



The Revolt of Aspirations: Contesting Neoliberal Social Hope

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Abstract

This paper considers the English student protests of late 2010 in the context of the politics of aspiration. Aspiration is a particular form of neoliberal social hope based around promoting individualised social mobility. It has been central to British education policy since 1997, especially those policies designed to widen and increase participation in higher education. I argue that the student protests reveal both the success of these policy interventions around young people's aspirations *and* the limits of the politics of aspiration. This paper examines the contradictory effects of the politics of aspiration on different groups of students and traces how this shaped the rhetoric of the protestors. The intervention concludes by considering the need for radical activists to (re)configure new forms of social hope as an alternative to aspiration, and as an integral part of exploring alternatives to a market-driven education system.

Introduction

This paper thinks about young people's aspirations in relation to the recent protests by school and university students (November/December 2010) about the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government's proposals to raise



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² Aimhigher was a national programme that operated in England from 2004 – 2011 with the aim of raising the aspirations of young people from social groups (and neighbourhoods) that were under-represented in higher

university tuition fees in England from £3,000 to £9,000 from 2012 and abolish the Education Maintenance Allowance, a grant for students from low-income families in the last two years of their secondary school education. I argue that these protests demonstrate the extent to which many young people's aspirations have been raised to the point where they expect to undertake higher education. They also reveal the limits of realizing those aspirations in a time of austerity.

I would suggest there were two main groups of students who were enraged enough to participate in those protests 1) those from middle class families on modest incomes ('the squeezed middle', to use New Labour leader Ed Milliband's favourite phrase) who have come to take a university education for granted, but whose parents may now have to make hard decisions about which of their children to educate to university-level; and 2) working class students (especially those from aspirational Black and minority ethnicity [BME] families) who have been consistently told that a university degree is their only viable route to social mobility and a comfortable life (Butler and Hamnett, 2011). Both groups have had their aspirations (and expectations) vis-a-vis higher education 'raised' over the last decade. The former have experienced a sense of class dislocation – the disruption of taken-for-granted class privilege; whilst the latter have had to confront broken promises of future social mobility.

Throughout their period in government (1997 – 2010) New Labour stressed the importance of 'raising' people's aspirations. This imperative was central to the project of widening participation in higher education. However, as Mike Raco (2009) has articulated, this political concern with 'aspirations' was meant to lower people's expectations of what the state could and should provide for them. This neoliberal reconfiguration of welfare provision (and the consequent shift in the terms of debates around 'social justice' to promote individual rather than social responsibility for change) underpinned many aspects of education and youth policy under the New Labour governments. However, I would suggest that the student protests reveal just how persistent people's expectations of the welfare state have been (even as they have taken on board much of the individualised aspirational message promoted to them). It also exposes the contradiction that so many families have been reliant on state support in order to enable them to engage in this individualised culture of aspiration.

Raising aspirations

Before examining the demands raised through the student protests, and proposing a productive strategy for politicising young people's hopes for the future, it is useful to survey how a concern for their aspirations became so central to recent education policy. During the 2000s, widening participation interventions were targeted at individuals from low income families in socially deprived neighbourhoods (Lupton and Kintrea, 2011; St Clair and Benjamin, 2011). But this project had wider effects. Government policy has promoted social mobility, which has increasingly been presented as being predicated on transcending the problems

associated with particular small-scale local territories (and ultimately physically moving away from these areas) (Cameron, 2006). As a result, widening participation interventions were primarily directed at socially deprived localities. This was not just an imperative to focus interventions where they were most needed, it was consolidating an assumption that young people from low income families would not travel for higher education. The gradual introduction of university tuition fees has made this outcome more likely and many young people from such backgrounds do stay at home throughout their studies, attending their local universities. Even those English universities that recruit students (inter)nationally have mostly prioritised working 'locally' to recruit non-traditional students. By identifying and locating educational inequalities as being 'local' problems, the broader national and global relationships that cause inequalities in access to higher education remain unchallenged. By promoting a politics of aspiration, recent education policy has privatized responsibility for the relatively low educational attainment of young people from low income families within working class homes. This deflects attention from addressing those inequalities perpetuated by the education system.

