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BOOK REVIEW

Mass higher education and the slow road to freedom

Peter Scott, *Retreat or Resolution? Tackling the Crisis of Mass Higher Education*, Policy Press, 2021

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'Mass higher education is experiencing a "general crisis"', states Peter Scott in his important *Retreat or resolution?* 'Its undoubted achievements in reshaping the individual, society, the economy and culture do not seem to have been properly recognised.' For many people, 'mass access has either produced perverse outcomes or failed to deliver its original promise'.

Scott demonstrates that massification 'stands accused of overwhelmingly favouring the middle classes; entrenching and extending institutional hierarchies; enabling the emergence of corporate universities dominated by a new managerial class; sacrificing critical enquiry and radical thought to cults of "employability" and "impact" policed by "metrics"; or even of "woke' and "cancel" culture' (pp. 4–5). The egalitarian promise, of the society open to talent and the fair redistribution of life opportunities, seems to have failed. As a result, there is no 'compelling narrative, or simple story' about the role of universities in national life (p. 17). Mass higher education has been judged and found wanting by government, by the political left and right, by its own people, and, less clearly, by public opinion. It does not have to be so, states Scott. He is unsure about the ultimate potentials of mass higher education, but sure that it should be public and democratic.

Most books on higher education sit within the national container (Shahjahan & Kezar, 2013), without also imagining higher education and knowledge as a single global space. At first sight this is true of *Retreat or resolution?* Scott's 'general crisis' is framed by higher education in the UK, particularly England, while noting the growing divergences in system organisation, policy and funding between England, Scotland and Wales. In the passages on higher education in North America, Western Europe and East Asia, he sees those regions from inside the UK looking out. Readers will conclude that the identified problems of massification must derive from the history of the UK and its specific higher education policies. This includes the successive system expansions and designs, Thatcher's emptying out of the public good rationale for higher education and the emphasis on solely individual benefits, the tightening hold of Westminster and Whitehall, the 2012 market reforms and the shift from arms-length system steering to tougher institutional regulation, not to mention the resilience of British class

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distinctions dating from the post-Civil War era in the seventeenth century, the steep hierarchy of universities, the rise of non-class identities along with growing economic inequality, and the decline of British pragmatism amid a more ideological and adversarial politics. All are brilliantly summarised in *Retreat or resolution*? But to present the issues as solely national in relevance would be to sell the book short. Its arguments about the ambiguities and dilemmas of mass higher education have a larger worldwide resonance.

Incomplete or failed?

Chapter 1 opens up the discussion of the alleged crisis, asking whether the revolution promised by the great expansion of access to tertiary education, which has now reached 50 per cent in the UK and is higher in many other countries, is still 'incomplete', or has 'failed'.

> The key question is whether mass expansion has tended to consolidate rather than erode social differences, both between the different types of graduates and between graduates and non-graduates, or whether mass higher education retains the potential to promote more democratic access that can challenge these hierarchies? (p. 12)

Chapter 2 is a compelling political, social and cultural history of post second world war Britain and chapters 3–4 summarise the higher education policy history. They are packed with astute observations, required reading for those who want to understand the UK sector.

Chapter 5 presents 'higher education today'. Rather than passing from an elite system to a mass system beginning to approach universality, UK higher education contains all of these historical layers at once (p. 81). It is also both common and private. The emptying out of 'public' is incomplete, given the income contingent loans for tuition, and focuses on fair access and the civic mission of the university. Yet higher education retains much of the 'feel' of an elite system. This is reinforced by the £9250 tuition charge, and the dominance of the Russell Group; and also by the awkward and fundamental fact that learned academic merit (except perhaps at the highest level of originality) is closely correlated with Bourdieu's cultural capital, one of the mechanisms for reproducing class distinctions. On the other side of the coin, the doors have open wider to female students, and black and other ethnic minority students, though the latter are concentrated in lower status universities. Scott summarises the different types of institutions, system governance and its agencies, subject by subject enrolments, noting that most students are engaged in non-STEM subjects, institutional finances, governance and management. There are short sections on teaching and learning, research and the academic profession. Chapter 6 looks beyond the UK—the best passages are those on the USA—and at international education in the UK.

The final chapters draw together the arguments, moving from the social context in chapter 7 to higher education in chapters 7–8 and Scott's own reform programme in chapter 9. The UK now works more in services and less in manufacturing. It is less white and more educated. Graduates are moving down the occupational scales, though jobs are also changing: the notion of a 'graduate job' is fuzzy and claims of graduate 'underemployment' lack foundation. Graduation is also a marker of status and identity; yet amid economic inequality, upward social mobility appears to have slowed and claims about meritocracy seem more hollow than before. Has higher education fostered a more open society, or does it consolidate prior social differences determined by family and wealth?

