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## **Hewers of Wood and Drawers of Water: English Subaltern Education from the Charity Schools to the Neoliberal Meritocracy of Widening Participation**

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## **CSP ARTICLE 2339**

### **Hewers of Wood and Drawers of Water: English Subaltern Education from the Charity Schools to the Neoliberal Meritocracy of Widening Participation**

#### **Abstract**

British educational ideas and policies towards working-class and minority youth show continuous preoccupations with social status and preparation for labour. In examining this, we link educational discourses and practices in England from the Charity Schools to the contemporary higher education policy Widening Participation (WP). We argue that WP is heir to successive educational programmes that explicitly fit poor and marginalised youth to labour and, contrary to its asserted aims, legitimates social and economic hierarchies. Using major government reports, promotional narratives and data on university expansion and tuition fees, we argue that the ‘disadvantaged student’ in WP is a currency for higher education institutions and student debt is the price of a ticket to ‘success’ within an imagined neoliberal meritocracy. The novelty is that whereas in the past, the costs of subaltern education were covered by philanthropy, today’s ‘disadvantaged students’ indebt themselves to maintain their positions in society.

**Keywords:** Higher education, Charity schools, Social class, Widening Participation, Inequality

‘In education, as in everything else, free competition is the rule, and as usual the wealthy derive all the advantages from this arrangement.’  
Friedrich Engels (1958: 124)

#### **Introduction**

Engels’ observations of the social conditions of mid-nineteenth century English factory workers rarely touches on education. This is because there was so little of it for youth whose only future was manual labour. Despite laws for compulsory schooling of child workers, ‘the letter of the law was followed, but children learnt nothing’ (Engels, 1958: 195). Almost two centuries later, a state managed competitive market system still prevails at all levels of English education and despite current government claims to be addressing economic inequalities, the children of the wealthy still receive most of its advantages. Our article traces British educational ideas and policies towards working-class and, later, ethnic minority children from the industrial era charity schools to the current Widening Participation (WP) policy in higher education. We argue that education has remained a means to reinforce class and status hierarchies in England and WP plays a key role in it today.

#### **Hewers of Wood and Drawers of Water**

In his exposé of the short, sickly, and unhappy lives of English working people, Engels notes that the middle classes had little interest in the educational or any other parts of the lives of workers beyond their work. Capitalist production at the time was supported by laws and the fear of starvation to compel obedience to factory discipline. However, this did not rule out a modicum of education, for without it there would have been little to separate child labour from the enslavement of Africans that Britain had reluctantly banned in its colonies. Hence, a reform movement in the 19th century for all English children to be exposed to formal schooling eventually succeeded, but principally because it provided the children with skills for productivity in the workplace (Moos, 2021: 76). A variety of schools emerged, but these were institutions predicated almost exclusively on class. Ranging from the misleadingly named ‘public schools’ which consisted of private boarding institutions for the children of the wealthy to workhouse, industrial and ragged schools for children of paupers, there was virtually no mixing of classes in the different kinds of schools in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain (Smelser, 1991: 45-6). Schools for pauper children were in effect working schools with only brief periods devoted to learning to read (Jones, 1964: 155, 160).

Many schools in Engels’ era and earlier were run by charities doing Christian and philanthropic work to ameliorate the most destructive aspects of industrialisation on the health and wellbeing of child workers. These charity schools were satirised in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century by Bernard Mandeville (1989: 292-293) in an essay ostensibly attacking them because they undermined British social order:

It is impossible that a society can long subsist and suffer many of its members to live in idleness and enjoy all the ease and pleasure they can invent, without having at the same time great multitudes of people that to make good this defect, will condescend to be quite the reverse, and will by use and patience inure their bodies to work...

In other words, when a privileged elite are relieved of manual work, there must be others willing to do the arduous and dangerous tasks needed to preserve the luxurious lifestyles of the rich. As he put it, ‘the surest wealth consists in a multitude of Laborious Poor,’ (Mandeville, 1989: 294). According to Mandeville, if youth earmarked for such work are educated, there will be little motivation for them to do it, and this will be disastrous for a society predicated upon social class divides. Indeed, one important view was that education could disrupt class hierarchies by inculcating a desire to rebel and abandon much needed manual labour. This view was common in Tory and High Anglican circles in Mandeville’s time and into the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Smelser, 1991: 50-1).