Interventions designed to raise the aspirations of these young people were primarily intended to move their ambitions up a perceived hierarchy of acceptable future careers (Brown, 2012). In practice, these interventions also functioned to intensify their aspirations – so that they adhered more strongly to the imagined futures promoted by a now familiar menu of aspiration-raising activities (including residential summer schools, student mentoring schemes, and shorter taster days that offer glimpses of undergraduate life) (Brown, 2011).

Louise Archer (2007: 635) has contended that the egalitarian promise of early widening participation policy has been compromised. Statistics published by the Higher Education Funding Council for England support her contention. The rates of participation in higher education by 18 and 19 year olds from all social classes have increased since 1997, but they remain highly differentiated by social class. For the academic year 2009/10, HEFCE's (2010: 7) analysis predicted that 57% of this age cohort growing up in the least disadvantaged areas of the country would enter higher education, compared to 19% of their peers living in the most disadvantaged areas of England. This differential is further exaggerated when admissions to highly selective degrees at leading (research-intensive) universities are compared.

Despite these inequalities, on one level it can be said that work to raise young people's aspirations regarding progression to higher education has been a success. Fair access to higher education may not have been achieved across the board, and efforts to widen the participation of young people from previously under-represented groups have been inconsistent and uneven in their impact. Nevertheless, participation in British higher education has been significantly increased and progression to university has become the norm for most young people from professional, middle class families (McFall, 2012). This may not

represent a ‘raising’ of those young people’s aspirations, but it has strengthened and extended the normative power of middle class attitudes to education. These young people now expect to progress to higher education as a matter of course, as an act of transition to adulthood and future professional careers.

As increasing numbers of middle class students progressed to higher education, widening participation initiatives worked doggedly to encourage and enable young people from low income and working class families to join them in undertaking a university education. Here, the emphasis was on ‘raising’ young people’s aspirations. Although such interventions undoubtedly did enable many individual young people to envision their future life trajectories differently, I would argue that in many cases widening participation projects had most success in assisting the progression to higher education of young people (often from minority ethnic communities) who already had high aspirations in relation to their future careers, but may have lacked the social capital to act on and achieve those ambitions (Butler and Hamnett, 2011). The cumulative effect of fifteen years of widening participation initiatives has been to foster, in a generation of working class young people, the value of higher education as a route to individual social mobility (often, at least in theory, tied to spatial mobility away from their home neighbourhoods and communities (Green and White, 2008)). Whilst the ‘hidden curriculum’ behind these interventions may have been to foster neoliberal subjectivities that appreciated the importance of taking private, individualised responsibility for one’s social welfare and well-being; in practice, many of these young people continued to expect the state to provide them with assistance to take advantage of this opportunity, through Aimhigher² widening participation initiatives, the Educational Maintenance Allowance and other forms of bursary.

In their respective ways, these different groups of (potential) students responded to the increase in tuition fees out of fear, anger and self-interest, to preserve their respective routes into higher education. Middle class students, especially those from relatively less affluent families feared that their automatic ‘right’ to progress to higher education was being eroded by the cost of study; while aspirational students from low income families feared that the promised route to social mobility and the support mechanisms that existed to help them achieve this were being pulled from under their feet. These tandem dynamics were audible within the slogans raised by student protestors, the rhetoric they articulated and in media coverage of the protests.

² Aimhigher was a national programme that operated in England from 2004 – 2011 with the aim of raising the aspirations of young people from social groups (and neighbourhoods) that were under-represented in higher education. It operated through local and regional partnerships between schools, universities and other education providers.

Another education is possible?

A key concern raised by student protestors was that the proposed higher tuitions fees would severely and unfairly restrict access to higher education for young people from low income families. This is a real and genuine concern, but overlooks more complex class dynamics at play in the student movement. I will return to this argument shortly, but first, I want to examine protestors' interventions about the defence of state education.

