

CUT THE SHOCK DOCTRINE: RADICALIZE COMMON SENSE¹

Paul Bowman

1. Shocks and Doctrine

In boxing there is a simple sequence of punching and stepping and punching which, if done correctly, can lead to the serious rattling and disorientation of an opponent.¹ This sequence is initiated when a good hard jab or straight left lead lands full in the opponent's face. They may blink or lose track of you. When you land this strike from the left, you step quickly to the right and blast them with a hard right. This is what has happened in the UK. We've been hit by a stinging blow from the left followed by a quick move to the right and the delivery of a massive shock. At least, it's in the post, it's being set up, being telegraphed, it's on its way; we can see it coming, the steps are being taken. What is to be done?

The strikes from the left were actually the betrayals of the left – the betrayals by Labour of anything like the policies of the left: the decision to bail out the banks rather than restructure the banking system is only the most recent (albeit the most telling) example. But the betrayals go much further back – right back to the electoral victory of a 'left' that actually signalled the defeat of the left.²

But what is happening now, under the coalition government, can be explained in terms provided by Naomi Klein. Klein writes in her book, *The Shock Doctrine*, that, in response to disasters, it has become the unpublicised policy of neoliberal nation states and their ministers and institutions, specifically the World Bank and the IMF, to offer 'help', to offer solutions; but solutions that are in fact slaves' ransoms: solutions which remake the world in their image, or rather, the image of economic organisation that they condone and seek to impose everywhere.³

This image of the world is based on very weak, leaky and brittle academic theories, such as ‘rational choice’ theory, ‘public choice’ theory and right-wing economic theories, whose declared premise is always that the free-market can solve all problems. At the same time, these theories always silently rely on the state to mitigate the inevitability of market failures. The market failures lead to crises, which are interpreted by governments as calling for more ‘exceptional’ (supposedly ‘just this once’) state intervention,⁴ but state intervention that always involves a demand for the expansion and intensification of market principles.⁵ This is so even though no market could survive for one single second without regulation. And even regulated markets have complete disasters. And after the disaster comes the institution of the shock doctrine. This ideology dictates: there has been a shock. The only solution is the imposition of market principles and mechanisms here. This tautology guides economic thinking: ‘market failures demand market principles’. This is what is being imposed on the UK university system – completely unnecessarily.

It is said that this is necessary because there is a financial deficit. But one thing needs to be said: there is *no deficit*. There *need be no deficit*. There need be no austerity measures and no unemployment and no movement of debt off the government and onto the shoulders of the individual, and no inevitably deeper and longer recession. Here is a short explanation of why there need be no deficit and need be no cuts:

Greg Philo video:



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pmmf-Lnuq0&feature=related>

2. Ill-Legitimacy

It is noteworthy that what is called into question *first* are the *credentials* and credibility of Professor Philo. This is a familiar argumentative tactic: discredit your opponent so you don't even have to bother taking their argument seriously. It's not a particularly ethical tactic; and I'm sure we're not proud, but I'm also sure we all do it. We ask: who is this person saying these things? Are they properly qualified? Need we listen?⁶

A few things occur to me in the face of this question of qualification. The first is to ask our politicians: what are *your* qualifications? Do *you* have an arts, humanities or social science degree? Who paid for that? Do you have a mortgage-sized debt hanging over you because of your education? Or did you receive an essentially free education? In short, we could seek to generate a new expenses scandal: a kind of sequel to the scandal of MPs' abuses of public money;⁷ namely, the scandal of the fact that their educations were paid for by the public whilst they want to take away this right for other members of the public now and in the future.⁸

So that's one possible route. A second is to pose the question: Are you properly qualified to do this? Are your arguments and reasoning sound? Rather than asking prospective students today to engage in spurious 'rational choice' *speculations* about the conjectural future worth of a degree, based on 'calculations' about future earnings (which, as Freud might say, is nothing more than an equation between two unknowns; in other words, it is speculation: far from *rational* and far from *choice*), wouldn't a more rational thing be to attribute a financial value to a degree attained any time between, say, 1950 and 1997, and institute a tax based on *present* earnings? As preposterous as it may sound, at least such a method would not be based on requiring potential students today to behave in the manner of the banking system of 2008: the behaviour which *caused* the financial crash in the first place – speculating on possible future values.