So indispensable were ill-informed people that a wise legislature would ‘cultivate a Breed’ (Mandeville, 1989:293) that could work hard and subsist on scarce provisions. However, the existence of such schools did not necessarily contradict this goal. In her history of the charity school movement, M.G. Jones (1964: 5) states that charity schools came into existence in large part ‘to *condition* the children for their primary duty in life as hewers of wood and drawers of water.’ Being heavily influenced by the clergy, the emerging bourgeois class, and eighteenth-century Puritans, these schools aimed to ameliorate the worst of the visible misery created by industrial capitalism, while at the same time legitimating it by displays of philanthropy.

However, Mandeville and the clergy may have over-estimated the potential of education to foment rebellion, especially considering how commensurate schooling could be to work, and how different the schooling of child workers was from that for the children of the rich. Types of higher learning, such as instruction in Latin and the memorisation of mathematical and theological formulas were forms of distinction through which those who had absorbed such knowledge could ‘esteem themselves infinitely above those who were wholly ignorant of them,’ (Mandeville, 1989: 295) making labour, while socially necessary, a contemptuously inferior activity. At the same time, the charity schools ‘did not exist to develop...intellectual powers nor steer [pupils] towards equality of opportunity’ (Jones, 1964: 74).

Before, during and after the Industrial Revolution, Britain had practically ‘cultivated a Breed’ devoted to continuous, strenuous, unhealthy, and life-shortening labour in which children played a significant role. Anywhere between 10 and 50 percent of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century industrial workers in mines and mills were children, often starting work between the ages of eight and eleven (Cunningham, 2000: 412). Engels (1958:226) gives examples of places where half the children never had a ‘square meal’ to eat, and often went without food from eight in the morning until seven at night. Industrialists and churches often provided education for these children at night, but Engels (1958: 125) notes that children frequently fell asleep in these ‘evening institutes’ which, when the children were awake inculcated ‘at as early an age as possible a narrow sectarianism and a fanatical bigotry.’

When formal schooling was made compulsory after the 1870 Education Act, it was layered onto existing English notions of class that constituted statuses as fixed (Smelser, 1991: 45). Indeed, formal education itself, which was accessed sporadically and gradually for working children, was a means of inculcating a specific type of knowledge functional to industrial labour. In doing so, it reinforced patriarchal gender roles with working girls

expected to combine schooling with paid work, unpaid domestic work, and surrogate motherhood for younger siblings (Horn, 1988). By contrast, schooling for the (mostly male) children of the wealthy taught a classical pedagogy in which being ‘learned’ was defined as mastering scientific, mathematical, or philosophical knowledge. Hence the knowledge and capability of *doing* was relegated behind a command of specific facts and doctrines, as was knowledge of arts, medicine, and the natural world associated with folk culture and women. This meant that working-class children could never become truly ‘learned’ through formal education, and even when they were exposed to it, as many commentators from Engels onwards observed, it was practically useless to them. Far from being an opportunity, formal education wasted time and stripped poor families of income, incurring hunger, deprivation, and suffering (Thane, 1984: 892-3).

### **Thick as Two Short Planks**

Higher education which offered the possibility of accessing knowledge that would expand the range of knowledge to which working-class, and later migrant, children were exposed was far beyond their reach until the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Until recently, English working-class people have not been considered or considered themselves suitable for university. In Willis’ (1977) ethnography of ‘the lads’ in a ‘working-class school’ in the 1970s, white male pupils saw themselves as having futures exclusively in manual labour. Teachers were fatalistic regarding ‘the lads’, who in turn were equally fatalistic about their own destinies. Willis observed that teachers had a ‘strongly-held conservative ethic concerning the organic, harmonious society.’ These educators sometimes invoked the Biblical dictum used extensively in educational discussions in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that ‘there must be hewers of wood and drawers of water’ (Willis, 1977: 69). Consequently, manual jobs would always go to working-class children, many of whom were in teachers’ estimations ‘thick as two short planks’. Illustrating the ongoing nature of these prejudices, environmentalist and farmer James Rebanks’ (2016:xi) commented on the similar fatalism of rural Cumbria schoolteachers and pupils in the 1980s:

We were basically sorted aged twelve between those deemed intelligent (who were sent to a “grammar school”) and those of us that weren’t (who stayed at the “comprehensive”). .... We were firmly set, like our fathers and grandfathers, mothers and grandmothers before us, on being what we were, and had always been.

