when much university teaching was absent-minded and mediocre. Like many middle-aged academics before and since, he was convinced that standards of student literacy were in decline. In a 1975 speech, he said that reading his childhood diary had made him realise that his spelling at the age of 9 was better than that of 'a good percentage' of his current students at the University of Manchester.⁵⁵

Cox and Dyson had a Leavisite faith in English as a discipline of both intellectual rigour and emotional receptivity and a source of moral and spiritual renewal. Their problem was the same as Leavis's: how to square this missionary zeal for their subject with the danger of diluting academic standards. This problem had led Leavis into a seeming paradox: the humanities were both vital to the life of the whole culture and the pursuit of a small, elect minority. The aim, as he wrote of his ideal University English school, was 'to be content with modest numbers, but to provide a standard, a centre and a source of stimulus and suggestion'.⁵⁶ As Wood points out, Cox and Dyson did not share Leavis's disdain for universities beyond Oxbridge, and the links they made with schoolteachers through their journals *Critical Quarterly* and *Critical Survey* point to a desire to democratise their subject.⁵⁷ But this desire competed with a sense that the study of English demanded a rare mix

of scrupulousness and sensitivity incompatible with what they called 'the comprehensive university'.⁵⁸

In his assessment of the educational climate, Cox did what his training as a literary critic had taught him to do. He wove together a convincing global interpretation out of smaller textual details, in this case the details of his own life. In *The Great Betrayal*, he sees the success of the Black Papers in transforming education as a victory for common sense – 'a triumph for the ordinary, the obvious, the instinctive and the natural over the theorists and utopians of the 1960s'.⁵⁹ But this new 'common sense' arose out of emotive stories rooted in Cox's and his fellow authors' own experiences.

The changes to universities in the 1960s no longer seem as dramatic as the Black Paper authors feared. The new student movement was less violent and radical in Britain than in most other countries. Protests and sit-ins on UK campuses were sporadic and the work of a small minority. Even most arts students, as the *Times* wrote in June 1968, were 'peaceful conformists concerned mainly with getting a degree, a spouse and a job'.⁶⁰ The rise in student numbers was also fairly modest. In 1960–1, 5% of Britons under 21 went on to higher education in all its forms; by 1972–3, this had risen to just under 14%.⁶¹ The universities, including the plate glasses, retained a largely middle-class intake.⁶² Small-group teaching in the humanities survived; staff-student ratios remained the same as they had been in the late 1950s, very low compared to most countries.⁶³

Richard Hoggart, in his 1971 Reith lectures, contrasted Britain with France, which had faced a similarly huge hike in demand for higher education from baby boomers coming of age. There, just five months after the *événements* of May-June 1968, a new Minister of National Education, Edgar Faure, had steered through the Orientation Act of Higher Education, a huge restructuring of the universities. Britain, meanwhile, had tinkered with the system and produced 'a reasonably humane but quite unradical set of accommodations'. For those working in universities it felt like 'being on the back of a cow as it slowly turned over'. Now the British seemed to feel that the democratisation of higher education had gone far enough; the cow had 'finished turning over for the time being'.⁶⁴

Thatcherism and the Humanities

Cox claimed that the Black Papers liberated 'a repressed ideology' which helped to elect Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister in 1979.⁶⁵ The Black Papers had opposed university expansion, particularly in

fashionable arts and humanities courses as opposed to science, engineering and technology courses where there were vacant places.⁶⁶ They believed that opening up universities to market forces would raise standards and restore natural hierarchies. Two Black Paper proposals – introducing student loans and abolishing academic tenure to allow institutions to get rid of poor teachers and unproductive researchers⁶⁷ – were enacted towards the end of the Thatcher era.

