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Article

Liberal Education and the Left in Britain

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Abstract: Liberal education used to command wide political support in Britain. Social democrats and social liberals disagreed with conservatives on whether the best culture could be appreciated by everyone, and they disagreed, too, on whether the barriers to understanding it were mainly social and economic, but there was no dispute that education ought to aim to hand on the best that has been thought and said. That consensus has vanished since the 1960s. The dominant currents of thought on the left now reject any notion of a universal culture that might form the core of worthwhile learning. This paper considers why the British left supported liberal education, why they have moved away from it, and what the implications are for the future of education policy on the left.

Keywords: liberal education; tradition; canon; Arnold; Tawney; relativism; constructivism

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Introduction

In a public lecture in 1953, the socialist intellectual and economic historian R. H. Tawney said this:

> Education … is, partly at least, the process by which we … become partners in a universe of interests which we share with our fellow-men, living and dead alike. No one can be fully at home in the world unless, through some acquaintance with literature and art, the history of society and the revelations of science, he has seen enough of the triumphs and tragedies of mankind to realise the heights to which human nature can rise and the depths to which it can sink.[1]

Tawney's Burkean citing of the universal ideas that are embodied in a tradition of thought came naturally to all shades of moderate socialist and liberal opinion up to the middle of

[1] Tawney, R. H. (1964 [1953]), "The WEA and adult education", in *The Radical Tradition*, Harmondsworth: Pelican, pp. 86–97, at 87–8.

the twentieth century. But then, in the two or three decades which followed, that way of thinking about education collapsed.

This paper outlines why politically reformist opinion in Britain used to venerate Matthew Arnold's dictum that education is passing on the best that has been thought and said, and why the now dominant idea on the left is that "the best" is merely the oppressive arrogance of complacent elites. The paper is in four broad sections. First, there is a very brief outline of the nineteenth-century liberal background to twentieth-century socialist thought about the educational curriculum. Second, there is a discussion of why socialists such as Tawney believed that the whole point of education policy should be to give everyone access to a culture that had hitherto been confined to the economically privileged. Third is a summary of how these ideas had an impact on socialist practice. Then, fourth, the decline of these views since the 1960s is traced to the point where the left has come to see them as associated only with the most reactionary kind of conservatism. The paper finishes with some brief speculations about where all this might be going, especially following the election in 2024 of a new Labour government in the UK.

The Nineteenth-Century Background

The liberal and democratic socialist thinkers discussed here were heirs to an ancient debate, which may be summed up in the question: How may people acquire the wisdom to rule well? That debate had been happening for two and a half millennia. What was new with the advent of mass democracy was that the rulers would now be every adult. The preoccupation of radical thinkers was then how to ensure that every citizen had the same opportunities as had the previous elites. The capitalism which they wanted to reform had liberated the individual as never before in history, but capitalist democracy offered freedom while denying its full reality to all but a few. Most obviously, widespread poverty constrained freedom unacceptably. But the main strands of reformist-left thought also held that being shut out from the inherited civilisation was, in a deeper sense, more alienating than material deprivation.

There were predecessors to this way of thinking in the middle of the nineteenth century, notably the pioneering Christian socialist F. D. Maurice and also in some respects John Ruskin. But most of the reformist-left thinkers in the twentieth century owed more to mainstream liberal ideas than to more radical predecessors, especially to Matthew Arnold, but with an important strand also from John Henry Newman.

From Newman came the idea that education for its own sake was the best preparation there could be for citizenship because it promotes free-thinking:

> That alone is liberal knowledge, which stands on its own pretensions, which is independent of sequel, expects no complement, refuses to be informed … by any end, or absorbed into any art.[2]

Related to that was Newman's principle of intellectual detachment. Education was not propaganda, however mildly and however much in favour of liberal principles of freedom. Indeed, education was liberal precisely because it prescribed nothing moral.

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[2] Newman, J. (1873), "The idea of a university", in Mooney, T. B. and Nowacki, M. (eds.) (2011), *Understanding Teaching and Learning Classic Texts on Education by Augustine, Aquinas, Newman and Mill*, Exeter: Imprint Academic, pp. 165–99, at 171.

The most important thinker from this nineteenth-century background is Arnold, with his belief that – as Stefan Collini puts it – culture could "unify and heal",[3] which appealed to many on the political left in their thinking about how education might heal the divided society that capitalism had created. The reformist left in the twentieth century responded enthusiastically to Matthew Arnold's principle in *Culture and Anarchy* in 1869:

> The whole scope of the essay is to recommend culture as the great help out of our present difficulties; culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know … the best which has been thought and said in the world.

This principle appealed all the more to later radicals because of the less familiar following sentence:

> Through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits.[4]

What especially attracted the left to Arnold was his explicit attention to renewing the idea that liberal education prepared people to govern. Apprehensive though he was of democracy, the question as Arnold saw it was essentially how to recover democratically the natural authority of the old ruling class: "The difficulty for democracy is, how to find and keep high ideals".[5] Liberals and moderate socialists also found Arnold's appeal to reason attractive since it allowed them to dissociate themselves from those revolutionary currents of thought which rejected everything that the liberal tradition had bequeathed.

Socialist Thought and Liberal Education

Socialist ideas about liberal education in Britain in the first half of the twentieth century may be summarised conveniently through the views of three of its most prominent intellectuals – Tawney, Harold Laski, and G. D. H. Cole. These were like a socialist pantheon in the 1920s and 1930s. In the words of the biographers of Laski:

> It is difficult to recapture the hold over the mind of the left between the wars exercised by the socialist trinity of Cole, Laski and Tawney.[6]

Richard Tawney (1880–1962) was Professor of Economic History at the London School of Economics. In his academic work he was distinguished as an historian of seventeenth-century England. His main influence on socialist thought was through his teaching of economic history and related matters to classes in the Workers' Educational Association (an organisation discussed more fully below), and through his work on developing the Labour Party's policy on school education, notably in *Secondary Education for All* (1922).

Harold Laski (1893–1950) was professor of political science at the London School of Economics, having also held academic posts in several universities in the USA and

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[3] Collini, S. (1988), *Matthew Arnold*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 87–8.
[4] Arnold, M. (1960 [1869]), *Culture and Anarchy*, Wilson, J. D. (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 6.
[5] Arnold, M. (1980 [1861]), *The Portable Matthew Arnold*, Trilling, L. (ed.), Harmondsworth: Penguin, pp. 436–68, at 454.
[6] Kramnick, I. and Sheerman, B. (1993), *Harold Laski*, London: Hamish Hamilton, p. 251.

Canada. In his academic work he wrote on the nature of the state, on democracy, and on capitalism and socialism. He, too, taught classes in the Workers' Educational Association. He was prominent in the Labour Party, becoming chair of its National Executive Committee in 1945.

Douglas Cole (1889–1959) became professor of political and social theory at Oxford University. From 1941, while at Nuffield College, he directed the Social Reconstruction Survey, a sociological investigation of Britain with the aim of informing the development of social policy for the post-war world. He also taught for the Workers' Educational Association. He was influential on the development of the Labour Party's economic policy in the 1930s.