A third approach to the theme of qualification is the question of the qualification of the Lord whose name is attached to the review of spending in the first place. This is, of course, a certain Lord Browne. This is not the former British Prime Minister, but rather the former boss of BP, a man who was hounded out of the oil industry because of homophobia. This all arose largely because of a court-case Lord Browne initiated to try to prevent the public revelation of his

homosexuality. In it he committed perjury. He maintained a lie about another person's character for several weeks. However, he escaped punishment for this because the judge deemed public knowledge about his conduct to constitute punishment enough...⁹ Anyway. This is the man who, had he stayed on with BP, would currently be taking the rap for the recent Gulf of Mexico BP oil catastrophe.¹⁰ Indeed, this is the man who was and is so obsessed with making cuts that he is a key contender for the person who arguably ought to be deemed most responsible for the BP disaster in the first place. Not only this, he was also head of BP at the time of the 2005 Texas City oil refinery disaster. Yet, after these disasters, all arguably caused by *t/his* obsessive cost-cutting, we should note, he (untouched, unscathed, unmoved) continues – recommending what will inevitably be further disastrous cuts.

Other authors of the report include the mastermind of the 2008 UK banking bailout as well as management consultants, employees of McKinsey and people who had close connections with ENRON.¹¹ This, then, is disaster capitalism incarnate. Accordingly, the Browne report recommends that billions of pounds be cut, including a 100% reduction in funding for arts, humanities and social sciences. Martin McQuillan has called this 'the nuclear option': total and irreversible destruction of everything whose target is other than financial. McQuillan regards it as a death blow for critical thought itself. Writing about similar cuts in Ireland, Graham Allen stated, 'the future has been cancelled'.¹²

3. The Future's Plight

But, as we have already seen, with the revolts in the media and in popular culture,¹³ and with the marches and protests in London earlier this month (10 November, 2010), maybe the future has not been entirely cancelled. Maybe the public university is not dead, even if its death warrant has apparently been issued.¹⁴

The future may not be bright. But the future may be political. What do I mean by this?

The philosopher Jacques Rancière argues that politics is essentially quite rare. This is because politics only happens when there is a social convulsion – a debate about the *status* of some-one or some group or some-thing within the community. Thus, vis-à-vis feminism, for example, the domestic kitchen is not political simply

because there are power relations there. There are power relations everywhere. Rather, at a certain point in time, the domestic kitchen became political because there was a wider social debate about the status of women in the community.¹⁵

We are hopefully seeing this social convulsion (that *may* give rise to politics) taking place today around the question of the status and role of university education in society. That is, this *may become* political – or it may not become political. It will become ‘political’ only if a scene of argumentation about the status of education in the UK can be established. I think some of the groundwork for this has been done. But it needs more. This process needs *relentless* agitation. Everywhere. As Gramsci put it: permanent persuasion. All the time. But hurry up. Because time is running out. This is not an open-ended ongoing political issue, like sexism or racism. In this case there is limited time before the government will vote on the White Paper. So what should you do? Here are my suggestions.

Ask your parents: should university education be free? Should it be funded by the accrual of future debt per individual or is it a social right? This argument needs to be won.

Win arguments. For politics is about winning arguments and not smashing windows. Politics is not even about marching or striking. These are not the be-all and end-all of politics. ‘To strike’ should not necessarily mean ‘to walk out, to cease activity’; but rather to hit where it hurts. And what hurts an argument? A better argument.

And these are not *mere* arguments. The stakes are high for the politicians who are attempting to persuade us that these shockingly bad decisions are not actually ‘decisions’ but are somehow ineluctably necessary inevitabilities. But remember: *These cuts are not necessary. There are other alternatives.* Politicians need to be reminded of this. Over and over again. More importantly, surely, politicians need to be told that *we will not forget* and we will do everything we can to make their political careers depend on this. Just as there were no ‘weapons of mass destruction’, so there is no need for cuts. Remember.

So ask your parents: should education be free? Ask your grandparents. Ask your aunts and uncles. Should education be free? Ask your MPs: was your education free? Find out what your MP’s degree was in. If they are a Lib-Dem, ask them how they can sleep at night. Ask them whether they want to be re-elected next time. Tell

them everyone regards them as a traitor and a hypocrite – *unless* they do the right thing, *unless* they vote the right way. If your MP is Conservative, ask them whether they want to be re-elected. Ask them: is this vandalism ‘conservative’? Is it ‘big society’? If they are Labour, ask them whether they want to be re-elected. They *can* reverse this.

Tell them this. Slashing funding for arts and humanities will *not* mean the end of the subjects that right-wingers hate: media studies, cultural studies, journalism, etc. Instead it will massively reduce so-called proper subjects: philosophy, history, classics. It will also likely damage the provision of sciences at undergraduate level. Because (also tell them this) contrary to popular opinion, science does not underpin or somehow fund the arts. Quite the opposite is often the case. The cost of teaching science subjects is astronomical. True, the research grants are astronomical. But these are for research projects – and not for the delivery of degrees. Without the financial support of arts and humanities, many universities could not continue to provide science degrees.