The Thatcher years, then, should have been bad for the humanities in higher education. Thatcher was rare among prominent British politicians of any era in being a science graduate, and she was broadly in sympathy with the argument that arts subjects were wasting taxpayers' money on courses of dubious economic value and subversive intent. In her memoir *The Path to Power*, she criticised 'the kindergarten Marxism and egocentric demands' of the student movement of the 1960s, which she saw as 'a development of that youth cult ... whereby the young were regarded as a source of pure insight into the human condition'. The universities had expanded too quickly, she concluded, and 'in many cases standards had fallen and the traditional character of the universities had been lost'.⁶⁸

The declinist argument about Britain's deficit in science training, previously linked to the left, was now taken up by historians such as Martin Wiener and Correlli Barnett who were championed by the right. English culture, for Wiener, had suffered from a 'century of psychological and intellectual de-industrialization'. Provincial universities had embraced a 'conservative revolution', replicating the curricula of Oxbridge colleges with their dilettantish, gentlemanly focus on the arts.⁶⁹ Barnett argued that after the Second World War a liberal, arts-trained political and mandarin class had seduced the country into chasing the false utopia of a 'New Jerusalem' of social reform and full employment at the expense of industrial modernisation.⁷⁰ These historians' work was admired by Thatcher and her Education Secretary, Keith Joseph.

But for all the mood music, the swing back to science failed to happen. In the early 1980s, Joseph (and his parliamentary under-secretary, Rhodes Boyson) inherited the Black Papers' suspicions of mass higher education. The fierce funding cuts to universities in this period were partly aimed at suppressing what they saw as artificial demand, especially in arts subjects. The demand, though, simply migrated elsewhere. While cutting university funding, the government allowed numbers to grow in polytechnics, where unit costs were cheaper.⁷¹ This growth was largely in the humanities and social sciences subjects that were being cut in the universities.

The polytechnics had always been more arty than their reputation; just less than half of their students in the 1970s studied science and technology.⁷² But the Thatcherite cuts to universities encouraged more ‘academic drift’: the tendency for polytechnics to expand their portfolio in traditional as opposed to vocational or applied subjects. Lord Vaizey, former professor of economics at Brunel University, accused them of becoming ‘arty-technics’.⁷³ ‘Should there really be a department of philosophy in Middlesex Polytechnic?’ asked Lord Annan, the former Vice-Chancellor of the University of London, in the House of Lords in 1984. ‘Should there be anthropology taught in Oxford Polytechnic?’ The Robbins Report had been wrong, Annan argued, in believing that you could have ‘both mass higher education and Rolls-Royce education’.⁷⁴

Student demand for the humanities subjects remained high. The sciences were still often seen as the duller, safer choice. The time-honoured stereotypes – science students diligently arriving at the lab at 9 a.m. each morning, with arts students pursuing a more leisurely timetable punctuated by the occasional essay crisis – persisted. Francis Spufford writes that at Cambridge in the early 1980s, arts and science students rarely socialised with each other. The arts students valued ‘verbal prowess’ and the knack of making ‘unpredictable connections’. In their ample spare time, they ‘put on plays, drank cheap Bulgarian wine, and protested against Mrs Thatcher’. To them, scientists worked too hard and ‘seemed hopelessly earnest and unironic’. They grouped scientists of all stripes together as ‘natskys’, derived from natscis or natural sciences, the Cambridge combination of physics, chemistry and biology. The natsky was thought of as ‘a troglodyte in an anorak, given to unspeakable pastimes which presumably made up for the sad fact that the large majority doing science were male’.⁷⁵

Students at both universities and polytechnics continued to choose degrees based on emotional affinities and personal interest. In September 1984, Nina Stibbe, while working as a live-in nanny in Camden, began studying humanities at Thames Polytechnic. Here her tutors were ‘the modern type who had read Stuart Hall and Terry Eagleton and scrapped with the fuddy-duddies’.⁷⁶ But she studied in a way that would have been recognisable to anyone doing a humanities degree at a university at the time. Teaching consisted of dense, hour-long lectures where everyone frantically scribbled down the words of a lecturer speaking too quickly, and seminars at which ‘people who haven’t read the text are told they may as well leave the seminar and that’s the ultimate shame’. In between these classes, she was expected to disappear to the library to make her way through long reading lists, from Descartes to Ngugi wa Thiong’o.⁷⁷

Stibbe enjoyed the state of 'being a student', and was thrilled at seeing a reflection of herself in a shop window carrying a bundle of books.⁷⁸ Stuart Maconie, studying English at Edge Hill College in Ormskirk, similarly enjoyed posing 'with my head in some slim volume of verse, wearing a black polo-neck and smoking a roll-up'.⁷⁹ The humanities continued to thrive in the gap between Thatcherism's uncompromising market rhetoric and the more pragmatic on-the-ground reality. Favourable residues from the pre-Thatcher years – free tuition, maintenance grants, being able to claim benefits during the summer vacation – gave students the confidence to study arts subjects as a corrective to what many saw as the hard-headed commercialism of the age.