Further examples are drawn from a few other thinkers on the reformist left, but the representativeness and contemporary fame of these three make them convenient icons. The recurrent point is that these thinkers never believed that there was anything intrinsically alienating about the inherited culture: the problem lay not in the culture but in blocked access to it.

Their most fundamental principle was liberalism. Cole described himself as "a radical individualist as well as a socialist". Looking back (in 1958) he concluded that "I was never under any temptation to become a Communist, because my attitude was basically pluralistic and libertarian".[7] Tawney's abiding principle was expressed in a comment in 1953:

> It is not certain, though it is probable, that Socialism can in England be achieved by the methods proper to democracy. It is certain that it cannot be achieved by any other; nor, even if it could, should the supreme goods of civil and political liberty, in whose absence no Socialism worthy of the name can breathe, be part of the price.[8]

The overwhelming crisis which these thinkers believed that liberalism faced was an imminent collapse of European civilisation. Laski described the perception graphically in a book written around 1943 but published posthumously in 1952, linking the implications of the crisis to the urgent necessity of persuading the new mass electorates to avoid such a catastrophe:

> Fear of a complete breakdown is never long absent from the thought of any observer in the West who is honest enough to admit that what was generally accepted, say from Hume and Adam Smith to the Peace of Versailles in 1919, as the permanent aims of our civilisation, are now under microscopic examination by the very peoples whom we hoped to persuade to its acceptance.[9]

This same apprehension was expressed in 1934 by John Strachey, who had been a Labour MP until 1931, was again a Labour MP from 1945, and throughout was on the left of the party:

> My generation of Englishmen became conscious of the break-up of our old world, not by realising that its economic foundations were shattered, but by a sudden and

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[7] Cole, G. D. H. (1958), *A History of Socialist Thought, IV: Communism and Social Democracy, 1914–1931*, London: Macmillan, p. 7.

[8] Quoted in Terrill, R. (1973), *R. H. Tawney and His Times*, London: Andrew Deutsch, pp. 151–2.

[9] Laski, H. (1952), *The Dilemma of Our Times*, London: Frank Cass, p. 152.

> bewildering loss of faith in the whole moral, religious, and social ideology which we had inherited.[10]

Virginia Woolf (in 1940) described the feeling as like standing on the tower that was culture as it gradually tilted over towards collapse.

Out of this general sense of impending cultural doom came a belief in education as the only way in which civilisation could be recovered. Tawney suggested (in 1924) that "rebuilding a tolerable civilisation" would depend "at least in part on the deliberate cultivation of human faculties of which the proper name is education".[11] This reformist-left thinking was much more about recovering things of great value that were believed to be under threat from capitalism and war than about creating anything new, except insofar as a newly educated people would be a source of new imagination.

It is not then surprising to find that all these thinkers deeply distrusted any attempt to distort education for purposes of propaganda. Their ideal was detachment, often explicitly stated as the aim of extending to everyone the principles that governed the liberal university. A clear instance of that is from the academic philosopher A. D. Lindsay, who stood in a parliamentary by-election in Oxford in 1938 on an anti-appeasement platform that was supported by both the Labour and the Liberal parties. He, too, was a frequent contributor to adult-education classes, which – radical socialist though he was – he believed ought to be suffused with the aristocratic ethos of Balliol College, of which he was master. He meant by this – writing in the late-1940s – "an intense care for distinction and values, a life of the kind of leisure and free conversation among equals which helps to cultivate the things of the spirit, and a wide and generous toleration."[12]

Laski argued that asserting such values was itself almost a revolutionary act, because what he called "capitalist society" was incompatible with

> a life that was gracious and dignified not for some fragment of mankind especially favoured by birth or wealth or the chance possession of acquisitive skill, but for all men and women prepared to earn their bread by the sweat of their brows.[13]

Cole, likewise, believed in

> absolutely open discussion, absolute freedom of teaching – these are the bedrock principles on which our movement is securely based. We stand for education, not as a form of propaganda, … but as a way in which we can help one another to increase our knowledge, to strengthen our minds, and to arrive at a fuller understanding of the world around us.[14]

Tawney castigated what he saw as the dishonesty of communist thought, describing as "nauseous"

> the chicanery, discreetly termed relativism, which dismisses ordinary human virtues, from honesty to mercy, as bourgeois morality; falsifies ethical standards; and

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[10] Strachey, J. (1934), "The education of a communist", *Left Review*, 1, pp. 63–9, at 66.
[11] Tawney, R. H. (1924), *Education: The Socialist Policy*, London: Independent Labour Party, pp. 2–4.
[12] Quoted in Scott, D. (1971), *A. D. Lindsay*, Oxford, Blackwell, p. 110.
[13] Laski (1952), p. 245.
[14] Cole, G. D. H. (1925), "The W.E.A. and the future", *The Highway*, pp. 97–101, at 101.

> applauds as triumphs of proletarian heroism on one side of a frontier episodes denounced by it as Fascist atrocities on the other.[15]

One purpose of detachment was to defy vocational usefulness. Laski proclaimed a need for breadth of learning against the limited horizons of both specialism and also "the practical man", specialism being "learning without wisdom", and practicality "habit without philosophy".[16] It was not that left-wing thought deplored the practical application of knowledge, but merely that disinterestedness was believed to prepare people better for life than any more explicit attempt to inculcate useful knowledge. Cole, when contesting the Oxford University constituency in the 1945 election as a Labour candidate, accepted the need for technical education,

> but I believe that this can be done, not merely without sacrificing the culture that we have inherited from the past, but in such a way as to deepen and enlarge it and to penetrate culture with the spirit of science and science with the best achievements of that older culture.[17]

If non-utilitarian detachment was the way to defend civilisation against barbarism, tradition was the inspiration, as the best way of rising above the moment. Tawney, as we have seen, extolled tradition. Laski wrote in 1930:

> It is deep comfort in a grimly acquisitive society, to know that the priests move at their tasks. … [A]s we contemplate the press and hurry about us, it is in general ... pleasant to know of a place where men are remote from, and careless of, the commonplace immediacies of the marketplace.[18]

Respect for tradition very commonly took the form of valuing a canon of great works. Laski believed that any educated citizen should know the most important elements of the inherited culture first hand, giving as examples Shakespeare, Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Hobbes, Rousseau, Adam Smith and Ricardo:

> It is essential for the student to encounter … the great mind which has formed the civilised tradition. He will rarely find it easy to wrestle with; but he will gain infinitely more from surmounting the difficulties of the supreme book than by digesting a second-hand summary of what the supreme book contains.[19]

Cole welcomed the fact that the founder of the Workers' Educational Association, Albert Mansbridge,

> thought … in terms of a great cultural heritage from which the workers were for the most part excluded, and wished to find a means of opening this heritage to them and, in doing so, of broadening it out to find room for their aspirations.[20]

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15 Tawney, R. H. (1964 [1952]), "British socialism today", in *The Radical Tradition*, Harmondsworth: Pelican, pp. 176–88, at 178.
16 Laski, H. (1930), *The Dangers of Obedience, and Other Essays*, New York: Harper and Brothers, pp. 92–3.
17 Carpenter, L. P. (1973), *G. D. H. Cole*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 204.
18 Laski (1930), p. 122.
19 Ibid., p. 97.
20 Cole, G. D. H. (1952), "Education and politics: A socialist view", in Lauwerys, J. A. and Hans, N. (eds.), *The Yearbook of Education*, London: Institute of Education, pp. 42–63, at 45.