Also tell them this, for good measure: the belief in the economic benefits of science is short on proof anyway. The economic benefits of non-vocational subjects, on the other hand, are enormous.

Also tell them this: the theoretical and ideological underpinning of right-wing economic theory and ideology since Thatcher has been based on the classical economics of Adam Smith. Which is great. This is because, in *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith argues that education falls into the category of a non-economic institution that *must* nevertheless be funded by the state, because the economy can’t fund the right sort of education (namely, putatively ‘useless’ education); and without an artistic and cultural education society and the economy will fall into a vicious circle of decline and be unable even to provide a workforce, let alone ‘lead the way’ in a ‘global knowledge economy’. This ultimately suggests that Adam Smith’s belief in the power of the free market to sort itself out is irrational, insofar as his conviction that non-useful (i.e., non-vocational, non-utilitarian) education must be funded by the state (because it has a fundamental and incalculable value) *contradicts his entire premises*.¹⁶ (As a footnote, however: this also suggests that the best thing that any revolutionary Marxists could do now would be to wholeheartedly support the government cuts, because these cuts are helping to speed up the demise of capitalism.)¹⁷

It will be good to use Adam Smith to argue against right-wingers. This could carry more clout than making noises about ‘civil society’ and ‘informed citizenry’ and ‘public sphere’ and ‘democratic debate’ and the ‘values’ of arts and the ‘importance’ of ‘culture’ and all the rest of the things that right-wingers could not care less about – or at least think that common plebs have no right to anyway.

So: rather than shouting about values, simply *deconstruct* arguments. *Show* where and how bad arguments fall down *because of their own terms and their own failed logic*.¹⁸

And then tell them this: the cuts could devastate many universities. Many of these will be the middle class, middle England universities – the countryside campus ones.¹⁹ And then tell them this: moving education out of the price range of the many may devastate the possibility of social mobility for many ethnic minorities. It could entrench class divides in untold ways. It could increase ghettoization in all sorts of places.²⁰ But if they don’t care about other people and other places, then tell them this: if you kill a city or a town’s university, you rip millions upon millions of pounds out of that place’s local economy. You devastate its infrastructure. So it’s not just others who are hurt. You may lose your ‘Marksies’ Food Hall, your Jamie’s Kitchen, your theatre, your art galleries and your ‘cheaper car insurance’.

And then tell them this: none of this will drive young people into rationally choosing science subjects anyway. And if it did, this would prove more expensive for the universities, or the state, because sciences cost so much to deliver and need to be subsidized more often than not by arts, humanities and social sciences. Admittedly, it may drive more people into so-called ‘vocational’ subjects – such as business studies – which are cheap and eminently ‘flexible’ (or empty) and easy to deliver. Yet such supposedly vocational degrees (but are they really?), like any positional good, can only have appeal to the extent that not everyone has one and to the extent that there are vocations out there which need them.

But wait. Arguments about utility are awful anyway. For once you argue about utility, the game is over; you’ve already lost. Here is comedian Stewart Lee on University Funding and the Arts:



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JDEZ2h41t0I>

Now, all of this is all very well and good. But the question remains: what is to be done? Some of the best suggestions I have seen have come from this Captain Ska Video for the song 'Liar Liar':



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQFwxwS7NBI>

There is time left. But keep looking at the clock. Blog. Lobby. Agitate. Do not claim 'radicality'. Being radical or marginal is not what is needed. Being self-evidently – *obviously* – right, correct, ethical, moral, sound, sober, sane: this is the position to strive for. What needs to happen – and quick – is the verification, in every possible context, of the fact that the cuts to education and public services are *self-evidently*, totally, scandalously wrong – and potentially disastrous; that there are alternatives. Make the banks pay. Tax the super rich.²¹ Privatize the debt, nationalize the surplus. Create a new expenses scandal. Cut the shock doctrine. Radicalize common sense. Take time off from doing sponsored walks for charity and organise instead a protest walk, or sit, or stand, or dance, or petition. Have it

sponsored if you must. Raise money for another event. Have fun. Have a carnival. Behave well. Argue well. Remember: not everyone has thought it through. Not everyone agrees with you. Argue with them. Argue well. Check the calendar. When do the MPs vote? That's your deadline. Get the job done by then. There can be no extension this time. Try your best. You have everything to lose. You have a world to gain.