By employment statistics alone, polytechnics humanities courses were, as one education correspondent wrote in 1989, 'more difficult to justify than almost anything else in education'.⁸⁰ When Stibbe and her cohort graduated in 1987, most picked up casual work in shops or cafes, or selling homemade jewellery and candles in Camden Market. They were happy to be in these 'dead-end' jobs for a few years, confident that the graduate opportunities would come. There were fewer graduates competing for the same jobs then, and most of them had been on grants so they were not in serious debt. They knew they would not have to live at home again, and there was less parental involvement in choices of degree and career than now. They did not need to consider unpaid internships, a now common stepping stone to a career in the creative industries.⁸¹ Even in a tough job market, this gave humanities graduates options and confidence. After three years, Stibbe got her first job in publishing.

The early Thatcherite policy of cutting university places was soon defeated by democracy, what Mandler calls 'the irrepressible and politically unstoppable force of demand for more and more education'. From the mid-1980s, an expansion of higher education began, under Kenneth Baker, which continues today.⁸² The proportion of science students in universities hit a short-term peak in 1984 but then began a quarter-century decline. The declining share for the sciences in this period was mostly at the expense of the social sciences, business, law and communications, but the arts and humanities' share held up.⁸³

The Age of Mass Higher Education

When new universities were formed from the old polytechnics in 1992, the critique of academic drift in the old polys turned into nostalgia for the binary divide. 'There is now no easy way of curtailing the growth

of low-standard humanities courses,' the philosopher Mary Warnock, former mistress of Girton College, Cambridge, wrote in 1996, arguing that erasing the binary line had been a dreadful mistake. 'There seems nothing left to do except cherish and preserve what pockets of excellence remain ... The universities have survived dark ages before, and may do so again.'⁸⁴ Similar anxieties motivated the founding in 1994 of the Russell Group of elite universities and the 1994 Group (of slightly smaller but still research-intensive institutions), aimed at protecting their status and funding.

Despite these fears, the binary divide remained in all but name. In fact, the marketisation of education led to an ossification of the hierarchies that the plate glass universities had weakened slightly. It was not just that elite institutions could draw on their reserves of economic and cultural capital in the competition for status; it was that marketisation was specifically geared towards preserving these hierarchies. Tuition fees were always about more than financing universities. They were meant to sharpen the student consumer's knowledge of the market, increase competition between institutions and curb demand for the 'low value' courses.⁸⁵

Since the late 1980s, the entire educational system had been transformed by an ethos of meritocratic elitism. At its heart lay the Black Paper ideal of social mobility, with the rigorous enforcement of standards and hierarchies allowing the most able students to move up the educational ladder to the elite institutions. Kenneth Baker's 1988 Education Reform Act loosened the control of local authorities over schools, and set up new centrally funded rivals to the comprehensives. It introduced a National Curriculum, with clearly defined key stages and modes of assessment. It paved the way for Standard Assessment Tests, with national exams at 7, 11 and 14 years old as the Black Papers had advocated.⁸⁶ These proposed tests were designed, as the Black Papers also intended, to assess not just individual children but overall school performance. League table rankings followed. Ofsted, formed in 1992, initiated the more rigorous school inspections that the Black Papers had called for.

Every Education Secretary since Baker has intensified this movement towards more centralised control of schools and greater competition between them. The aim has been to render defunct what Tony Blair's director of communications, Alistair Campbell, called 'the bog-standard comprehensive'.⁸⁷ In its place is now a multi-tiered school system, incorporating faith schools, specialist schools, city academies and free schools and a culture of constant testing, measurement and ranking of students and, by extension, their schools.