Laski would not stop at the works of the past, and would extend the canon to the great writers of the present, including those with whom he disagreed fundamentally on political matters. Thus he could give a detailed exposition of T. S. Eliot's *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* that is even-handed and sympathetic even while disagreeing with Eliot's "profound disbelief in the quality of the ordinary man".[21]

There was one specific feature of the tradition of liberal education which particularly appealed to socialist intellectuals: the belief that reason was not only paramount but was also itself intrinsically socialist in the sense that, as Jonathan Rée has put it, socialism was, "at bottom, the only reasonable arrangement of humanity".[22] Tawney argued in 1914 that the Workers' Educational Association as firmly held to the principle of reason as any university:

> The disinterested desire of knowledge for its own sake, the belief in the free exercise of reason without regard to material results and [on the grounds that] reason is divine … finds in the Tutorial Classes of the Workers' Educational Association as complete an expression as it does within the walls of some university cities.[23]

Cole believed (in 1950) that "reason [i]s the human quality which, as civilisation advances, ought more and more to exercise a paramount and coordinating control". The means were not only to be "book learning", but also judgement – common sense, "the intelligent choice of means", and moral vision which could be objective because shared by society. It was a pragmatic "reasonableness" rather than an abstract rationality.[24]

Laski argued in 1923 that the only way to develop the intellectual power required for leadership was through formal, even abstract, learning: experience was not enough. Thus he believed that however useful trade union activity might be, or however much a sense of the dramatic may come from cinema, football or the music hall,

> citizenship is the power to contribute one's instructed judgement to the public good. It is a thing of the mind, and it demands, for its development, a training that is vigorous and unrelenting. It above all seeks a discipline of thought which comes only from the ability to handle the world about us, to relate the causes and effects of phenomena.[25]

John Carey has noted the condescension towards mass culture by intellectuals in early-twentieth-century Britain.[26] He certainly did not exclude many who regarded themselves as socialist or liberal. H. G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, Virginia Woolf, Aldous Huxley, E. M. Forster, even (ambiguously) George Orwell: these and many others on the left can be found expressing pessimism about whether democracy could ever acquire the cultural and intellectual distinction that would be needed to enable it to operate as intended. In that sense, there was a strong current in left-wing thought between the wars that was heir to Thomas Carlyle rather than Arnold.

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21 Laski (1952), *The Dilemma of Our Times*, pp. 120–1.

22 Rée, J. (1987), "Socialism and the educated working class", in Levy, C. (ed.), *Socialism and the Intelligentsia*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp. 211–8, at 214–5.

23 Tawney, R. H. (1964 [1914]), "An experiment in democratic education", in *The Radical Tradition*, Harmondsworth: Pelican, pp. 74–85, at 85.

24 Cole, G. D. H. (1950), *Essays in Social Theory*, London: Macmillan, p. 76.

25 Laski, H. (1923), "Knowledge as a civic discipline", in Laski, H., *The Way Out: Essays on the Meaning and Purpose of Adult Education*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 47–59, at 50.

26 Carey, J. (1992), *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, London: Faber and Faber.

Nevertheless, there is an important distinction, relating to the potential of education. The left intellectuals who have been discussed here believed that, through education, universal enlightenment was, without doubt, feasible. One source of faith in working-class potential was direct contact with the students of Workers' Educational Association classes. Laski traced his optimism to his experience as teacher of adult students: "Many of us cannot have failed to have met trade unionists whose intellectual powers have been stunted by the hardships of the lives they have led".[27] Tawney often said that his own education as a teacher was mainly through his work as a tutor for the Workers' Educational Association, noting in 1953 that

> if I were asked where I received the best part of my own education, I should reply, not at school or college, but in the days when, as a young, inexperienced and conceited teacher of Tutorial Classes, I underwent, week by week, a series of friendly, but effective, deflations at the hands of the students composing them.[28]

That humility is not at all the intellectual condescension described of others by Carey.

Adult education was not a tool for social engineering: it was about liberating the minds of working-class people where capitalism had fettered them. Tawney meant by equality not the same economic conditions for all, but a common culture that was within the reach of all: "Differences of remuneration between different individuals might remain; contrasts between the civilisation of different classes would vanish".[29] David Vincent has traced the origins of this view in the second half of the nineteenth century, analysing the autobiographies of working-class writers. For them, knowledge was freedom: "Reading taught these men how to think, and, what was of equal importance, demonstrated in the face of the extensive dislocation and injustice of their daily experience, that it was possible to conceive and construct an ordered and justifiable pattern of living".[30] Further analysing evidence from Vincent, and also from many other sources, Jonathan Rose concludes that this freedom came from immersion in a "conservative canon".[31] Vincent quotes a warehouseman from Manchester explaining that, even while "wiping the sweat from my brow", he would take comfort by escaping in his mind into the world of Milton's *Il Penseroso*.[32] Enthusiasm for Shakespeare was spontaneous: for many working-class people, "Shakespeare was a proletarian hero", Rose says, "who spoke directly to working people. … The plays provided a language of radical political mobilisation".[33] These are the same kinds of principles as were expressed by the likes of Tawney, Cole and Laski.

Thus the views of education and democracy that were expressed by these influential socialist intellectuals were part of a common culture that stretched from the conservative right to those on the left such as Laski who, in the 1930s, adopted a form of Marxism. Highly critical of capitalism though these thinkers were, they were not outsiders and were not, in any profound sense, alienated from the mainstream of European civilisation. The socialist thinkers were mainly the heirs to Matthew Arnold and, through him, to the Enlightenment, or – more accurately – to what Michael Matthews calls the 'Enlightenment

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[27] Quoted in Kramnick and Sheerman (1993), p. 78.
[28] Tawney (1964 [1953]), p. 86.
[29] Tawney, R. H. (1964 [1931]), *Equality*, London, George Allen and Unwin, p. 150.
[30] Vincent, D. (1981), *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, London: Methuen, p. 174.
[31] Rose, J. (2002), *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, p. 116.
[32] Vincent (1981), p. 166.
[33] Rose (2002), pp. 122–3.

project'.[34] What Matthews means by that is that Enlightenment had diverse sources, both historically and geographically, not only from specific European philosophers of the eighteenth century. This generality of Enlightenment enabled these twentieth-century radicals – like generations of radicals before them – to hold the view that there was (in Matthews's words) a "large commonality between the Enlightenment project and the project of Liberal Education".[35] Despite some rhetoric to the contrary, these radicals were not really romantics. They thought of education as being about taste and manners, about universally valid principles, about civilisation. Socialism for these thinkers was no more than the fullest flowering of democracy, the truest kind of democracy that could only be attained when no-one faced any obstacles to becoming a full citizen. That required the capacity to judge and a developed sense of what is right; and, for that, liberal education was essential.