For many of the articulate student protestors interviewed in the media since the protests in November/December 2010, the protests were not just about resisting the threefold increase in tuition fees, but were about the wider defence of state education provision against an expanding market in higher education. Oxford University student and direct action activist, Sophie Lewis stated: "this is a movement that objects, with rage, to the idea of education for GDP points," (quoted in Bell, 2011). Activist blogger and journalist Laurie Penny also understood the student protests in a wider context

The movement is about more than this Education Bill. Young people, but increasingly people from different generations – lecturers, parents, trade unionists – are finally articulating a culture of resistance to the narrative that we have to pare down the state. People are standing up and saying there is an alternative. (quoted in Bell, 2011).

While I agree that the movement opposed the paring down of state education and welfare provision, I am less convinced that most of the student protestors were articulating an alternative. The blogger Jody McIntyre, who became famous after being dragged from his wheelchair by Metropolitan Police officers during the student protests in December 2010, offered this spirited defence of state education provision:

Education should be free. The Education Maintenance Allowance should be kept. These are not controversial issues. What has happened is the marketisation of education: education is now a commodity; as a student you are a consumer of that commodity, so that you then go out into the capitalist society to make as much money as you can. These cuts are ideological, and it's become clear that the main parties share the same line on this. So there's no real freedom of choice, no real democracy, as the choice we have made is not represented by anyone. (quoted in Bell, 2011).

He makes several key arguments here – first a defence of state provided higher education (and a call for it to be free once more); second, a defence of the education maintenance allowance that supported young people from low income families to stay in education after the age of 16; and, third, clear opposition to the expansion of market mechanisms in education. His arguments both oppose the ideological basis of the introduction of higher tuition fees and advocate a return to

the era of free education. Whilst this could be seen as an alternative to the present post-welfare marketization of British higher education, it is essentially a call to return to an early social democratic welfare state.

I find it interesting to consider how such arguments fit with the recent ‘politics of aspiration’. Raco (2009) has suggested that the politics of aspiration promoted by New Labour over the last fifteen years (and continued since May 2010 by the Coalition Government) has sought to replace a social democratic politics of expectation about what the welfare state *should* provide. The 2010 student protests demonstrate the uneven and incomplete ‘success’ of this politics of aspiration, as the student movement simultaneously sought to defend state welfare provision without challenging the individualizing impetus of post-welfare reforms (Mason, 2012). Only a radical minority articulated an alternative way forward (but see Pusey and Sealey-Huggins, 2013 this issue) and, for the most part, even high profile radical activists articulated contradictory arguments in relation to young people’s aspirations.

Barnaby Raine, a fifteen year old school student activist from London told *The Independent* (Bell, 2011) that “our generation is angry to see young people who rely on government help to stay in education being told to abandon their dreams and aspirations while those who caused this crisis pay themselves bonuses big enough to fund education for decades.” This comment highlights the fact that for many young people the aspiration to participate in higher education has been unobtainable without state subsidy and welfare support. The withdrawal of the Education Maintenance Allowance and the hike in university tuition fees, in the context of a stagnant and precarious graduate employment market, disheartened many young people, forcing them to question the aspirations that they had been encouraged to develop and work towards. Amit, an eighteen year old computer science student quoted in *The New Statesman* (quoted in Penny, 2011) complained that “all that aspiration was pretty much for nothing when there are no jobs. ... This fight is so much more important than blind careerism. Just don’t tell my parents I said that.”

What is striking in this comment is how much aspiration has become restricted to thinking about future career progression. However, this quote also gives a sense of how the aspiration for social mobility is caught up in complex folds of intergenerational ambition – the unfulfilled dreams of parents are projected onto and invested in the younger generation – adding further complexity to recent debates in geography about the anticipatory logics of contemporary forms of neoliberal governance and citizenship (Anderson, 2001).