'The emancipatory potential of a university experience cannot be underestimated at the individual level', states Scott. 'But across wider social groups and in aggregate, participation in higher education appears to reflect, and even consolidate … existing inequalities' (p. 134). The advance of higher education has been both a social leveller and a social divider (p. 149). The 'graduate class' is 'still a middle class from which key sections of the community are excluded' (p. 150).

There is a 'lack of clarity about where higher education sits within the political economy' (p. 181). In some sense, it is still 'public' to almost all of the parties. Yet what does this mean? It is not a universal public service like the NHS in the UK but nor is it part of the private market either. The imagined student consumer market could never work as planned, given that higher education is a one-off good with benefits that take a lifetime to manifest. Is higher education 'an autonomous domain, a part of civil society distinct from state and market'? (p. 180). It seems 'located in an ill-defined (and unpopular?) para-state hinterland' (p. 181). What is the positive vision for mass institutions - islands of academic and scientific excellence, bastions of 'critical inquiry' in an open society, 'beacons of civic and community life, corporations in the knowledge economy, people's universities?' (p. 178).

In social democratic manifestos the long shadow of V.I. Lenin still looms, and Scott's final chapter is headed 'What is to be done?' (other Lenin pamphlet titles, such as 'State and revolution' and even the final 'Better fewer but better', await their corresponding works on higher education). However, Scott's solutions to the crisis of massification, again specific to the UK system, move in the opposite direction to both Lenin and the contemporary English state. He argues for the radical reversal of the tendency to centralisation of higher education in England, with a large role for cities and regional administration, and for policy borrowing from Wales (a tertiary systems approach uniting universities and further education) and Scotland (free tuition and the public role of higher education).

Here the author wants to reassert the public mission and character of the sector in all respects, with less competition between institutions; embedded institutional governance with more representation from staff, students and local authorities; a return to system planning by more arms-length governmental agencies; and an end to governance through metrics such as graduate salaries and research impact measures, which generate 'partial data' because they have been 'designed with specific political agendas in mind' and so are 'not neutral or objective' and are prone to unacknowledged inaccuracies (p. 185).

> At the system level there is an unstable balance between the steering and coordination of a 'public' (in the broadest sense) system, on the one hand, and, on the other, the regulation of a quasi-private system… In England that balance has tilted dangerously but unrealistically towards the latter. As a result most policy instruments, funding regimes and measurement tools like the REF and the TEF operate in a kind of void, with more unplanned consequences and inappropriate uses than clear and consistent aims. (p. 179)

Scott gives no ground to the critics of expansion. He wants to continue the long journey towards universal participation. This would both elevate the overall levels of knowledge and skills and reduce a key problem of the present mass system: the growing immiseration of non-graduates: 'The language of 'elites' and 'the left behind' would become less persuasive' (p. 172). He also wants more equitable access, which means radically reversing another English tendency, marketisation. The main system-level move would be the introduction of free tuition with higher education funded from general taxation. Individual universities could further access via outreach work with schools and deprived communities;

contextual admissions schemes, whereby entry criteria are modified to register forms of disadvantage, vital in opening pathways into the elite institutions; and possibly minimum quotas, though these are difficult to implement. He also emphasises that equity is advanced less by improving social mobility into elite higher education institutions and more by lifting the education in other institutions. Oddly, he does not discuss student income support. Arguably this is crucial in not only attracting students from disadvantaged backgrounds but in enabling them to become immersed in their studies without the need to work.

How practical is all of this? Some of it is within reach. More or less within the current policy parameters the system could move from 50 per cent towards 80 per cent tertiary participation and fairer access using contextualised admissions and outreach to schools. An incoming British Labour government in 2024 could well implement a partial decentralisation of higher education policy and administration to cities and regions, encouraging tertiary cooperation in degree structures and programmes while keeping research policy at the centre. Free tuition would be a larger leap because of the aggregated fiscal cost.

It is more difficult to foresee less inter-institutional competition and a partial flattening of the hierarchy. As long as the high capitalist ideology of marketisation and private benefit are unchanged, as long as there is historically steep inequality and families can secure advantages via investment in privileged educational routes, then social outcomes via higher education will remain grossly unequal, corresponding to the larger map of social inequality. As Scott says: 'Any reforms that help higher education overcome its current contradictions – a radical 'leap forward' – can only be effective within the context of wider social and economic reform and cultural renewal' (p. 153). That is what they call a big ask.