Liberal Education and Socialist Practice

Educational policy and practice on the British left in roughly the first half of the twentieth century followed the principles which were expressed by these intellectuals, and indeed they all, as political activists, contributed to the developments in policy. Two broad areas of education policy illustrate this – on adult education, and on the character of secondary schools.

The Workers' Educational Association, founded in 1903, has been described as "the fourth plank" of the British Labour movement – along with the party itself, the cooperative movement and the trade unions.[36] It had its origins in various attempts early in the twentieth century to extend Oxford University teaching to people who were not full-time students. Albert Mansbridge, its founder, was son of a carpenter who was born in 1876 in Gloucester and who achieved most of his own education through attending university extension classes at King's College in London. Its ethos was summed up by the historian of adult education, J. F. C. Harrison in 1961:

> From Edwardian liberal Oxford and the radical nonconformist provinces the WEA imbibed its peculiar strength – the strength of working-class self-improvement, of nonconformist moral earnestness, of a radical concern for social justice.[37]

Part of its success was in attracting grants from the Board of Education. The Board commissioned a report (published in 1910) on how these grants were being spent, by a schools inspector, J. W. Headlam, and the prominent liberal, Professor L. T. Hobhouse, who was a sociologist at London University. The recommendations of this report shaped the Workers' Educational Association for the next half century. The classes ought to aim to be "scientific, detached, and impartial in character" and should aim "at calling forth [the student's] own individuality, and stimulating him to mental effort". But that individuality must also be guided by a canon: it should accustom the student "to the critical study of the leading authorities", and should be such that it "implants in his mind a standard of thoroughness, and gives him a sense of the difficulty as well as of the value of truth". The

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[34] Matthews, M. R. (2019), "Mario Bunge and the Enlightenment project in science education", in Matthews, M. R. (ed.), *Mario Bunge: A Centenary Festschrift*, Springer, pp. 645–82, at 648–52.

[35] Matthews (2019), p. 671.

[36] Woodhams, S. (2003), "Forgotten history: A radical platform for workers' education", *Changing English: Studies in Culture and Education*, 10, pp. 73–89, at 74.

[37] Harrison, J. F. C. (1962), *Learning and Living, 1790–1960*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, p. 349.

student must be able to understand points of view other than his or her own, and learn "to distinguish between what may fairly be called matters of fact and what is certainly mere matter of opinion".[38]

All these operating principles are close to the ideas from Tawney, Cole, Laski and others, hostile to unregulated capitalism, but equally hostile to what the Workers' Educational Association teachers saw as the Marxist propaganda of the rival Labour Colleges, which grew in the 1920s, but were already declining by the mid-1930s, and never came close to rivalling the Workers' Educational Association in size.[39] The same principles of liberal education also underpinned more informal enterprises of adult education, such as Penguin books, the BBC, the Left Book Club, and army education during the Second World War. These activities shared a belief in culture as an agent of progress. Allen Lane, for example – founder of Penguin – saw its purpose as providing "good books cheaply", but

> the clue to the success of the Penguins resides in the first word of this slogan. … We … believed in the existence in this country of a vast reading public for intelligent books at a low price.[40]

On the second example of policy – secondary schools – two general points may be made about the attitude of the 1945 Labour government to questions of what was to be taught in schools. One was, again, respect for a liberal education of a quite traditional kind. The Minister of Education in the 1945 government, Ellen Wilkinson, was firmly on the left and feminist. Yet she admired liberal education as ardently as anyone we have been examining here, drawing a sense of seriousness from her Methodist upbringing. In office, she resented attempts by Whitehall officials to exclude working-class pupils from that liberal tradition. She asked if school might not be the source of a cultural awakening which could compensate for the drudgery of the work that most children were destined for:

> Can't their three precious years of secondary school be at least a relief from all that? … Can't Shakespeare mean more than a scrubbing brush – can't enough of a foreign language be taught to open windows on the world?[41]

That is in the same tradition as the Manchester worker whom Vincent quotes extolling Milton.

At that time, the selection of the best for the curriculum came to be inseparable in the minds of most socialists with selection of the best students, the second relevant feature of Labour's policy on schools. It was assumed on the left that the most worthwhile aspects of the inherited liberal curriculum required a quality of intellect that was not possessed by everyone. Tawney had put this point in his *Secondary Education for All* in 1922:

> The demand of Labour for the democratising of secondary education implies no wish to sacrifice the peculiar excellence of particular institutions to a pedantic State-imposed uniformity.[42]

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[38] Jennings, B. (2002), *Albert Mansbridge*, Leeds: University of Leeds, p. 76.

[39] In the late-1930s, the Workers' Educational Association had about 60,000 students. The Labour Colleges peaked at around 20,000 in the mid-1920s, and were down to about 13,000 in the late-1930s; Paterson, L. (2015), *Social Radicalism and Liberal Education*, Exeter: Imprint Academic, p. 103.

[40] Lane, A. (1938), "Books for the million", *Left Review*, pp. 968–70, at 969.

[41] Quoted in Vernon, B. D. (1982), *Ellen Wilkinson*, London, Croom Helm, pp. 222–3.

[42] Tawney, R. H. (ed.), (1922), *Secondary Education for All*, London: Labour Party, p. 30.

Ellen Wilkinson defended selection on the same grounds, provided that it was based on measured merit, not invidiously on social class. She said in 1946 that

> by abolishing fees in maintained schools we have ensured that entry to those schools shall be on the basis of merit. No one can truly say that grammar schools are being filled with children from a privileged social class.[43]

Doubts about Liberal Education

All this had changed profoundly by the 1970s, such that, by the 1980s, left-wing thought comprehensively deplored liberal education of the kind which we have been discussing. That remains today the dominant position on the left, and in the academic study of education, which is – like most of academic social science and humanities – overwhelmingly on the left as defined in that new way.[44] A point of origin for these now dominant currents is two highly influential sociologists from the post-war period: Pierre Bourdieu and Basil Bernstein. Also important in the same direction is Thomas Kuhn. Bourdieu became one of the central sociological thinkers of the late-twentieth century, with significance far beyond his academic role as professor of sociology at the Collège de France. Bernstein's influence was on a more specialised audience in the sociology of education, the subject of which he was professor at the Institute of Education in London. Though less well-known than Bourdieu, for understanding the evolution of leftist thought on education his work has been as central as Bourdieu's. Kuhn's fame rests on his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (especially its second edition in 1970), leading to his being, in Michael Matthews's summary, "the twentieth century's most influential historian of science", with implications far beyond that field.[45]

Bourdieu's starting point was that educational inequality arises, not because of differences of material circumstances, such as poverty and wealth, but because school culture allegedly reflects middle-class culture, and is dissonant from working-class culture. Teaching is therefore "symbolic violence" because it imposes cultural values upon working-class children.[46] These ideas cannot be reconciled with the principles of liberal education – of a common, educated culture – because the very idea of there being universal cultural values is rejected. What is described as "universal" is, according to Bourdieu, merely "the dominant ideology".[47]

Bernstein's work concentrated on how social classes differ in their use of language.[48] On the one hand, there is the formal language that is needed to teach a curriculum composed of discrete, academic subjects taught formally with the attention on the teacher and the subject rather than the student. This formal language, Bernstein says, is also found in the everyday language of middle-class homes. On the other hand, there is the informal language that, he claims, is characteristic of working-class homes and which

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[43] Quoted in Rubinstein, D. and Simon, B. (1969), *The Evolution of the Comprehensive School, 1926–1972*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, p. 38.