Notes

¹ This piece was written for a 'teach-in' on Wednesday 24th November 2010, in the School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies at Cardiff University. These comments are little more than my recombination of elements derived from arguments made in the media – particularly *The Guardian* – and informed by contributions made by the following academics in particular: Stefan Collini, Jeremy Gilbert, Martin McQuillan, Greg Philo, Nina Power and Jeremy Valentine.

² This argument has been made most forcefully by Jeremy Gilbert over the last few years.

³ [See also Paul Kingsnorth on this.](#)

⁴ Giorgio Agamben argues that 'states of exception' are now the disavowed norm.

⁵ Again, Paul Kingsnorth's book *One No, Many Yeses* is very clear and helpful on the hold of this tautological rationale. It is discussed on his website.

⁶ According to Rancière, the *first* thing that needs to be established in a political relation is 'audibility' – that is, an understanding that one rational party is addressing another, and that the noises being made by one of the parties is not just meaningless babble but actually sentient, thinking, reasoned sense, or logos.

⁷ For a quick rundown of this, [Wikipedia is fine.](#)

⁸ There is an argument that what is happening now is not some kind of new 'jolt' or 'change' in the socio-economic world, but that this is just part and parcel of the normalisation of debt – a normalisation

which has, after all, been the base-level of neoliberal economic for 30 years.

⁹ A concise account of all of this [can again be found on Wikipedia](#).

¹⁰ See Martin McQuillan, writing on The London Graduate School website: [‘If You Tolerate This...: Lord Browne and the Privatisation of the Humanities’](#)

¹¹ *T.H.E.*, [‘Changing interests’](#) 18 November 2010: ‘The narrow make-up of the Browne panel provides evidence of a profound shift in higher education policymaking, says Gareth Dale’.

¹² McQuillan, [‘If You Tolerate This...: Lord Browne and the Privatisation of the Humanities’](#)

¹³ See, for example, [the comedian and light-entertainment chat-show host Paul O’Grady on primetime TV](#)

¹⁴ Nick Couldry and Angela McRobbie: [‘The Death of the University, English Style’](#)

¹⁵ See Jacques Rancière (1999) *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. London: Verso.

¹⁶ See Robert J. C. Young:

Even according to the rigorous analysis of Adam Smith’s economics, then, in which education is constituted solely according to market forces, knowledge outside the orbit of a strict criterion of utility has to be invoked in order to provide something beyond the system that can save it from its own consequences. That philosophical knowledge can only not be assigned to the university because, having in the first instance been rigorously excluded, its introduction would contradict the rest of Smith’s argument so absolutely as to call his entire premises into doubt.

R. Young (1992) ‘The Idea of a Chrestomathic University’, *Logomachia*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 120-121.

¹⁷ See Young again:

Smith discusses education in *Book 5 of The Wealth of Nations*.... Education falls under the category of a noneconomic institution whose ultimate benefit however makes it 'in the highest degree advantageous to a great society.' Smith then immediately focuses on the difference between what might be called the immediate and deferred profits of education: education is an institution whose use-value cannot be measured by the immediate exchange of its product, or, to put it another way, whose cost is greater than the direct exchange-value of the product that it produces, that is, the newly graduated student.

R. Young (1992) 'The Idea of a Chrestomathic University', *Logomachia*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 114.

¹⁸ I have argued this in, for example, 'Alterdisciplinarity' in *Culture, Theory and Critique* (2008).

¹⁹ [See McQuillan.](#)

²⁰ Of course, it may not, insofar as this could all be part and parcel of the normalisation of massive amounts of debt. Indeed, the prospect of greater debt is actually unlikely to affect students' decisions. True, if you ask a 15 year old whether they would pay £9k per year for fees, plus the rest, they will say no, they would not go. But when the obligation is on people to have degrees if they want decent jobs, then the prospect of even the largest debt, which they may never have to repay if they never get a good job, versus having to work in McDonalds their entire life, people will choose the debt option. Pressure to go to university comes from the job-market anyway. Moreover, once financial numbers go beyond a certain amount, they become too ridiculous to take seriously anyway. It's the same as the mortgage: impossibly huge numbers are involved, and one easily moves into a complete acceptance of this debt if that's what you have to have if you want a nice house – and everyone else has one too, so ... In an era when people are obliged to claim to 'give 110%', from performing on *The X Factor* to applying for a mortgage, student debt may not alter the normalization of debt significantly. It

just raises the bar in an ongoing process. *This is so unless a political battle is fought now.*

²¹ Deborah Orr, ['I've got an idea to solve the tuition fee problem – tax the rich'](#), *The Guardian*; [Greg Philo Video](#).

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