

More About Crimes against Humanities¹

Michael Chanan

1

The title of my talk is borrowed from a recent blog on Open Democracy² about the dire state of affairs at London Metropolitan University, which is intending to cut the number of courses it offers by 70%, from 557 to 160. All subject areas will be affected but Arts and Humanities are being decimated. In the Faculty of Humanities, Arts & Languages, only six courses will remain. Those being cut include History, Philosophy, Theatre Studies, Modern Languages, Caribbean Studies and Performing Arts. If London Met represents the most extreme case so far of the implications of the Government's reorganization of HE, what is the hidden agenda which it exposes, and what is it that is ideologically at stake here?

The Open Democracy piece reports:

A student speaking at an emergency meeting of the Humanities' Faculty Forum put the case precisely: "With my school results, I would never have got to study history at other universities but I've had excellent teaching here and good results. So is the government saying that people like me don't deserve to study history?"

I'm going to take this as a real, not a rhetorical question, and in that case there are actually several possible answers.

2

The first answer is yes, that's effectively what they're saying, despite all the fine language about access. In the film I've just made about the anti-cuts movement, [Chronicle of Protest](#), my Roehampton colleague Nina Power suggests that in the Tory purview such subjects are considered suitable to be studied only by the kind of people who used to study them, before the huge expansion of university education in recent times. Of course they can't say so openly, because the implication is that it's undesirable to place knowledge in the hands of the wrong class of people, and you can no longer say such a thing in public.

But the point Nina makes signals something else as well, because it would mean that the method of co-optation into the establishment through education which used to operate so well no longer does so. There used to be what Orwell referred to as the scholarship boy—the working class lad whose intelligence won him scholarships to the patrician educational establishments of public school and Oxbridge; for this was the route by which the establishment co-opted gifted children among the less privileged—or in another vocabulary, the potential organic intellectuals of the working classes—thereby blunting their inclination for opposition.

The category of scholarship boy disappeared with the introduction of universal education in the more egalitarian society of postwar Britain, but the introduction of the welfare state had required a

¹ for Glasgow Postgrad Symposium, 19 May 2011

² <http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/jane-skerritt/london-metropolitan-university-crimes-against-humanities>

fatal compromise: universal provision would not replace private supply in professional services like medicine and education but sit alongside them, so as not to infringe the rights of those who preferred to pay the costs of maintaining their social status. This preserved the domain of privilege, and in education, the role of the elite institutions which prepared young men and women for the public professions. In the words of an Oxford philosophy don whom I knew in the early 1970s, when asked why he hadn't published very much, 'I don't have to. I'm training the minds of the coming generation of politicians, that's influence enough.' He would doubtless have hated the managerialist regime which began under Thatcherite Toryism and intensified under Blairite New Labour, and would certainly nowadays need to publish more to earn his professorship, but the socio-political function of the job remains the same. To this day, the majority of members of the cabinet in virtually every government, Labour as well as Tory, for the last century or more have been graduates of Oxford.

If, however, you grow the numbers who get a university education in order to service a society hungry for technical cadres but at the same time governed by rampant individualism, and where birth and inherited privilege are trounced by opportunism and mediated celebrity, then the old elitist methods no longer work so well. So, yes, a student from a less privileged background, who didn't get the best grades at school because they could only go somewhere local and underfunded at public expense, is getting above themselves if they think they should be subsidised to study a subject like history which has no directly useful purpose, and certainly not just in order to improve their minds.

I will be accused of caricaturing the true picture, which is much more diverse, by reducing it to the two extremes, but the direct comparison of London Met and Oxford is justified by some striking data reported by the Open Democracy blog:

In 2010, Oxford was at the top and London Metropolitan at the bottom of the League Tables for academic achievement. This was reversed in the table recording the percentage of undergraduates coming from poorer backgrounds: London Met, top; Oxford, bottom.