[44] Adekoya, R., Kaufmann, E. and Simpson, T. (2020), *Academic Freedom in the UK*. London: Policy Exchange.

[45] Matthews, M. R. (2024), "Thomas Kuhn and science education: Learning from the past and the importance of history and philosophy of science", *Science and Education*, 33, pp. 609–78, at 611.

[46] Bourdieu, P. and Passeron, J-C. (1977), *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, tr. R. Nice, London: Sage, pp. 8, 12.

[47] Ibid., p. 40.

[48] Atkinson, P. (1985), *Language, Structure and Reproduction*, London: Methuen, pp. 42–3, 82, 136–7.

cannot be used to study at an academically high level. Thus, for Bernstein, the way in which education reproduces class inequalities is a mixture of curricular content, linguistic style and modes of teaching: according to him, the formal didactic style operating on traditional subjects alienates most working-class students.[49]

John Goldthorpe has summed up a common critique of both these writers' ideas, and the disjunction from previous forms of left-wing thought:

> Differing class conditions do not give rise to such distinctive and abiding forms of [culture] as Bourdieu would suppose; because even within more disadvantaged classes, with little access to high culture, values favouring education may still prevail and perhaps some relevant cultural resources exist.

Accordingly, "schools and other educational institutions can function as important agencies of" induction into a common culture.[50]

Goldthorpe's analysis, however, is now rare in the academic study of education. The current of thought about education exemplified by Bourdieu and Bernstein has become the norm in left-wing theories since the 1970s and 1980s. The ideas of a canon, of received culture, of the best that has been thought and said, are anathema. All the resulting ideas can be described as relativism, or – in a specifically educational sense – social constructivism. That is the belief that what gets into an educational syllabus is not what is true in any absolute sense, but rather what powerful social forces places there. An equally influential source is thus the writing of Thomas Kuhn, who, as Matthews notes, "is front and centre of constructivism which for nearly 40 years has dominated educational research and theorising".[51] Kuhn's most influential work on scientific revolutions coined the term "paradigm" to describe the core features of a particular tradition of scientific work. A scientific revolution, he argued, occurred when one paradigm was being replaced by another. The best-known example is the replacement of Newtonian physics with relativity. The key point is then that the two paradigms are supposedly "incommensurable", which is a fundamentally relativistic idea.

Kuhn's influence on education has not directly been through science education but through the routes by which the idea of paradigm shift was adopted by social science and thus by education. Although Kuhn himself was doubtful about a science curriculum that was not based on structures of knowledge, his argument that paradigms are incommensurable led to relativistic judgements about what should be in a curriculum (science as well as non-science). Constructivism was justified ultimately on the epistemological grounds that no claims about what is true are better than any other. The claims that are dominant – and that make their way into school syllabuses – are merely the favoured ideas of the powerful. So a radical pedagogy rejects the idea of "the best", and follows bodies of thinking that are associated with a plethora of cultural traditions without any claim to evaluate their quality.

Relativism was, of course, not unprecedented. Alongside the liberal tradition, there were the Marxist views of the 1920s, and after – the belief that all education was merely propaganda for the existing social order (the view that Tawney deplored as nauseous

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[49] Bernstein, B. (1977), *Class, Codes and Control, Volume 3*, 2nd edition, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, p. 75.

[50] Goldthorpe, J. (1977), "'Cultural capital': Some critical observations", *Sociologica*, pp. 1–23, at 14.

[51] Matthews (2024), p. 649.

in the quotation above).[52] Indeed a more intellectually distinguished tradition would go right back to the Romantic reaction to Enlightenment universalism.[53] But two features are unprecedented about the period since the 1970s. One is the entering of relativistic ideas into mainstream thinking about education for everyone. The other is the extension of the concerns about inequality into dimensions other than social class: although matters of gender and race were not wholly absent from the older debates, they have now become at least as prominent as class. Three strands may illustrate the character of this new relativism: cultural studies; multiculturalism; and scepticism about the Enlightenment. Each of these three also illustrates how this new radicalism has tended to misrepresent the actual practice of liberal education in its old radical forms.

One of the founders of cultural studies in the 1960s, Stuart Hall, described culture as "the lived traditions and practices through which … 'understandings' are expressed".[54] That reference to "lived traditions" is already a contrast to Matthew Arnold's idea of culture as embodying universal standards. The relativism is explicit in Hall's further reference to "the meanings and values which arise amongst distinctive social groups and classes". That might be taken to be the fundamentally non-judgemental rejoinder to Arnold's concept of "the best", illustrating in its insistently sociological description the refusal of any judgement of value.

Cultural studies also was explicitly hostile to the liberal attempts to create a common culture. Tom Steele, a historian of cultural studies, describes the Workers' Educational Association as imposing on its students "the spurious neutrality of the intra-mural university", meaning the claims to objectivity of the main university tradition.[55] According to other writers in cultural studies, the school curriculum could never be neutral or universal. One writer in 1972 described it as merely "an externally imposed order, based on the sacredness of subjects".[56] This reluctance to judge value was central to the tenor of cultural studies. A typical summary from an enthusiast is this from Henry Giroux:

> The humanist rationale for the canon is based upon an hierarchical economy where cultural objects are ranked. Certain of those objects (Shakespeare's writing, for example) are assumed to be "the best" of western culture … It is exactly this symbolic view of culture against which Cultural Studies should fight.[57]

Cultural studies may be a matter largely of academic debate, as may the ideas of Bourdieu, Bernstein and Kuhn, important ultimately in shaping a climate of opinion, but not of immediate public concern. But the different meanings and interpretations of multiculturalism have entered right to the heart of educational policy on the left. Multiculturalism as a state of affairs cannot be denied, and liberals have not sought to deny that society is composed of multiple cultural traditions which ought to be accorded respect

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[52] For example, Fieldhouse, R. (1983), "The ideology of English adult education", *Studies in Adult Education*, 15, pp. 11–35.

[53] For example, Berlin, I. (2006 [1952]), *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, Hardy, H. (ed.), London: Chatto and Windus.

[54] Hall, S. (1995 [1980]), "Cultural studies: Two paradigms", in Munns, J. and Rajan, G. (eds), *A Cultural Studies Reader*, London: Longman, pp. 195–205, at 198–9.

[55] Steele, T. (1997), *Cultural Studies, 1945–65*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, p. 203.