For Shiv Malik, writing in *Prospect* magazine (December 2010), discontent over frustrated aspirations was at the heart of the student protests.

Why were they here? Who were these kids—some as young as ten—rallying through London’s streets? These are no revolutionaries, anarchists, or even socialists. It is worse than that. They want

something more than just a reversal of higher education cuts and the scrapping of the Education Maintenance Allowance which allows poor 16 year olds to go to college. They don't want stuff per se; they have long since tired of their iPods and the latest version of *Medal of Honour*. They want the most intangible accessory of all: aspiration.

In a knowledge economy what else would one do? Without a degree you're out of luck. Without A-levels you are, and always will be a loser; dole scum or forever destined to compete with eastern European immigrants for minimum wage jobs in Burger King or Holiday Inn. So aspiration is all they have. They all want to try at being doctors or engineers or architects or television producers. And if you take that away from them, they will get angry. Outrageously angry. And vicious.

Previous research (Brown, 2011; Furlong and Biggart, 1999) has suggested that despite the rhetoric of 'low' aspirations, young people from working class families aspire to work in a wide range of jobs and careers (from routine service sector employment to the professions). Some dream of celebrity and sporting fame (especially boys), but even these aspirations tend to shift to more concrete, realizable plans as they near school leaving age (Furlong and Biggart, 1999; Nilsen, 1999). For many of the young people I have conducted research with (Brown, 2011), their career aspirations are frequently just the vehicles for the dream they hold most strongly – a financially and emotionally secure adult life. In the absence of secure and predictable futures (Southwood, 2011), young people have come to rely on their aspirations as the driver for their future success and well-being. In that respect, the promotion of middle-class norms of career-focused aspirations has been a success, but the protests also reveal its fragility and partiality. As Clare Solomon, the President of the University of London Union argued (Bell, 2011), to dismiss the student protestors as middle class young people defending their privilege denigrates the attachment to higher education of young people from poorer backgrounds (Brown, 2011). These are precisely the young people who have been told by two decades of widening participation interventions that they need to raise their aspirations and orientate themselves towards higher education as the most acceptable route to a comfortable life. In a report produced for the BBC's flagship *Newsnight* programme, broadcast on the evening of the 10 December 2010 protests, Paul Mason interviewed a group of teenage young men, clearly from a range of ethnic backgrounds, wearing scarves, masks and balaclavas to protect their identities. One of them complained,

We're from the slums of London, yeah? How do they...? How do they expect us to pay nine thousand in uni fees? And EMA was the only thing keeping us in college. What's stopping us from doing drug deals on the streets anymore? Nothing! (quoted in Mason, 2010).

This young man plays on place-based and racialised stereotypes to make his point and to counterpose two potential futures that are available to him. But his

comments are also indicative of how interventions on young people's aspirations have sought to promote middle class norms of deferred gratification as an alternative to other schemes for getting 'rich' quick.

Widening participation interventions to 'raise' the aspirations of young people like this promotes *aspiration* as a very particular form of neoliberal social hope. The protests revealed both the strength of this shift and its limits. They demonstrated how powerful the message about the importance of cultivating aspirations for higher education, professional employment and self-reliant citizenship has become for this generation, but also revealed the extent to which for so many young people and their families the satisfaction of these aspirations was unimaginable without the expectation of continuing financial support from the state and practical assistance from widening participation initiatives like Aimhigher. Although the student protest movement did articulate a need to defend these elements of welfare support, and in many cases advocated a return to the free university education of the welfare state era, I would argue that they failed to reveal, perform or promote new forms of social hope (as an alternative to the politics of aspiration).