Similarly, ‘having aspirations wasn’t normal,’ global political analyst Fiona Hill (2021: 17) says of her schooldays in the 1970s and 80s, ‘...it just seemed pointless when you were

unlikely to escape poverty or ever leave County Durham.’ The mutually constricted sense of possibilities reinforced longstanding English ideas of class as impermeable.

The internalisation of these restrictions continues to be gendered. It intersects with class and is richly illustrated in studies of the educational experiences of girls in poor communities. Of the working-class girls, she interviewed from coalfield villages, Thompson (2022: 186) finds that ‘even those who went to grammar school had few memories of being encouraged to stay on beyond the end of compulsory education.’ In an earlier study of working-class girls’ educational aspirations, Evans (2009: 349) mentions that even the most academically successful working-class girl in her sample of students in a deprived London borough was not encouraged to apply to Oxbridge. Further, these girls perceived elite institutions as beyond them. This was understandable given the patriarchal and class-based culture at such universities, and perhaps also because of the longstanding cultural belief that education was less important for girls (Horn, 1988:72).

Because Britain was a major colonising power, race further intersects with gender and class in normative conceptions of the world as hierarchically organised into groups suited for different educational pathways. For example, school curricula in the 1960s and 1970s inculcated representations of British cultural and moral superiority (Dorling and Tomlinson, 2019: 31-33) which assumed that ‘New Commonwealth’ children conformed to derogatory colonial imagery. Consequently, some urban educational authorities used specific techniques to consign black children to subaltern destinies. Children of Caribbean heritage were transferred to educationally subnormal schools at vastly higher rates than white children because they were judged by urban school psychologists to be of low intelligence. Bernard Coard’s (1971) report on this phenomenon showed that such transfers were almost always one-way, and in the schools for the subnormal, black children were prepared for low skilled jobs. This was based on a premise shared by many psychologists and educationalists that black children were constitutionally of low intelligence. Coard argued that ethnocentric IQ testing and prejudiced attitudes of the teachers – not least of which was a common disinterest in Caribbean culture - helped produce the low test scores of black children that confirmed their suitability for less demanding jobs.

Not only were immigrant schoolchildren of the 1960s more likely to be designated as intellectually inferior, but they were seen in a series of government policy documents such as the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act and the 1965 Home Office White Paper as stoking legitimate fears among the white population that could lead to racist violence. That is, the cause of racist violence against black people, was black people themselves, symbolised above

all by the presence of black schoolchildren (Carby, 1982: 183-4) within what Coard (1971:14) prophetically called a ‘hostile environment.’ A situation emblematic of this environment was noted in artist and writer Akala’s (2018: 67-70) recent memoir in which he, as a mixed-race Afro-Caribbean child in the last year of infant school in the 1990s, was placed in a ‘special needs’ class. This is despite him being an avid reader and enthusiastic about his studies. Only after his white mother’s intervention, was he returned to the classroom in which he had been previously.

As black children’s culture-based knowledge and Creole dialect were either ignored or inferiorised in the English classroom, Coard (1971:30) argued that they regarded themselves as fit only for menial labour and ‘abandon all intellectual and career goals.’ The pattern of teachers adopting low expectations of black and poor white children persisted in the 1980s in urban areas of high deprivation. In his influential report on Hackney, Paul Harrison (1983: 277-8) declared that education binds inner city children to their destiny. ‘The school system,’ he tells us ‘obligingly certificates failure, in a way that largely determines the subsequent career and class of the victim. Instead of compensating for disadvantage, British education reinforces it and perpetuates it.’

While the overt racism of the school administrations of the past has diminished, echoes of Coard’s findings can be found in contemporary government reports on school exclusions. During the academic year 2019/2020 Black Caribbean pupils were two and a half times more likely to be excluded from school than white British students (Gov.UK, 2021a). Black Caribbean girls were permanently excluded from school at a rate double that of White British girls (Agenda, 2021), and girls from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities were permanently excluded at more than four times higher the rate of White British girls. Additionally, children from the economically poorest families in England have rates of exclusion up to four times higher than average (Gov.UK, 2021b). Some black girls have even been penalised for coming to school with the ‘wrong hair style’. Being excluded from school creates a situation in which the young person is deemed unfit both for education, and hence work which requires a satisfactory school record.