[56] Hunt, A. (1972), "The tyranny of subjects", in Rubinstein, D. and Stoneman, C. (eds.), *Education for Democracy*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, pp. 26–33, at 32.

[57] Giroux, H., Shumway, D., Smith, P. and Sosnoski, J. (1995 [1985]), "The need for cultural studies: Resisting intellectuals and oppositional public spheres", in Munns, J. and Rajan, G. (eds), *A Cultural Studies Reader*, London: Longman, pp. 647–58, at 651.

provided that they do not contradict core liberal principles (such as freedom of speech and equality of rights).[58] The question is rather whether education should actively promote radically diverse cultures rather than the common culture that the liberal educational tradition had sought as a way of uniting cultural groups.

Increasingly from the 1970s onwards, there was a sense – with Bourdieu and Bernstein – that the culture for which universal claims had been made was too partial to be anything much more than an agent of oppression. Educational attention thus shifted to group identities. One of the internationally foremost theorists of this shift, the American political philosopher Iris Marion Young, summarised the multiple strands in 1989:

> Many feminists, black liberation activists, and others struggling for the full inclusion and participation of all groups in this society's institutions and positions of power, reward, and satisfaction, argue that rights and rules that are universally formulated and thus blind to differences of race, culture, gender, age, or disability, perpetuate rather than undermine oppression.[59]

This became the belief that all cultures are equally valid – the romantic attachment to culture which the late-eighteenth-century philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder founded in reaction to the Enlightenment and which subsequently came to inspire mainly right-wing politics until, in the 1960s, it fused with anti-colonial thought to create a new kind of left wing.

The link to this political activism was summed up approvingly by Iris Marion Young in an early statement of identity politics:

> The concept of a social group has become politically important because recent emancipatory and leftist social movements have mobilized around group identity rather than exclusively class or economic interests.[60]

Similar views were expressed by another influential theorist of the new cultural relativism, Nancy Fraser. The "struggle for recognition", she said, "is fast becoming the paradigmatic form of political conflict in the late twentieth century":

> Group identity supplants class interest as the chief medium of political mobilization. Cultural domination supplants exploitation as the fundamental injustice. And cultural recognition displaces socioeconomic redistribution as the remedy for injustice and the goal of political struggle.[61]

Yet this theory recurrently evades the practical question of what is meant by "group identity", and appears to ignore the ways in which identity had been treated in the liberal tradition of education. Young, like many writers in this vein, just refuses to answer the question of definition – "I shall not attempt to define a social group here".[62] Fraser is more explicit: "Examples [of cultural or symbolic injustice] include cultural domination …

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58 Barry, B. (2001), *Culture and Equality*, Cambridge: Polity, p. 22.

59 Young, I. M. (1989), "Polity and group difference: A critique of the ideal of universal citizenship", *Ethics*, 99, pp. 250–74, at 267.

60 Ibid., p. 259.

61 Fraser, N. (1995), "From redistribution to recognition? Dilemmas of justice in a 'post-socialist' age", *New Left Review*, no. 212, pp. 68–93, at 68.

62 Young (1989), p. 259.

; nonrecognition … ; and disrespect".[63] So the groups are defined by the way in which the dominant culture treats them, rather than by their own culture, and so this does not actually add much clarity to the question of what should be in a group-specific curriculum.

In contrast, the actual practice of the old ideas of a universal liberal culture based on a canon did address the meanings of specific identities. For example, Fraser asked in 1995 for what she calls the destabilising of gender identities, a question that has become insistent more recently. A supporter of the old liberal education might suggest in response an attention to, say, *As You Like It*, where Rosalind, dressed as a man, plays at being a woman, and then is chided for not being sufficiently manly, complicated in Shakespeare's own day by the fact that Rosalind would have been played by a boy. This fluidity of gender identity is not only a matter of visibly cross-dressing but also involves feeling. Or the old liberal education might point to the questioning of presumed racial identities in *The Merchant of Venice* or of colonial identities in the relationship between Caliban and Prospero in *The Tempest*. The old radical advocates of a canon might point out that the works of this particular canonical writer would seem perfectly capable of achieving the "transformative recognition" of identities that a writer such as Fraser seeks.

More generally, the attention to group identity exemplified by Fraser and Young and cultural studies may be taken to be one instance of the general decay of the Enlightenment project. The philosopher John Gray says we must now reject

> the most fundamental Western commitment, the humanist conception of humankind as a privileged site of truth, which is expressed in Socratic inquiry and in Christian revelation, and which re-emerges in secular and naturalistic form in the Enlightenment project of human self-emancipation through the growth of knowledge.[64]

Such ideas deeply shaped a certain kind of left-wing thinking about the curriculum in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s, not so much in mainstream political parties such as Labour – which at that time ignored altogether such theoretical discussion of curricular matters – as among those left-wing thinkers who might be considered to be the fringe except that they came to be the mainstream of academic debate about education. The allegation in curricular debates that were influenced by this scepticism of the Enlightenment was repeatedly that claims to universality are spurious, masking an actual exercise of domination, again following Bourdieu and the social constructivism that derived from Kuhn.

A familiar example was the allegedly intrinsic gender bias in some school subjects. Consider for example an early instance – in 1984 – of the attempt to import ethical concerns into the scientific curriculum:

> "Subjects" like physics are supposed to be neutral, or "pure". But the teaching of scientific principles without any parallel discussion of how this knowledge might be applied (the bomb, space programmes) is an incredibly partial and short-sighted stance.[65]

Another example from the same decade claimed that "normal, formal science is masculine", and proposed that "a feminist science would see the philosophy of wisdom as

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[63] Fraser (1995), p. 71.

[64] Gray, J. (1995), *Enlightenment's Wake*, London: Routledge, p. 155.

[65] Davies, L. (1984), "Gender and comprehensive schooling", in Ball, S. J. (ed.), *Comprehensive Schooling: A Reader*, London: Falmer, pp. 47–65, at 63.

being entirely congruent with views of the purposes of science".[66] Such views on gender were most common between the 1970s and the 1990s, but they persist as part of the more general attack on the rational Enlightenment, especially in the context of what to teach in schools. For example, a paper in 2007 argued that "what remains here is the question how to deprivilege science in education and to free our children from the 'regime of truth'".[67] This is a clear example of Matthews's comment that gender relativism in science has grown out of cultural studies.[68] We might also respond to the relativism by noting that the actual striking growth[69] of female participation in science since the 1980s has happened despite it: a recent instance is that the leading scientists in the development of the Oxford Covid vaccine – Sheila Gilbert and Catherine Green – have described how they worked in rigorous adherence to all the canons of mainstream science.[70]

There are analogous anti-Enlightenment arguments in connection with race. David Gillborn, for example, who is Professor of Critical Race Studies at the University of Birmingham, rejected (in 1995) a fundamental tenet of both liberalism and liberal education in his view that

> pluralism, despite its liberal commitment to democracy and power sharing, enshrines a belief in a superior and non-negotiable common framework of values. The selection and definition of school knowledge is legitimated by recourse to a version of rationality that assumes openness and goodwill lie at the heart of what is, in fact, a political process of labelling and exclusion.[71]

Aiming to create a common culture through education is thus inherently racist.