In his Labour Party Conference speech in 1999, Tony Blair announced his ambition for 50% of the UK's 17- to 30-year-olds to enter higher education. 'In today's world there is no such thing as too clever,' he said. 'The more you know, the further you will go.'⁸⁸ But participation was always intended to be heavily stratified. In May 2000, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, criticised Magdalen College, Oxford, for rejecting Laura Spence, a well-qualified comprehensive school pupil who went on to study biochemistry at Harvard. Tellingly, this and subsequent university admissions controversies focused on Oxbridge. The point of this narrowly defined idea of social mobility was that a small number of children from modest or disadvantaged backgrounds would have the same elite education as their more privileged peers.

Meritocratic elitism informed Labour's move in the Higher Education Act 2004 to increase tuition fees to £3,000, breaking a manifesto commitment. In his autobiography, Blair writes that he was persuaded by a visit to Downing Street, in late 2001, of the key heads of the Russell Group to demand more funding. He had also looked at the league tables of the top fifty universities in the world and saw only a few in the United Kingdom. America's domination in these tables 'was plainly and inescapably due to their system of fees ... Those who paid top dollar got the best. Simple as that.' Britain had also got itself into 'a typical egalitarian muddle' over the lower-ranking universities. The previous government's conversion of polytechnics into universities 'was fine except that it fuelled the myth that all universities were of the same academic standing, which manifestly they weren't'.⁸⁹

Meritocratic elitism also ran through the GCSE reforms of the humanities subjects initiated by Michael Gove as Education Secretary in the coalition government from 2010. An English graduate, Gove saw English and History teaching as intellectually lightweight and focusing on student experience and generic skills at the expense of prescribed knowledge. Persuaded by E. D. Hirsch's work on cultural literacy, and the importance of a traditional, academic curriculum, he believed that students should be taught narrative, national history and canonical literary texts. A key aim was to allow a small minority of bright working-class children to acquire the cultural capital more associated with an elite education.

Gove, the adopted son of an Aberdeen fish processor, had passed a scholarship to attend the independent Robert Gordon's College, before going on to Oxford. In 1988 he told the Oxford Union: 'If schools pushed and brought people up to face failure and enjoy success rather than merely ladling out a thin gruel of no-risk conformity then they might be attracting them to Oxford.' As Education Secretary, his language

was less combative but his views materially unchanged. In 2011 he praised two London academies in deprived areas of Hackney and White City in London for pushing students to apply for Oxbridge and ensuring that they did not become ‘the victim of the bigotry of low expectations’.⁹⁰

Boris Johnson, then Mayor of London, elaborated on this theme in his 2013 Margaret Thatcher lecture for the Centre for Policy Studies. Johnson called for more to be done to help able children from poor backgrounds, because ‘the harder you shake the pack, the easier it will be for some cornflakes to get to the top’. But he added that ‘it is surely relevant to a conversation about equality that as many as 16% of our species have an IQ below 85’. Free markets involved competition between ‘human beings who are already far from equal in raw ability’.⁹¹ As defined by Britain’s political elites, social mobility is not meant to solve social inequality. They do not believe in either the possibility or desirability of a more equal society.

Once again, though, student demand has complicated the plans of policymakers. School leavers and their parents (now more involved in such decisions by dint of the greater financial contribution they make) increasingly see higher education as a rite of passage and a right of citizenship. The millennium birth cohort study, which follows the lives of Britons born between September 2000 and January 2002, makes this clear. When the millennium cohort were 7 years old, 96% of their mothers with the lowest educational qualifications said they wanted them to go to university. The youngest of this group are due to graduate from university in 2023. To the chagrin of their political leaders, neither they nor their parents seem, even in the age of £9K fees, to make purely economic assessments of the worth of a degree. In Mandler’s terms, they see higher education as a ‘consumption good’, valued as an experience in itself, and not merely an ‘investment good’, valued for its instrumental benefits.⁹²

Policymakers have had more success, though, in increasing the share of students doing science degrees. This share, which had been declining since the mid-1960s, has been rising rapidly since 2012, at the expense of the humanities, especially languages and literatures.⁹³ The brunt of this decline in the humanities share has been felt at less prestigious institutions. Since the government ended student number controls in 2013, Russell Group universities have made up gaps in humanities admissions by lowering entry tariffs and taking students who would previously have gone elsewhere. This has been the major factor in the recent wave of redundancies and course closures that has hit the humanities in post-1992 universities.