The positioning of minority and working-class pupils in adverse educational situations is partly a product of scientific ideas on race, gender and class differences in aptitude that were central to the civilising mission of British colonialism (Elkins 2005:5). The concept of innate intelligence was a generally accepted fact among intellectuals and policy makers whose imperial activities were justified by cultural evolutionism, and which had been heavily influenced by eugenicists such as Francis Galton, Julian Huxley and Sir Cyril Burt (Dorling

and Tomlinson, 2019: 96-97). So strong was the notion of biologically rooted social status that it was a key feature of domestic debates leading up to the Education Act of 1944, which created the 'Eleven Plus' examinations overseen by local authorities. Test results informed the practice of separating children whose scores destined them for vocationally oriented secondary modern schools from those who would enter more academically demanding grammar schools with fluid access to universities and onto elite occupations and professions. Many local education authorities also rejected girls for grammar schools in favour of boys with lower test scores through an informal quota system in part because these results contradicted the widely assumed natural hierarchies in intelligence (Chitty, 2009: 86). Secondary modern schools often put special emphases on domestic science for girls to confirm normative gender expectations (Thompson, 2022: 183).

### **Widening Participation to Universities**

Built on a history of class, gender and race based educational policy and practice, WP could be said to have begun in the 1960s. Following the government commissioned report of the Committee of Higher Education chaired by Lord Robbins in 1963, university education was to be opened to more of the populace, especially women and social groups that were historically excluded, and this was to be centrally funded. Robbins expressed optimism about the vast potential of the population to benefit from higher education. Robbins (1963: 54) departed slightly from the bigoted biological determinism that informed mid-20<sup>th</sup> century educational thinking, stating that, 'the numbers who are capable of benefiting from higher education are a function *not only of heredity* but also of a host of other influences varying with standards of educational provision, family incomes and attitudes and the education received by previous generations' (Our Emphasis).

Expansion resulted in the founding of the recommended new universities and polytechnic training colleges. While there was clearly a practical dimension to this in training professionals for post-war rebuilding, Robbins (1963: 7) also emphasized promoting 'the powers of the mind' and producing 'not mere specialists but rather cultivated men and women.' These desires could be more readily realised since tuition fees for 'home' students had been abolished in the Education Act of 1962. Robbins rejected student loans because of their deterrent effect and recommended expanded government funded university education along with means tested maintenance grants. Thereafter, university participation extended to include many from working-class backgrounds, the majority of which became the first in their families to attend university, including large numbers of women (Holmwood, 2018: 41-



42). Despite this shift in student demographics, inequalities persisted, in part because race and ethnicity were absent from university expansion discourse. Furthermore, when the ‘citizenship acts’ that accompanied the dismantling of the British Empire came into effect, many people already living in Britain who wanted to study were then required to pay international fees (Holmwood, 2018: 43).

However, the term ‘Widening Participation’ did not enter the higher education policy arena until 1997 with the Dearing Report (1997: 101) dedicating an entire chapter to it. Although seemingly positioning itself as the ‘access’ and ‘learning’ report, the main purpose of Dearing was to offer a ‘solution to higher education’s funding crisis’ (Scott, 1998: 4) created by neoliberal policymaking of the 1980's and 90's, which emphasised growth, competition, and accountability, (Collini, 2017: 1); concepts which have continued to direct educational institutions and transcend party politics.

Consequently, tuition fees for home students were reintroduced in 1998 with dreams of a meritocratic society being championed in Tony Blair’s (2001) education speech:

We believe there is no greater ambition for Britain than to see a steadily rising proportion gain the huge benefits of a university education as school standards rise, meeting our goal of 50% of young adults progressing to higher education by 2010.

This announcement propelled the WP strategy set out in Dearing and expedited the marketisation of higher education in England. However, in the same year, Michael Young (2001), who coined the term *meritocracy* in his 1958 satire, writing in *The Guardian*, asked Blair to refrain from using the term. Young had initially shown how ideas of merit can enhance social and economic inequalities, and in an introduction to a later edition of *Rise of the Meritocracy*, he detailed how the ‘unironic deployment’ of the concept had exacerbated social stratification (Young, 2008). In 2006 fees in England were raised from £1000 to £3000 per year, and by 2010, the year of the next major review of higher education, Blair’s participation rate target had been met, with 45% of people aged 18 to 30 entering an HEI (Higher Education Institution). The subsequent Browne Report (2010) focused on funding, accountability, competitiveness, and growth advanced by Dearing, but went further by suggesting that the 2006 fee increase was insufficient to cover the expansion. As the report argued, ‘HEIs must persuade students that they should ‘pay more’ in order to ‘get more’. The money will follow the student (Browne, 2010: 4)’. To help ‘persuade’ students that they should invest more in higher education, Browne (2010: 26) produced a key narrative for the future landscape of higher education policy in England: ‘Higher education provides a major opportunity for creating social mobility’.