A similar example on race in more recent left-wing thought about the curriculum is in a pamphlet in 1997 offering to "rethink education and democracy" written by "the Hillcole Group" which included among its authors several academics who had been prominent since the 1970s in socialist debates about education (for example, Caroline Benn, Clyde Chitty and Ken Jones). They rejected any notion of a common school curriculum as representing

> the heavy-hand of government directives and prescription along "nationalist" lines, … whose ostensible objective, some assume, is to return the country to a mythical past when a Christian monocultural orthodoxy held sway.[72]

What is perhaps most revealing about these writers is – again – their apparent ignorance of the cultural subtlety of the liberal-education tradition.

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66 Bentley, D. and Watts, D. M. (1986), "Courting the positive virtues: A case for feminist science", *European Journal of Science Education*, 8, pp.121–34, at 123, 126.

67 Eijck, M. V. and Roth, W. M. (2007), "Keeping the local local: Recalibrating the status of science and traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) in education", *Science Education*, 91, pp. 926–47, at 944.

68 Matthews, M. R. (2021), *History, Philosophy and Science Teaching: A Personal Story*, Singapore: Springer, p. 254.

69 See, for example, Buchmann, C., DiPrete, T. and McDaniel, A. (2008), "Gender inequalities in education", *Annual Review of Sociology*, 34(3), pp. 319–37; Paterson, L. (2022), "Participation in science in secondary and higher education in Scotland in the second half of the twentieth century", *Research Papers in Education*, 37(6), pp. 1189–213.

70 Gilbert, S. and Green, C. (2021), *Vaxxers*, London: Hodder and Stoughton.

71 Gillborn, D. (1995), "Racism, identity and modernity: Pluralism, moral antiracism and plastic ethnicity", *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 5, pp. 3–23, at 12.

72 Hillcole Group (1997), *Rethinking Education and Democracy*, London: Tufnell, pp. 65–6.

Examples of this ignorance may be found in the writing of Bhikhu Parekh, who gained strong influence on policy through his chair of a committee of the Runnymede Trust that published in 1998 a document called *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*. The report rejected what it called Eurocentrism as if there had never previously been any questioning of the European cultural heritage. The report meant various things by this, none of which would in fact have been absent from those earlier left-wing thinkers who nevertheless combined it with a belief in a genuine universalism. The report gives as one such strand of Eurocentrism a belief in the superiority of European civilisation, something that was, in fact, recurrently questioned by radical socialists in Britain in the 1930s and earlier.[73] Another strand of Eurocentrism, as defined by the report, is a belief that European culture developed unaided by other civilisations. Again, that view was never common among radical thinkers. An awareness of cultural diversity grew from, in truth, the Enlightenment, a fascination with the idea that there were other civilisations which were far older than Europe's. Indeed one of the multicultural consequences of possessing an empire was that it forced its more thoughtful administrators into creative contact with non-European civilisations, a practice that was stronger before the strengthening of imperialist triumphalism in the second half of the nineteenth century, but which then fed into the radical critiques of the Empire that eventually led politically to its dismemberment.[74] Moreover, no educational tradition that paid as much attention to ancient Greece and Rome as did the classical tradition in Britain could wholly ignore that all tradition offers an ambiguous legacy.

Writing elsewhere, Parekh seemed to believe that rationalism itself is a defining feature of Eurocentrism. He was sceptical of the liberal claim that reason is "impersonal and homogeneous in nature, transcending time and place and identical in all human beings". He even went so far as to say that "the liberal way of life is historically contingent and embedded in a particular culture".[75] Such doubts about the universal relevance of liberalism's interpretation of reason would have been regarded with abhorrence by the old advocates of liberal education. But the key point is that they would have argued the case, not defined reason out of acceptable existence.

However confused Parekh's dismissal of liberal universalism is, his views are moderate compared to those expressed more recently under the influence of Critical Race Theory and the movement to "decolonise the curriculum", in which there is no area of shared agreement at all. Consider, for example, the ideas of Kehinde Andrews, who is professor of black studies at Birmingham City University. Black Studies, he says, is not actually about study at all. It is rather about the "science of liberation",

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[73] For example, Tawney's fascination with China and Laski's with India. A. D. Lindsay was also very interested in India, and served on a commission of the International Missionary Council in the 1930s, investigating the position of Christians in the sub-continent. It is true that he concluded that Christianity was more intellectually discerning than Hinduism, but the point in this context is that he argued the case, rather than presuming Christianity's superiority: reasoned rejection of a specific culture is as respectful as reasoned acceptance of it.

[74] On the irresolvable complexity of the relationship between imperial rulers and the people they ruled, see for example three well-researched and distinct points of view: Dalrymple, W. (2002), *White Mughals*, London: HarperCollins; Biggar, N. (2023), *Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning*, London: Collins; Kumarasingham, H. (2023), "Constitution and Empire", in Cane, P. and Kumarasingham, H. (eds.), *The Cambridge Constitutional History of the United Kingdom: Volume 2, The Changing Constitution*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 496–528.

[75] Parekh, B. (2006), *Rethinking Multiculturalism*, London: Palgrave, p. 361.

"designing the conceptual tools and methodologies for social change".[76] That is a response to "the Eurocentric framework of knowledge [which] is a part of the 'masters tools', fashioned to perpetuate the unequal status quo". Thus, he says, "all courses – whether history, literature, or mathematics – would be taught from a revolutionary ideology or perspective".[77] Andrews concludes that "viewing Western thought as something emerging from the genius of those great, dead, White male Europeans … is the root problem of the university curricula".[78]

Or consider Advance HE, which used to be called the Higher Education Academy and which is deeply influential on the policies of all universities in the UK. In its advice in 2021 on how to create an "anti-racist curriculum", it quoted with approval one of the founders of critical race theory, Richard Delgado: the aim is to "question the very foundations of the liberal order, including … Enlightenment rationalism and principles of constitutional law".[79] Part of that will be "debunking the myth of objectivity in scholarship [and] pedagogical work".[80]

The doubts about liberal education on the left thus have taken many forms since the 1970s, but they all are in some sense versions of the ideas most influentially expressed by Bourdieu and Bernstein, and generalised by Kuhnian relativism. The main difference is now the greater prominence given to race and gender than to class and economics, reflecting a broad change to the character of leftist ideology. The politics of these new themes, moreover, has one crucial difference to that which was dominated by class. People from these new categories of oppression – women, or people with marginalised gender identities, or members of particular ethnic and racial groups – have generally not ceased, with personal emancipation, to regard themselves as members of these categories, and instead become what Donald Sassoon describes as "articulate middle-class campaigners putting forward novel ideas which challenge existing conceptions of common sense".[81] Sassoon sums up the effect of the resulting new social movements as "the great crisis of socialism" as an ideology. By contrast, emancipated working-class people have generally become middle class, especially in the twentieth century where greater access to advanced education also came to be associated with upward social mobility. On the whole (as Vincent and Rose have argued) the old working-class auto-didacts saw themselves as inheritors of the whole of western culture, from which they had been unjustly excluded: they saw their own social exclusion as a matter mainly of economics, not of personal identity, and their goal was that their class should be able to inherit that culture, not to change it fundamentally. These aspirations were then articulated by socialist intellectuals, and were put into practice by the Labour movement.