Besides, as Martha Nussbaum puts it, in a book called *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, those whom she calls 'educators for economic growth' will especially not want any study of history 'that focuses on injustices of class, caste, gender, and ethno-religious membership, because this will prompt critical thinking about the present.'³

3

This brings us directly to the crucial question of what education is for, and a different kind of answer, where we find that the disparagement of subjects like history is nothing new, nor is it a Tory monopoly. There is the example of the then Labour Education Secretary Charles Clarke who caused a rumpus in 2003 when he rubbished classics as a worthwhile subject, because 'the medieval concept of a community of scholars seeking truth', he said, could no longer be seen as a justification for the investment of money by the state, and in contemporary society 'universities exist to enable the... economy and society to deal with the challenges posed by the increasingly rapid process of global

³ Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, e-book edition (no page references)

change'.⁴ This is exactly what Nussbaum calls education for economic growth, as opposed to education for democracy. Or as Terry Eagleton put it, speaking to a protest meeting at the LSE in January, which you can see in *Chronicle of Protest*, 'There are two incompatible and contradictory versions of education which are now fighting it out: the right wing version is education for the economy, the left wing version is education for society.'

A columnist reporting the spat in 2003 saw it as throwing up a series of fundamental questions:⁵

'What are universities for? Is their purpose to turn out students who are fit for jobs in the global marketplace? Or is it to educate the next generation to think for themselves? Moreover, should the state fund all courses equally? Or are some courses - for example, engineering - more useful to the economy and thus worthy of higher subsidies than classics and medieval history?' (Lucy Hodges, *op.cit.*)

Nearly a decade later the same questions are forced on us again. The main difference between then and now is that back then the Minister's main critics were Vice Chancellors. The only proper view of higher education, said one,

'is to study and disseminate knowledge for its own sake. One of Charles Clarke's arguments is that university education needs to be relevant to modern society, but universities are all about helping us to decide what is relevant and what not.'

Said another:

'You want to teach people to be sceptical. A questioning and sceptical turn of mind is extremely valuable, and a study of classics is a perfectly good way to achieve this.'

Furthermore, universities, he said, are about creating and transforming knowledge, and it is very difficult to predict ahead of time which knowledge is going to be economically useful. A third declared himself opposed to the notion that some subjects are more useful than others, noting that companies want to hire graduates with degrees in philosophy or English because they can be innovative and imaginative, and they're good at getting on with others. All these arguments, and others, are valid to a greater or lesser extent, but the Vice Chancellors have mostly abandoned them.

To some extent—but this is not to excuse them—they weren't given a chance, because of the sleight of hand performed by the Coalition in using the Comprehensive Spending Review to impose swingeing cuts on the teaching grant, and then announce a massive increase in fees, to be funded by a graduate tax, to compensate. These cuts would fall principally in the arts and humanities, leaving a protected group of core subjects comprised by science, medicine and technology. All that this demonstrates is a highly tendentious notion of economic value, tacitly designed to serve the interests mainly of the big corporations, which looks pretty much like it's based on counting the disciplines that generate the largest numbers of patents—an attitude which penalises the humanities, where achievement cannot be quantified so readily. As Nussbaum puts it, 'The economic growth culture has a fondness for standardised tests, and an impatience with pedagogy and content that are not easily assessed in this way.'

⁴ Lucy Hodges, *The Independent*, 29 May 2003, www.independent.co.uk/news/education/higher/youre-wrong-mr-clarke-539252.html

⁵ *Ibid.* for all quotes in this paragraph.

Not that I wish to defend the arts and humanities on economic grounds. The proper argument begins for me with the first words spoken to the camera by the first person I interviewed at the Turner Prize Teach-In on my first sortie to film what became *Chronicle of Protest*. The speaker was a student at one of the London art colleges. 'There are various financial reasons why I don't think they should cut the arts,' he said, 'however, I don't think the financial reasons are the justification for saving the arts.' In other words, the arts do bring economic benefits, but these are not their *raison d'être*, which is not just the sheer delight they give, but the succour of imagination, emotional intelligence and empathy. Crucially, these capacities are both personal and social at the same time, indeed they bring individual and collective together, in a space where the individual is enriched because the collective listens, while the collective is enriched by the voices of numerous individuals and groups, and comes to understand things in vital new ways.