Nevertheless, a return to ambitious policy idealism would be a refreshing break from the present. It remains to consider the larger implications. Is there such a crisis outside England? This moves the discussion beyond the terms established in *Retreat or resolution*.

Some parts of the malaise and the solution are clearly localised. The nominal emptying out of the public role and collective social mission has gone further in England than elsewhere. In some countries, it has scarcely occurred at all. Few other systems charge tuition at the Anglophone levels or place such singular emphasis on the private benefits. However, other factors are more universal. 'High participation' systems of higher education, expanding to 50 per cent participation and beyond (Cantwell, et al., 2018), all seem to share two problems, neither of which were anticipated when system growth took off. Arguably, if there is a current crisis of massifying higher education, these two problems are integral to it.

Two sources of crisis

First, no nation anywhere—regardless of its political economy and policy, high capitalist and neo-liberal or social democratic—has been able to develop higher education so as to create a society significantly more equal in its educational and social outcomes. This flatly contradicts the expectations long attached and still widely attached to higher education policy. In that respect, mass higher education everywhere has failed—or rather, the original hopes were oversold. The expansion of higher education enhances social inclusion but in itself is ineffective as a redistributive instrument. This is partly because of a secular tendency in expansion itself. As participation expands, entry into the more sought-after higher education institutions automatically becomes more selective, vertically stretching the stratification of value between institutions, while at the same time favouring those families with the best private resources and cultural capital with which to compete (Marginson, 2018).

As noted, academic competition between students is grounded in cultural immersion in knowledge and this favours families with existing cultural capital. Socially fair educational competition based on objective educational merit is a fantasy. Newly participating families become concentrated in lower prestige institutions (Shavit et al., 2007).

The history of equity policy across the world shows that adding more students from under-represented groups is not enough. When places expand, the middle class tends to make the best use of the opportunities and there is no redistribution between the classes. To achieve genuinely equal social opportunity, it is essential to displace large numbers of the existing privileged place holders. Few equity reformers want to do that; and except under conditions of political revolution, no government anywhere in the world has attempted it.

Where measured equality has advanced in industrialised societies, this has happened not through redistribution policies in education but through the emptying out of private fortunes by war and depression, creating space for large-scale upward mobility (Piketty, 2014), or through policies designed to minimise differentials in wage fixing and/or redistribute net incomes through taxation and spending. Even in the egalitarian Nordic world, with free access to near universal education of high quality, at best higher education reproduces norms of equality rather than equalising outcomes. Though Nordic vertical differentials of value in education are more modest than in the UK, wealthier families still secure superior access to the most sought-after institutions and to places in Medicine, Finance and Law (e.g. Borgen, 2015 for Norway; Jonsson & Erikson, 2007 for Sweden).

Hence to answer the question posed by Scott, mass higher education has failed in one respect (equalisation) while it has succeeded in another (inclusion). With the right mix of policies, its performance on equalisation could be improved at the margin but within limits. However, while expectations should be scaled back, it should not be concluded that equity policies are unnecessary or unimportant. They are wholly justifiable on grounds of social justice alone, while in practical terms, they function as a holding operation. Government and institutional policies designed to open up access and reduce the stratification of value between institutions counter-balance the effects of social groups working higher education in their favour and thereby enhancing inequalities. When the counter-balancing policies are insufficient, a US-style outcome can evolve, in which higher education is socially regressive overall, though it is empowering for many individual students from disadvantaged families.

Second, massified higher education everywhere is challenged by the tightening focus on employability. Scott understands the relation between higher education and work as complex and continually changing (pp. 166–167). Higher education carries multiple social agendas. Its role as anteroom to the professions and occupations is important and most students enrol in courses that are at least generically vocational (p. 103). However, he states, higher education also shapes the economy in cultural terms, as well as responding to it, and it does not *directly* meet economic needs. ‘Its primary purpose remains education’ (p. 189). Furthermore: ‘Going to university … has always conferred on graduates non-financial benefits which they value highly, for example in terms of individual empowerment, social and cultural emancipation, and access to attractive lifestyles’ (p. 147).