The reasons behind the shift to the sciences are complex. Science has acquired a certain glamour that would have been hard to imagine in 1980s Cambridge when the arts students looked down on the ‘natskys’. Computer code has come to underpin many forms of communication, creativity and play, and scientific breakthroughs, in the form of new cancer treatments, vaccines, gene therapies and alternative sources of energy, are often in the news. STEM is also heavily promoted in schools, aided by STEM-friendly policies such as the English Baccalaureate, which requires pupils to study the three main sciences at GCSE, and the funding of new specialist maths colleges. Post-2008 austerity, and the new £9K fees regime introduced in 2012, may be driving more career-focused student choices. Evidence of a shortage of graduates with skills in STEM is sketchy: most science graduates still go into non-scientific jobs.⁹⁴ But the figures carry less weight than the pervasive sense that our future lives will be governed by these scientific and technological urgencies, rather than the low-tech, slow-burn methods of the humanities.

Dominic Cummings, the former special advisor to the Prime Minister, has been a forceful advocate for this view. Like Amis half a century earlier, Cummings usefully illuminates elite thinking about higher education by voicing it without nuance or tact. He has lamented our tendency to select leaders from ‘a subset of Oxbridge egomaniacs with a humanities degree’.⁹⁵ Cummings is himself an Oxbridge humanities graduate and his own writings, mostly posted on his blog, are prolific and prolix. But he champions thinkers who can cut through the obfuscations of words with the purity of numbers, using statistical modelling and analytical programming languages. In his ideal future, policy will be driven by a tiny elite of super-clever people, mostly mathematicians and physicists with the data-processing and forecasting skills needed to understand modern systems and networks.

Cummings’s vision looks strikingly similar to the meritocratic utopia of 2034 in Michael Young’s 1958 satire *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. Here, in a world led by the super-intelligent where psychometrics can reliably foretell the IQ of a foetus, there is no place for the sentimental egalitarianism that excuses mediocrity. Britain is at last ruled by ‘the five per cent of the nation who know what five per cent means’.⁹⁶ In Young’s utopia, the House of Commons has handed power to the civil service and a House of Lords stuffed with clever life peers. For Cummings, too, democratic procedure is a terrible drag on brilliance. It would be better if Prime Ministers were directly elected and could appoint ministers from outside Parliament (Bill Gates as Health Secretary, for instance), instead of relying on the ‘limited talent pool’ of the

Commons.⁹⁷ Cummings praises the technocracies of Silicon Valley and Singapore for rooting out weak performance and time-wasting compromise. In Whitehall, by contrast, it is hard to get anything done because tedious due process makes it impossible to sack useless people or close dysfunctional departments.⁹⁸

In Cummings's vision, the non-super-intelligent human beings are essentially implements of competitive efficiency, servants of a technocratic future whose direction and priorities have already been determined. No wonder there is little room in his vision for the humanities, with their infinite nuancing and layering of competing interpretations. That would be to acknowledge that human beings are uniquely complex and ultimately indecipherable, that their role is not simply to make up patterns of collective human behaviour to be parsed by the data analysts and super-forecasters.

The views of Cummings's former boss, Boris Johnson, were more complicated. Johnson was often filmed in a white coat and goggles, visiting laboratories, talking up Britain's role as a 'scientific superpower'. He placed science at the centre of his government's agendas such as tackling the climate emergency, levelling up, and building a post-Brexit 'global Britain'.⁹⁹ But in his speech at the 2020 Conservative Party conference, he also said that he 'owed everything' to his tutors at Balliol College, Oxford, where he studied *Literae Humaniores*. Commonly known as *Greats*, this four-year course in classical literature, history and philosophy is over 900 years old. Even after losing ground over the last century to its modern equivalent, PPE, it retains some of its traditional prestige as the supreme academic training in rigour and sensitivity. Johnson is proud of his classical education and will often drop into ancient Greek or quote from Pericles or Homer in public. He told the *Guardian* in 2003, in a discussion of whether a degree was now worth the outlay in the age of tuition fees and student loans, that his university education was 'beyond price ... a spiritual blessing'.¹⁰⁰