Government policy not only stands against all this, but it's incoherent, badly thought out, and riven with contradictions which are now backfiring. Indeed in the last few days while I've been writing this, there have been leaks and reports about measures which tinker at the edges and get quickly withdrawn. For one thing, the new system is misconceived financially. While students will be lumbered with a prospective 9% additional marginal income tax (above a certain level), the Treasury is faced with a funding black hole, because with the level of fees, mostly at the top of the bracket, that the universities have now set, it's going to cost more than they bargained for. To make the figures work, it is suggested, there will have to be a further cut—in university places. This gives the lie to the idea that education can be turned into a free market, which is wholly fallacious. It can hardly be free if both the price and the numbers are controlled. And another thing: how far can it be a free market if the prospective student has little real possibility to shop around, and is faced with nominal choices which in reality are unattainable?

Another difficulty. The 'narrative', as current lingo calls it, about the relation between fees, funding, taxation and debt is hopelessly confused. Fees are supposed to reflect the costs of delivery, which are advanced by the state and repaid by the student in later life through taxation. The level of repayment is supposed to be calculated according to egalitarian principles but it doesn't look that way. Above all, it doesn't look like taxation but debt. 'When is a debt not a debt?' you might ask. It seems to depend on who owes it to whom, but you can always try calling it a graduate tax. As Rafael Behr put it in *The Guardian* late last year, debt is 'a curse and a blight, except when incurred by students to pay university tuition fees, in which context it is an opportunity and an engine of social mobility'.⁶

Students resent this enormously. In another sequence in *Chronicle of Protest*, one of them protests that they're being 'roped in to paying as much as nine grand a year for an education that the government isn't even going to be funding any more... it turns us into customers rather than students who are here to learn and gain an education'. They're being sold 'the "student experience" the same way that people are sold the luxury cruise liner experience or the 3D cinema experience... it's becoming more customer-based, more profit-based, more capitalist-based, than it is about growing and expanding your mind'. True, these are the words of one of the activists, and the majority of students are less exercised by it all, but this is nonetheless a condition that generates precisely the alienation of the majority. The media epithet for it was 'apathy', but it's clearly giving way to a new politicisation

⁶ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/dec/26/buzz-words-of-2010-explained>

The dilemma for the ruling order, says Eagleton, is that as long as it wants its skills, its professional qualifications, and its ruling ideas, it has to allow places to exist where young people can do the kinds of thing you do at university, where students talk and learn from each other and think about ideas, and in certain political climates this is almost bound to result in a certain kind of militancy. The humanities play a particular role in this dilemma precisely because they foster critical distance and perspective, argument and analysis, or in short, not just intellectual discipline but also imagination.

This dilemma also has a hidden aspect, which concerns the form of provision, because education is not a regular kind of commodity, to be consumed like a bar of chocolate or bound to break down like a car, or even like a book, saleable on the second-hand market, because it isn't an object at all but a process, which is affected by the amount and quality of attention you get and give. The dialogue between 'teaching and learning' is fluid and always provisional, and the work of the teacher is like that of doctor or nurse, where quality of attention matters more than quantity. To ignore this and treat the student bureaucratically, according to the managerialist schemes which originate with Thatcher's 'reform' of higher education in the 1980s—this is already a form of systemic violence which breaches the very principles of pedagogy. Attempting on top of this to marketise something that is not a regular commodity represents a final abdication of social and political responsibility in favour of exclusively economic criteria. But it cannot possibly improve provision. More likely, as a letter-writer in *The Guardian* suggests, 'Private providers will be able to pick and choose what is popular and cheap to run. There is no incentive for the private sector to provide courses that carry heavy overheads, and the likelihood is that this will fall to existing universities, which will face huge costs to maintain provision.'⁷

The implication is clear: to hand education over to the profit motive is a perversion of education, which to fulfil its own nature needs to be free and disinterested.

4

A government married to savage unreconstructed neoliberalism is intent on a brutal regime of pecuniary shock therapy for the wholesale reconstruction of the higher education system, using the myths of marketisation for cover. The universities must be forced to cut out whatever is marginal to the aim of supplying the economy with an obedient and technically proficient workforce. The ability to think and argue for oneself, suggests Nussbaum, is seen as dispensable, indeed the student's freedom of mind is dangerous.