All true, and the discussion exhibits the openness and embrace of complexity which are such valuable features of Scott’s contribution. Yet these issues are also in motion. Human capital theory, which is enshrined in economic policy, imagines an education-work relation that is more linear and direct in form than educationists can see. Policy in many countries now believes that higher education should create ‘job-ready graduates’, as the Australian government puts it. The UK government measures the ‘value’ of courses in terms not of academic standards but of graduate earnings. Perhaps in his definition of the crisis of

massified higher education, Scott has underestimated the existential challenge created by the employability mantra.

Higher education sits between two larger social sectors, those of schooling and work. Increasingly, it is expected to blend more closely into work. Yet it is more like schooling. The classical core of higher education is in the educational formation of students as autonomous persons, what Biesta (2009) calls ‘subjectification’, and their socialisation as social actors, together with the transmission, creation and dissemination of knowledge. These activities have long been joined in higher education. Educational formation takes place through immersion in knowledge, while faculty labour is fashioned as a teaching/research nexus. This cultural assemblage shapes the distinctive internal organisation and reproduction of the higher education sector. Teaching and learning, and scholarship and research, are grounded in epistemic disciplines, study programmes and departments/schools.

The intrinsic core of higher education and knowledge, especially the subjectification function, is central to the personal agency and capability gained by successful students. This goes on to shape their lives at work and everywhere else. Here students are empowered as persons. However, in higher education policy and public debate, the extrinsic role of higher education as preparatory for graduate work, occupations and professions so dominates discussion of higher education that economically-minded governments seem to be scarcely aware that the inner educational core and the subjectification function exist at all.

If human capital economists in governments set out tomorrow to design a high productivity labour training system, they would not establish immersion in knowledge, academic disciplines and teaching/learning rituals as core components. Student formation via immersion in knowledge and vocational training on the job (where training is much more effective) are chalk and cheese. Higher education does not in itself create productivity and job opportunities which depend on many factors. The employability mantra lacks foundation. But governments and the public media now exhibit an unquestioning belief in the human capital narrative and this is conditioning popular expectations of the sector.

It is a case of irresistible force and immoveable object. Employability has become an irresistible force because it has become embedded in mass participation in higher education with considerable moral authority. Everybody wants a job, and many people see work as a human right. Yet intrinsic higher education is an immoveable object, because the core functions in student learning and development, knowledge and research are woven into every aspect. A clash between an irresistible force and an immoveable object is destabilising because it cannot be resolved. That is why this is an existential crisis for higher education.

Eventually, either policy and public expectations about employability will give way to a more nuanced policy—or alternatively, the intrinsic core of higher education, notably malleable throughout its history and joined effectively to many different extrinsic agendas and social projects, will reach the limits of its flexibility and be broken up from outside.

Within the present policy settings, the more higher education expands as Scott rightly says it should, the more that employability will become entrenched as the master objective, while the average slippage of graduates down the occupational scale, and the growing heterogeneity between the earnings of high-income and low-income graduates, continually problematise the performance of the sector and destabilise its support. With the egalitarian mission of higher education also seen to falter, popular consent for the sector is doubly eroded. Apparently, it fails to provide either fair educational opportunities or jobs. This then is the crisis of mass higher education and it is a worldwide crisis not just an English one.

The slow road to freedom

What is the way out of this trap? Arguably, the counter strategy involves nothing less than a fundamental rethinking of the emancipatory mission of the sector—focusing not on what higher education does as a redistributive machine for allocating opportunities, but on what it does educationally for all its students, but especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds: the provision of conditions for the evolution of self-forming, self-realising, empowered persons, through their immersion in powerful social knowledge.

Arguably, higher education is better at directly creating freedom through individual empowerment, than in creating measurable aggregated social equality. On this point, its track record is absolutely clear. Putting it more positively and collectively, it is through the enabling of widespread freedom as empowerment that mass higher education can make its main contribution to democratic equality. The mission of public higher education then is to create the conditions for an egalitarian kind of freedom, grounded as Gramsci (1971) argued in universal access to knowledge both diverse and empowering. Higher education thereby fosters the free open society that Scott celebrates in the concluding chapter of his fine book.

This kind of mass higher education, ever expanding and spreading personal agency and capability, is the slow road to the freedom of all. Is the higher education sector closer to that kind of higher education than at the beginning of massification in the 1960s? Yes, it is much closer. It has not failed. The self-realising person has become a central trope of modern societies everywhere. Democratic personal empowerment is the hope of the world. This is the sector's story, this is the narrative that it needs to make. Those who want to deconstruct mass higher education and its mission are not democrats. But it is all the more vital to defend and enhance student learning and knowledge where the individual and social gains are made.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares no competing interests.

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