Underpinning the investment and mobility narrative, in 2012, following Browne's recommendations, tuition fees rose to £9000 per year. In the same year, a progress report on social mobility and child poverty called *University Challenge: How Higher Education Can Advance Social Mobility*, asserted that higher education was the 'leveller of opportunity' and championed WP as a pathway to social mobility by former Labour minister Alan Milburn (2012: 12). The report documented falling student numbers following the increase in tuition fees, noting a 'fear of debt' that could be counteracted with a 'sustained communication campaign' (Milburn, 2012: 7).

Correlating higher education with social mobility allowed slogans of 'opportunity' and 'aspiration' to be promoted to WP target audiences, in turn enabling English universities to meet the demands of the marketized model that was created for them through the tuition fees system. Increasing student numbers became a main financial objective as institutions competed for investors. To meet the objective, extending university entry to applicants called 'disadvantaged students' through WP became a key revenue stream.

The social mobility narrative and the aim of recruiting higher numbers of 'disadvantaged students', however, required greater government control. In 2016, the White Paper *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility & Student Choice* (DBIS, 2016) announced the formation of the new regulator of higher education in England, the Office for Students (OfS), which was established following the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. McCaig (2018: 120) highlights the implications arising from the birth of the OfS:

The shift from a system lightly regulated by a funding council acting at arms length from government to a system in which both funding and regulatory control (including of quality assurance) exist within a single body - the OfS - can be seen as an act of centralisation that threatens its declared *raison d'être* of fostering institutional autonomy and academic freedom (McCaig, 2018: 120).

Furthermore, through its binding of Access and Participation Plans (APP) with regulatory registration, the OfS enshrined a sustained commitment to WP. Within the APP, which institutions submit to the OfS for approval, the 'provider' must set out how it aims to increase *Access, Success and Progression* for disadvantaged students; only institutions with an approved APP are allowed to charge maximum tuition fees (Office for Students, 2020). Although the OfS suggests many overlapping and ambiguous definitions of a 'disadvantaged student', a general conception of disadvantage among policy makers considers '...the

likelihood of HE participation based on residential location, and, to a lesser extent, eligibility for free school meals' (Augar Review, 2019: 77).

Because rapid tuition fee increases coincided with mass enrolments of 'disadvantaged students,' there was a need for legitimisation. This came through universities investing in marketing campaigns advertising social mobility and employability as achievable through university enrolment. Messaging was particularly necessary at non-elite institutions now that formerly excluded students from families on relatively low incomes were being required to pay steep fees. A *Guardian* investigation found that leading spenders on marketing were three post-1992 universities outlaying between £1.9m to £3.4m for 2017-18 (Hall and Weale, 2019). Diverting funds to entice students to enrol is essential for institutions that cannot rest on their academic reputations or accumulated wealth. Without a promise of social mobility, which is superfluous for elite institutions, traditionally antagonistic attitudes towards education might have prevailed among 'disadvantaged students', and predatory inclusion of formally disenfranchised groups would have been easily exposed.

Constructing narratives about future success meant moulding student experiences to fit them. Consequently, as the 2019 Augar Review noted, universities were lowering entry requirements, giving more unconditional offers, and inflating average marks to stimulate acceptances and retention. Inflation of marks has continued rapidly with 21% of all undergraduate degrees awarded First Class Honours in 2014/15 jumping to 35% in 2020/21 (HESA, 2022: Table 26).

Although the social mobility narrative has coincided with rising tuition fees, as far back as the 1980s, social mobility had openly been a concern of political elites seeking to alter Britain's image as hidebound and class-ridden, and neoliberal meritocracy has underpinned much political rhetoric since (Littler, 2018: 106). By encouraging students to think in terms of individual success, attainable through more generous marking and career driven education, WP has become a symbol of meritocracy. The policy is situated within the Uni Connect Programme, an initiative of the OfS, which works through regional hubs to promote higher education to school age children. These hubs often sport names that intimate meritocracy such as Hello Future and Aspire Higher.

