
Book review

Book review: *Retreat or Resolution? Tackling the crisis of mass higher education*, by Peter Scott

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Higher education is studied because, in most countries, it is an essential component of national life – in cultural, social, scientific and economic terms – and understanding its workings therefore seems a good idea. But this means more than examining how universities and colleges themselves operate (fascinating though this may be to those working in them). Because higher education everywhere finds itself located where social and economic forces meet one another, the field must engage with problems that go beyond what is usually thought of as the daily work of universities and colleges.

For example, creating human capital is widely understood to be central to economic growth in advanced economies, but what is the role of universities and colleges in producing (and, actually, defining) this form of capital, how is its creation to be funded, and how does higher education's supply-side role interact with demand? To take another example, do universities and colleges lead, or reflect, social and cultural changes, and what can we learn from seeing what they teach? (This is a matter of particular concern to those determined to fight 'culture wars', and so details of university operations can become sharply politicised.) Studying higher education also enables us to examine the extent of pluralism in the society in question: do central agencies call the shots, or do local bodies, and higher education institutions themselves, have a significant say? Do regional democratic institutions come into

play, and how is this manifested in university planning and management? Politics and economics are not just university subjects: their interactions determine much of what universities do.

Peter Scott, the most acute current analyst of the development of mass higher education in the UK, ends the first chapter of his new book by fearing that the 'very purposes of a university education ... seem to have been diminished and undermined' (18). This – interim – conclusion is all the more surprising because Scott has in a few pages outlined the paradox that mass higher education has, in just a few decades, utterly transformed British life, despite universities themselves having been 'curiously reluctant to devise a ... "story" ... about mass higher education as a whole' (10). (Scott is careful to note that Scotland, however, has always had its own story, 'however mythic' [17], to tell here.) How can it be that higher education is engaged in the range of crucial tasks just noted, and yet its purposes remain unclear?

Part of the problem, Scott suggests, is that the development of mass higher education has created 'a new and more generic "graduate" culture', as distinct from the traditional task of 'reproduction of social and political elites, still performed by elite universities' (138). Combined with other developments, such as obsessions with social media and political complaints about cosmopolitan 'citizens of nowhere', the effect has been 'to destabilise the authority of higher education' (139). All the topics mentioned above which involve the study of higher education may come into play here, so it is easy to see how the signal about what mass higher education is trying to do can get lost in the noise of competing cultural arguments and political claims.

Looking ahead, Scott notes that the Conservative government in 2020 disavowed the 50 per cent higher education participation target associated with the last Labour government, without apparently noticing that the target had already been exceeded. Just as selection at 11-plus largely disappeared in the 1960s, when politicians realised that voters had become disinclined to accept their children being labelled as failures, no political party expecting to win power today is going to antagonise voters by removing the university places their children might fill: Scott reports that virtually all parents now expect their children to take part in higher education. But the interesting point, Scott notes (and the argument could also be made, still, about the 11-plus), is 'how deeply unchallenged notions of ... "excellence" ... have remained rooted' (169). Although the 1963 Robbins Report cleared the path intellectually for university expansion by driving a stake through the heart of the 'more means worse' argument, like one of the undead in a cheap horror movie, the argument still emerges regularly from its grave. It is the differentiation that the higher education system itself creates – what Scott calls 'the persistence of an anachronistic taxonomy' (169) – step forward, the Russell Group! – that helps perpetuate the idea that it is the expanded system itself which is the problem.

This takes us back to the need for higher education in twenty-first-century Britain – or perhaps England – to have a better story to tell. Scott suggests a three-strand narrative. One strand should be about higher education's tasks in supporting localities and regions, with local politicians having a key role in managing the civic responsibilities of universities and colleges (so a partial reinvention of the polytechnic model). A second strand concerns higher education's role in supporting civil society and the public space. And a third is the unavoidably necessary role of higher education in skill formation. But I wonder if this is the page-turner story we need. Scott touches on what seems to me to be an eminently saleable message when discussing funding: 'Free tuition is the firmest possible affirmation of the public character of higher education ... Higher education is not simply a kind-of-commodity, or ticket to a job ... it also incurs an obligation, and responsibilities, to a wider community – more "us" than "me"' (188). Scott is surely correct in arguing that the most damaging effect of the 2012 changes to English higher education was to seem to make it a purely 'me' affair. The case needs to be made that mass higher education in contemporary Britain is actually about everybody: it changes those who directly take part, and they in turn change the society around them.