Hoping differently

In the wake of the student protests a number of innovative projects have arisen (led by both students and academics) that have sought to reconfigure what a university is or could be. Many of these activist initiatives have been inspired by autonomous politics and are exploring ways in which free, collective forms of higher education could be delivered (in, against and) beyond the models offered either by the social democratic politics of the welfare state or more recent neoliberal policies of marketization (see, for example, Really Open University as seen in Pusey and Sealey-Huggins, 2013 this issue). I conclude my commentary by suggesting that alongside these initiatives to re-imagine higher education, there is a need for imaginative projects to reconfigure social hope (rooted in something other than social mobility). Instead of the trickle down of middle class aspirations, I consider the possibilities for reworking older traditions of working class mutual aid and collective self-improvement. This is not an impossible dream, in my previous career as a widening participation practitioner, I heard groups of young people on several occasions express the desire for assistance in developing the means to support each other as an alternative to more individualised (and, by implication, competitive) interventions (Brown, 2011).

Over the last two or three decades, 'aspiration' has become the dominant form of social hope in neoliberal economies. It functions in very specific ways:

There are competing versions of hope in a given society, but there is also a hegemonic form to hope. For us, living in a becoming- neoliberal world, that hegemonic form is aspiration. Not aspiration in the sense to aspire to greatness in some heroic Greek sense, or something romantic and colourful. No, for us aspiration has a particular hue and tint – it

means social mobility. It means a better job, more money, more things and a higher rung on the career ladder. Hope is individual in our world, never collective – the hope of entrepreneurs dreaming of making it big. Not just climbing the ladder but also winning out over all others. We hope for social mobility. ... Hope, the dominant form of hope, is to do better than your parents. (Beuret, 2011)

I agree. Over the course of New Labour's period in government, the central aim of widening participation policy shifted from a focus on promoting social equity to a more explicit attempt to discipline the hopes young people developed for their adult lives (Brown 2012). The aim of 'raising' young people's aspirations was to instil in them a desire for social mobility and the drive to take personal responsibility for achieving this. In the process, all other hopes for the future came to be dismissed as inappropriate – as 'low aspirations' to be challenged, reorientated and 'raised' (Bright, 2011).

The dominant forms of neoliberal aspiration, as they have developed over the last three decades, have been focused on accumulating 'bigger, better, more' and have relied on an expansive imagined future of perpetual growth. In contrast, in times of scarcity and particularly when the future seems uncertain, life is lived more in the present. More mundane hopes and mutual collaboration to achieve them seem to proliferate in such circumstances. This is the lesson of Britain in World War II that some in the environmental movement have sought to celebrate and emulate (albeit somewhat nostalgically) (Hopkins, 2008). In the context of current austerity, new forms of social hope might arise out of collective support networks for self-reliance and survival in the present, rather than aspiring to 'business as usual' and a future that seems ever less achievable.

Recent widening participation initiatives and policies have implied a 'trickle down' understanding of aspirations, such that the heightened aspirations of Government for the nation rub off over time on the population, serving to raise their individual aspirations by example. In these debates little credence is given to those institutions such as the Workers Educational Association, miners' welfare associations and trade union educational programmes that have traditionally harnessed working class desires for education and 'self-improvement'. No countenance is given to the possibility that social hope could 'trickle up' from working class traditions.

I look to the traditions of working class collective self-improvement articulated through these organisational forms, not with the intention of reinvigorating a social democratic politics tied to the welfare state, but to remember ways of organising that fostered alternative forms of social hope than those expressed through the politics of aspiration. I stake a claim for forms of organising that foster forms of collective social hope based on an ethics of mutual aid and solidarity. In contrast to 'aspiration raising' widening participation interventions that promote the aspiration for education not as an end in itself, but as an

instrumental link in a chain that leads to professional employment, I am excited by the prospect of projects that might imagine a future based on *doing* rather than labour (Holloway, 2010). These would be projects where young people are not encouraged to compete for who can climb highest, at the expense of others, but support each other in providing for their families and communities – working with hope towards a different future. I reiterate, now is the time to think imaginatively about modes of working with young people that promote collective hope and solutions for the (near) future and move beyond relying either, with expectation, on state welfare provision or, with aspiration, in the power of individual enterprise. Without promoting this shift in social hope ‘another education system’ will not be possible.

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