Reminiscent of 19<sup>th</sup> century appeals to self-improvement, but leavened with contemporary platitudes, the official websites of these regional hubs are awash with rhetoric depicting education as part of an *individual* pursuit of success. The hubs provide information for young people, teachers, parents, and carers, and they organise events with the aim of directing more young people onto further and higher education. The theme of *raising*

*aspirations* is central to the work of the OfS Uni Connect Programme and at the heart of the partnership approach of WP. Promotional material supplied to teachers includes overtures such as:

Let's work together to raise your student's aspirations, promote their interest in higher education, and help them achieve their life ambitions (Make Happen, 2022).

Based on a partnership between further and higher education 'providers', schools, teachers, parents and carers, WP has become both an industry and a culture. But the success it promises is more about labour than the pursuit of academic knowledge, reflecting ideas set out in Dearing's (1997: 2) vision 'to progress further and faster in the creation of such a society to sustain a competitive economy.' This industry presupposes a society wherein meritocratic ideals of transactional aspiration can directly transport 'disadvantaged students' to destinations of economic success.

Paradoxically, while WP has been gathering momentum, supposed destinations of social mobility seem to be less probable for the aspirational 'disadvantaged student'. Political discourses of meritocracy coincide with exposés of Britain's manifold inequalities. Reporting in 2018, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty (United Nations, 2018) placed Britain as one of the most unequal countries in the western world. The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2015) warned that Britain is at risk from becoming a permanently divided nation and the Social Commission (2016: iii) reported that Britain has a 'social mobility problem' entrenched by 'an unfair education system, a two-tier labour market, an imbalanced economy and an unaffordable housing market.' In 2017 the Social Mobility Commission (2017: iii) reported on place-based divides that sit alongside other factors such as class, income, gender, and race, to position Britain as being a 'deeply divided nation,' and by 2018/19 it concluded that 'social mobility has stagnated over the last four years at virtually all stages from birth to work' (Social Mobility Commission, 2019: v). By 2021 the same commission (Social Mobility Commission, 2021: vii) estimated that 4.3 million children, nearly one in three, lived in poverty in the UK. In 2022, the Health Foundation (2022a) found that the gap between the healthy life expectancy of men and women living in the most and least deprived areas was almost a decade. The Marmot Review for the Health Foundation observed that diminished funding for public education was linked to health inequalities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, reporting that spending on sixth form education declined by 23 percent over the decade from 2009 to 2019.

Additionally, the loss of funding had continuing adverse effects on the life chances of pupils in deprived areas (The Heath Foundation, 2022b: 20-22).

### **Learning to Labour through Precarity and Debt**

Increased higher education participation has also been associated with national economic security. Contending that ‘the economic imperative is, therefore, to resume growth,’ ‘the learning society’ originally advocated by Dearing (1997: 9) is:

a society in which people in all walks of life recognise the need to continue in education and training throughout their working lives and who see learning as enhancing the quality of life throughout all its stages.

In instrumentalising education in this way, Dearing justified the ‘contribution’ of fees by positioning HEIs as dedicated to supplying the labour force for permanent economic growth with students as major beneficiaries of their investment. With fees rising to £9000, post-Browne, this further entrenched a concept of ‘student-as-consumer’ (Bunce, Baird and Jones, 2017) and universities as ‘organisational actors’ (Soysal and Baltaru, 2021), with WP carrying the torch of neoliberal meritocracy.

However, to ensure that ‘disadvantaged students’ are seen to receive tangible benefits from this economic exchange, meritocracy and the fluid social mobility it implies has needed constant narrative adjustment. This is because student debt and precarity have become the price of inclusion in higher education. Many of the student loans taken out are unlikely to ever be repaid in full. Outstanding student loans amounted to over £206 billion in 2023 with forecasts of unpaid student loan debt reaching £460 billion by the mid-2040s (Bolton, 2023: 4). Not only are vast numbers of current English university students indebted, but they are also facing adversities not dissimilar to subaltern pupils of the past. Like Engels’ slumbering child labourers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century learning institutes of Manchester, large numbers of university students in contemporary report impaired sleep, diet and mental health because of financial worries (Save the Student, 2023). Since 77% (2015 figures) of students in the United Kingdom worked part time while studying, this is hardly surprising. In July 2022, a survey by the National Union of Students (NUS) found that one third of students lived on less than £50 a week, and over one in ten are accessing food banks (NUS, 2022). A recent report by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) suggested that homelessness among students and in university towns has been largely ignored by universities and that student homelessness may be significantly under-reported (Hurst, 2022: 44). The evidence of

widespread student precarity adds to anecdotal observations of university teachers like us that many students cannot afford to live on campus or travel to class, lack essential equipment like laptops and work multiple jobs.