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[76] Andrews, K. (2019). "Blackness, empire and migration: How Black Studies transforms the curriculum", *Area*, 52, pp. 701–7, at 701.

[77] The latter quoted p. 706 (approvingly) from Hare, H. (1972), "The battle for Black Studies", *The Black Scholar*, 3, pp. 32–47.

[78] Andrews, K. (2019), p. 706.

[79] Advance HE (2021), *A Brief Introduction to Critical Race Theory*, p. 2; link to the article. This was downloaded 3 March 2023; although it has since been removed from the Advance HE website, it is still available under the Advance HE rubric from individual universities, for example St Andrews at link to the article [downloaded 14 August 2024].

[80] Advance HE (2021), *What We Mean by Anti-Racist Curriculum*, p .4; link to the article [downloaded 3 March 2023].

[81] Sassoon, D. (1996), *One Hundred Years of Socialism*, London: I. B. Tauris, p. 672.

In particular, these old radicals accepted in principle the claims to universalism of the dominant culture. The new radicals of the kind we have discussed here challenge it. They assert that cultural value is relative to specific cultural groups – one class, one gender, one race, one ethnicity, one language, even one individual in the fashion for "personalised" curricula.[82] The new radicals deny that reason could transcend these specific identities: following Kuhn, they believe that cultures are incommensurable. Therefore they deny the core premise of liberal education that reason and the intellect transcend cultural boundaries. Even when the new radical claims are not thoroughly relativistic, they are universal only to the extent that they appeal to minimal principles of universal human rights; they do not appeal to cultural absolutes. These abstract principles are culturally emptier than the old versions of liberal education, and thus have far fewer implications for the details of an educational curriculum. Selecting "the best", from all traditions no longer even makes sense, despite selecting from as plural a range of traditions as might be offered in a more multicultural age. The aspiration to a shared cultural understanding by which to evaluate the quality of what has been thought and said has been abandoned.

Conclusion: The Implications for Policy

The final question is what the implications are for the educational politics of the British left, following the election of a Labour government in the UK in July 2024. Until the end of the governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown (1997–2010), Labour remained largely impervious to this transformation of left-wing thought about education. From the time of the Wilson governments in the 1960s and 1970s, Labour came to be dominated by the view that education policy was a kind of surrogate for economic policy. As direct action to redistribute income and wealth fell out of favour, the view came to dominate Labour policy that the best way to equip citizens to cope with inequalities of wealth and power was to enable them to compete as workers in the global economy. But this indifference to cultural matters exposed the tradition of liberal education to being undermined when professional educational opinion – especially academic opinion – shifted against it.

There are, then, two likely developments from the new Labour government, but each leads to broadly the same outcome so far as the demise of liberal education is concerned. One, the more likely, is that Labour will continue to consider mainly the economic aspects of education, with an important sub-theme of encouraging social mobility through education. If that is what Labour does, then the field will be open for the academic left to erode even further the liberal education that dominated reformist-left thinking until the middle of the last century. That tendency will be reinforced by the perception that enthusiasm for liberal education became the leitmotiv of Conservative ministers between 2010 and 2024, such as Michael Gove and Nick Gibb.

The other possibility is that the Labour government elected in 2024 might break with recent precedence and take an active interest in the curriculum. The reason to think that this might happen is that it has happened in Scotland and in Wales, where curriculum policy is the responsibility of the devolved governments. Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence has been strongly influenced by the recent currents of left-wing critique of liberal education, especially on the grounds of radical multiculturalism and relativism.[83] It

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[82] Prain, V., Cox, P., Deed, C., Dorman, J. et al. (2013), "Personalised learning: Lessons to be learnt", *British Educational Research Journal*, 39(4), pp. 654–76.

[83] See, for example, Humes, W. and Priestley, M. (202), "Curriculum reform in Scottish Education: Discourse, narrative and enactment", in Priestley, M., Alvunger, D., Philippou, S. and Soini, T. (eds.),

is thus based on the principles of social constructivism, neglecting structured knowledge and a standardised curriculum, and extolling the virtues of autonomy for schools and even for individual students. There is scant attention to the theories and principles that constitute each subject in the curriculum, which is a particular problem for primary schools where teachers are expected to teach all subjects, including those in which they have no expertise. The purported syllabuses are vague aspirations rather than detailed specifications of what is to be learnt. There is a strong emphasis on cross-curricular learning without adequate recognition that, to be successful, it depends on prior knowledge in the specialist curricular areas that contribute to it. The character of all this is summed up succinctly by Alan Convery[84]: it is "the removal of content from the curriculum and its replacement with a vague framework into which individual schools and teachers must reinsert knowledge of their choosing". The evidence from the Scottish results of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)'s Programme for International Student Assessment is that, on the whole, this reform is failing, especially in what would, for previous socialist thinkers, have been the core aim of narrowing social inequalities of attainment by enabling all social groups to rise.[85]

That curriculum, although associated with the government of the Scottish National Party since 2007, has had the strong support of the Scottish Labour Party. Moreover, the Labour government in Wales is now implementing a version of this Scottish policy. An evaluation of Welsh schools that were developing the proposed curriculum concluded that although "moving from a teacher-centred to a more student-centred curriculum may have merits in principle", the most socially disadvantaged students were failing to get access to what the sociologist Michael Young has called "powerful knowledge", by which he meant knowledge of the structured kind that has been at the heart of liberal education.[86]

If Labour in England does develop a new interest in the curriculum, these Welsh and Scottish precedents seem to suggest that this interest would take the form of challenging the kinds of liberal education that Michael Gove tried to put in place after 2010. Altogether, then, it seems likely that the left will never again be strongly committed to liberal education of the kind which thinkers such as Tawney, Cole and Laski inherited from Matthew Arnold, Cardinal Newman and the nineteenth-century auto-didacts.

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Curriculum Making in Europe, Bingley: Emerald, pp. 175–98; Paterson, L. (2021), "Partial, sycophantic, and superficial: The OECD review of Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence", Edinburgh: Reform Scotland; link to the article.

84 Convery, A. (2017), "'There Is No Alternative': Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence and its relationship with high culture", *Scottish Affairs*, 26(2), pp. 176–93, at 179.

85 Paterson, L. (2024), "Scottish performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment, 2006–2022: Falling attainment and rising inequality", *Scottish Affairs*, 33(2), pp. 131–56.

86 The evaluation is by Power, S., Newton, N. and Taylor, C. (2020), "'Successful futures' for all in Wales? The challenges of curriculum reform for addressing educational inequalities", *Curriculum Journal*, 31(2), pp. 317–33. Michael Young's ideas are developed in Young, M. (2007), *Bringing Knowledge Back In*, London: Routledge.