The threat posed by the instrumentalist and utilitarian view of education, which is not a local or merely recent growth but international and long-standing, has been keenly felt within the academic community, occasioning a series of books addressed to the wider public with titles like *The Lost Soul of Higher Education* (Ellen Schrecker) and *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given up on the Meaning of Life* (Anthony Kronman). According to Nussbaum, another of these authors, education systems all over the world are undergoing a dangerous shift towards economic instrumentalism and away from the liberal arts, which are seen by policy-makers as useless frills, to be discarded in order to stay competitive in the global market. Nussbaum argues for the function of the university, and the humanities in particular, in preparing the student for democratic citizenship, because

⁷ Letters: Profiting from university cuts | Education | *The Guardian* www.guardian.co.uk/education/2011/apr/20/profitting-from-university-cuts

democracy, in order to function properly, makes demands on its citizens to weigh the evidence and balance the arguments for themselves, not simply defer to authority or prejudice or fashion. If they don't, they are all too easily swayed and duped by the mere appearance of democracy, manipulated by the shadowy powers who pull the strings of puppet politicians.

If we admit that universities are not for everyone—but should be accessible to everyone who can benefit from them—nevertheless they are needed by society as a whole as bastions of critical thinking. To the ideologues of economic growth, however, the promotion of critical thinking is anathema. What they want is useful, docile, technically trained cadres with what the jargon calls 'transferable skills' suited to short-term profit-making. The humanities are an irritant precisely to the degree that they cultivate the student's critical freedom, their imagination and capacity to think independently, about society and human relations and their own social role, to empathise with the suffering of others and to question the structures that entail such oppression—for all this is not only awkward but positively dangerous. Educators for economic growth, says Nussbaum, 'will do more than ignore the arts. They will fear them. For a cultivated and developed sympathy is a particularly dangerous enemy of obtuseness, and moral obtuseness is necessary to carry out programs of economic development that ignore inequality.'

This is especially sensitive when it comes to education for the kind of mediatised economy we now enjoy—or suffer—which requires large armies of cultural workers equipped with new combinations of technical skills, cultural nous and aesthetic judgement across the multimedia multitasking domain of cultural production in the digital age. But again, this isn't exactly a new problem. On the contrary, it explains the long-standing hostility of the mainstream media to the kind of critical theorised practice pursued in university education in fields like media and cultural studies, film and journalism; especially the tabloid hacks who persist in talking about 'Mickey Mouse' degrees which they accuse of dumbing-down, when it is they themselves, of course, who are the cartoon characters and down-dumbers of contemporary culture.

The popularity of these courses, which will likely survive more easily than history or philosophy, is undoubtedly due to widespread and naïve aspirations to join the circus, but their social impact is much broader. Yes, they provide the media industry with scribes and hacks, but they also, for example, produce knowledgeable recruits to the public sector as curators—a group whose livelihood is particularly threatened by cuts in the arts—and prepare new generations of school teachers to engage with the cultural predilections of their pupils growing up in the new media ecology—an ecology that encourages the small and social media which belong to the parallel public sphere of the internet. In the process, they encourage the same qualities of the humanities that Nussbaum finds so crucial in the confrontation with the instrumentalism and alienation of capitalist globalization: the capacity to see the other not as an object but as a sentient human being and to empathise; to think critically about narrative imagination, the stories we are constantly being told, the way a narrative is assembled from fragments of facts and evidence; to transcend local loyalties, and awaken to the complexity of the world we live in, the global interdependency which none of us stands outside, because 'the global economy has tied all of us to distant lives'.

Critical education like this depends on properly deconstructing the mediatised society of the spectacle which the purveyors of the mainstream are intent on sustaining. It inevitably acquires an ideologically subversive edge, which happily tampers with youthful predilections for escapism and

fantasy, challenging prejudices and received assumptions, and mobilising emotional as well as discursive intelligence. But this is only what all good education has always done, as long as isn't regimented, controlled, censored, subject to arbitrary dictat, or required to deliver marketable outputs of a quantifiable nature.

What we're seeing, Eagleton warned at the protest meeting, is the end of the humanities as critique, 'and the final integration of higher education into the priorities of the system'. What we have to assert against that, he concluded, 'is the value of education for society, the value of education for community, for personal self-development, and that idea which capitalism finds it impossible to wrap its mind around, education simply as a value in itself.'

Trying to do this under the new dispensation is going to be a challenge. I wish you all good luck!