The gamble that the gains for ‘disadvantaged students’ in future employment will outweigh these hardships is looking increasingly remote. A 2023 report from the OfS-funded Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO, 2023) entitled *The value of higher education*, reveals a ‘gap in labour market outcomes’ between disadvantaged graduates and their peers, estimating that disadvantaged students earn around 10% less. Despite this class disparity in relation to the economic benefits of higher education, the report also highlights clear economic benefits for disadvantaged students when compared to those that do not go to universities. This perhaps influences other findings from the report, which suggest that ‘graduates from low socioeconomic backgrounds appear to benefit from higher levels of measures linked to wellbeing, such as perceived financial prosperity.’ This is deceptive, however, suggesting that if disadvantaged students *only* compare themselves with other people from disadvantaged backgrounds who do not graduate from university, then they perceive themselves as prosperous. By deflecting attention from the class disparities in graduate earnings an *appearance* of meritocracy and social mobility is created.

This appearance, however, could not be sustained, which is why narrative adjustment was needed. The Augar Report’s (2019: 99) assessment that ‘going to university and achieving social mobility has become something of an unquestioned – although we believe questionable – mantra’, can be seen as a moment that marks a redirection of WP. If acted upon, this would both destabilise the market set in motion by Dearing and enhance class disparities further. Recommendations such as reducing fees, adjusting student loan repayment thresholds and introducing ‘targeted number caps on courses offering poor value for money’ (Augar, 2019: 101) are bolstered with promotion of technical skills training and apprenticeships – so much so, that the *Review of Post-18 Education and Funding* does not even mention the term ‘higher education’ in its title. Following the report, announcements from government ministers echoed the importance of FE (Williamson, 2020), called out the failures of HE to deliver social mobility (Donelan, 2020), and repeated attacks on ‘low quality courses’ (Zahawi, 2021).

In 2021, Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi wrote to the OfS to confirm the appointment of the new Director of Fair Access and Participation, using the opportunity to stipulate what the government expects from the OfS, stating that ‘providers should not be incentivised, nor rewarded, for recruiting disadvantaged students onto courses where too

many students drop out or that do not offer good graduate outcomes.’ (Zahawi, 2021). This aims to penalise universities for recruiting ‘disadvantaged students’ onto courses that could not guarantee desirable employment soon after graduation. To ensure that universities and colleges appear to meet such demands, the OfS (2022a) now threatens tough regulatory action to any institution that fails to meet ‘numerical thresholds which will underpin requirements for minimum acceptable student outcomes.’ In turn, this pressures universities to steer curricula towards the imagined labour market outcomes attainable by their disadvantaged student clientele.

Although beginning as a progressive idea, WP was incorporated into neoliberal policymaking in the Dearing era, and by the time of Augar, had run its course as the social and economic inequalities of British society had exacerbated to such an extent that the narrative of social mobility lost credibility. To salvage a belief in social mobility, and the meritocracy it symbolises, WP now directly emphasises defined labour market outcomes. Government control over universities through the OfS transforms makes universities compete to show government that their client-graduates secure suitable work, which in turn encourages the development of courses laden with instrumental knowledge. A recent report from the House of Lords (2023: 4-7) describes the OfS as ‘an instrument of the Government’s policy agenda’, highlighting that ‘the OfS approach to student outcomes, and particularly its focus on employment outcomes for graduates, is too simplistic and narrow’, suggesting that this will ‘underplay the benefits of courses that are less directly vocational’.

Elite institutions will be minimally affected by concerns over graduate outcomes and the goading of the OfS to move towards presumed labour market relevant content. Having a high proportion of students whose parents will have already afforded up to £50,000 per year for private school fees, the more modest university tuition rates are unlikely to precipitate significant student loan worries in these universities. We also know that despite extensive managerial efforts to fit university pedagogy and research to state mandates, graduates of elite universities persistently achieve more. Baltaru’s (2019: 1193) research shows that the prestige and reputation of a university was the most important factor in graduate employment prospects. Euan Blair, Sir Tony Blair’s multimillionaire son, for example, admitted that despite his degrees in ancient history and international relations from Bristol and Yale respectively being “absolutely useless” for work in finance, he landed a job at Morgan Stanley (Curry, 2022), a feat that would be near impossible for ‘disadvantaged students’.