A very different vision of higher education appears in Johnson's novel *Seventy-Two Virgins*, published a year later. One of his characters, Jones, is a student at the fictional Llangollen University, a former mental home that became a Welsh-speaking teacher training centre, 'passing on this weird creole to the listless children of Denbighshire'. Finally, 'in the great Stalinist push to expand the numbers in tertiary education', it had been rechristened as a university. Here Jones spurned the 'useless courses' that occupied his peers, such as 'Media Studies or Gender Awareness in Film', in favour of 'that proper old-fashioned twenty-first-century British university course': hairdressing.¹⁰¹

Perhaps one should not make too much of a single passage from a hastily written comic novel. Its casual dismissal of third-rate institutions, with their Mickey Mouse degrees and blanket recruitment strategies, has become part of the media noise around universities. But this passage captures a world view consistently held not only by Johnson but by most policymakers and commentators. In this view, the humanities are simultaneously elevated and denigrated. The proper place for them is as a minority subject in the elite universities, where many of our future leaders will continue to study them. Here the ideal of the humanities as open-ended intellectual inquiry, exploring the deepest questions about life's meaning, survives. But young people with no chance of attending these elite institutions should not waste their time on pursuing this humane ideal. They should be steered into vocational subjects at lesser institutions or, better still, into further education and apprenticeships. In his 2020 conference speech, Johnson said that 'we all know that some of the most brilliant and imaginative and creative people in Britain and some of the best paid people in Britain did not go to university'. People needed to be given 'the options, the skills that are right for them'.¹⁰²

Universities and the Humanities Now

Since the 1950s, public commentators and policymakers have been peculiarly exercised by two questions: who should attend university, and what they should study once there. What has emerged might be called an elite folk wisdom, based less on evidence than on intuitions and attitudes, often drawn from personal experience. It comprises two main elements. The first is the fear that academic standards are in constant danger of decline, as more students enter university who should not be there. As with most descension narratives, the date when the rot set in tends to be negotiable, but it goes back surprisingly far. In his memoirs, Kingsley Amis writes that even when he started teaching at Swansea in 1949 (when only 3.4% of young people went to university), 'there were quite enough there in the university who should not have been there'.¹⁰³ The second element is the fear that Britain will be overtaken in a skills race by more technically minded or economically agile nations such as the United States, Japan or China. In the 1950s, these two positions were held by competing groups; now they are held by the same people. The Leavisite argument that the university is a bulwark against the technocracy has been decisively lost.

How have these two potentially conflicting demands, for preserving excellence and promoting growth, been squared? It is no longer

acceptable to call aspirants to higher education ‘scum’, even if some critics of expansion are still informed by an ill-disguised social and educational snobbery. The ‘more will mean worse’ argument has been replaced by a more nuanced one: a small number of poorer students should receive an elite university education commensurate with their ability. This argument relies on an assumption that academic ability is a fixed and limited entity, and that higher education should sift and regulate opportunities accordingly. The resulting alliance between free-market values and traditional academic hierarchies has been especially bad news for the humanities at post-1992 institutions.

But the attempt to remake universities along these lines has been going on for decades and has been only partly successful. Governments have less control over what happens in universities than in schools, because they are partly autonomous institutions driven by student demand. Left to their own devices, students have not always behaved as the rational-choice actors that the market supposes them to be. They have mostly gone to university not because they carefully calibrated its measurable benefits but because they had a more general intuition that it would be enjoyable and fruitful. The elite effort to ration and rigidly hierarchise university admissions has competed with young people’s democratic demand for more and better education. Policymakers might prefer to keep a lid on student numbers, but in the US Democratic politician Dick Tuck’s famous words, ‘the people have spoke – the bastards’. The market has turned students into consumers, but they cannot be trusted to consume their education in the approved ways. They continue to see themselves as more than human capital to be deployed in the pursuit of economic growth, and to make their choices accordingly. And so the ‘low value’ humanities courses survive, just about. Perhaps this explains the increasingly fevered tone of the educational culture warriors: even after years of corralling, the universities, and their students, remain recalcitrant.

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