This all signals a retreat from both Robbins’ ideas that universities should cultivate powers of the mind in all students, and the commodified ‘disadvantaged student’ that was

born from Dearing's Learning Society. It moves us back to the ameliorative and exculpatory functions of education satirised by Mandeville. Marketized higher education, while successful in its aims of widening participation to generate corporation-like institutions whose solvency is precariously dependent on continuous growth of students with loans, has done little to make 'disadvantaged students' advantaged. The introduction of this new 'learning to labour' model, implicit in Augar, is an admission of this. Some universities will join Further Education institutions in training loan-wielding 'hewers of wood and drawers of water,' while elite universities will remain sponsors for the reproduction of the already advantaged who benefit from broader academic pedagogy.

The ongoing government attacks on what is called the 'woke agenda' is likely to strengthen the development of separate pedagogies further. Placing emphasis on a course's 'quality' can be seen as part of a general strategy to redirect education away from liberatory pedagogies such as critical race studies (Crenshaw et al., 1996), that through their ability to challenge power structures and hierarchy threaten to decolonise universities (Bhambra et.al, 2018) and more broadly, educate citizens for democratic participation (Nussbaum, 2012). Furthermore, this politicised control of the content of higher education speaks directly to public debates about the purpose of universities at a time of government concerns about immigration, labour shortages, and Britain's colonial legacies.

## **Conclusion**

One of the main differences between the efforts to include subaltern pupils in education in the industrialising era and in tertiary education today is that in the past there was no claim that schooling would lead to significant social mobility. But given the persistence of gross social and educational inequalities, this is a superficial difference.

With more young people continuing in education, those that do not take out loans risk becoming disadvantaged further through exclusion in a labour market in which employers have a glut of graduates from which to recruit. Shifts in employment options have led to an increase in 'graduate level' jobs, yet these and the 'acceptable minimum student outcomes' are not concretely defined by the OfS, meaning that social mobility, while clearly signalled in policies and university marketing is conveniently vague. Under current policies social mobility can be registered when graduates do not secure their preferred job because universities are readily furnishing undergraduates with inducements to improve their chances by returning to study for a Masters. Not only will this choice be further funded by student loans, but for the purposes of data collection, captured through the Graduate Outcomes



Survey, it will be measured as meeting aims of ‘progression’, which suppose a ‘fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches lives and careers’ (OfS, 2022b: 3).

In effect, ‘disadvantaged students’ are accruing large debts in exchange for promissory notes of success and a desirable job. For students who started their course in 2021/22, the average undergraduate student loan is estimated to be £45,800, with only around 20% of borrowers being forecast to repay the loan in full. Following reforms to the ways in which student loans are repaid, this changes for those starting courses in 2023/24, with the total reducing to £43,400, and the estimated numbers repaying in full rising to 55% (House of Commons Library, 2022). In February 2022, in response to the Augar recommendations, government ministers (Gov UK, 2022) announced changes to the ways in which student loans are to be repaid, with a lower repayment threshold of £25,000 that is extended from 30 to 40 years. This means that the loan and repayment system impose additional taxes on graduates for almost all their working lives, regardless of whether the education received can be linked to social mobility, however defined.

Sociologically, the constantly shifting extension of higher education to working-class and minority students is a modest measure to manage contradictions between narratives of British society as meritocratic and the observed realities of ongoing class, gender, and racial injustices. If WP were to result in collective economic advances of ‘disadvantaged students’, it would undermine the multi-generational privileges that British social order continues to rest upon as Mandeville argued over two centuries ago. Therefore, legitimation is heavily dependent on an individual achievement ideology, and the imagery presented by universities is clearly central to the ameliorative and exculpatory functions of education that Mandeville flagged. If participation is as wide as possible, persistent inequalities and hardships can be depoliticised as matters of differential attainment and individual ‘success stories’ can be broadcast to encourage recruitment, as indeed they are by English universities.

Widening participation to universities *is* the new charity school. Both charity schools and WP masquerade as benevolent exercises of social and economic uplift while legitimating the same ‘disadvantages’ they claim to alleviate.

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