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'THE PROBLEM OF 'THE STUDENT' IN UNIVERSITY HISTORIES
Post-war Britain 1957-1972'
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NUS100 '[Researching student histories: Methodological and theoretical aspects](#)', 14 Sept 2022

Introduction (300) Slide 1

- Thank you
 - Been amazing series I've learned a lot and its been so good to hear about other people's work and the methodological approaches and their findings
- At this end stage of this series of workshops I want to maybe respond to some of the discussions we've been having
 - Particularly where these discussions are helpful for thinking about methodological approaches to do what my thesis was trying to do – which is to illuminate the role of 'students' in society
 - And since we're on material culture I want to point towards why I think these sorts of sources are particularly important for that task

The thesis – my findings (600) – Slide 2

- The aim of my thesis was to respond to Robert Anderson's call in 2017 to integrate the history of post-war higher education within 'social change and with broader intellectual and cultural developments'
 - I came to an argument which attached itself to a historiographical moment which broadly seeks to disrupt the prevailing narrative of the history of post-war Britain.
 - It goes something like this: after WW2 a post-war consensus established a social democratic era, where the state was empowered to intervene in society to redistribute wealth towards achieving certain agreed political ends.
 - This included the expansion of higher education to provide places for 'all those who qualify by ability and attainment and who wish to do so'.
 - By the 1970s and 1990s however this gave way to a marketised or neoliberal regime which rolled back the interventionist powers of the state

Slide 3

- However, recent historiographical trends in post-war British history instead stress the 'dynamism' of post-war British social democracy.
 - Individualism and consumerism have been repeatedly removed from the exclusive domain of post-1979 Thatcherite competitiveness and identified as a constituting element of working class and gender identities, left-wing politics, youth culture, and the growth in the demand for education during the 1950s to the 1970s.
 - It further questions the utility of categories such as 'social democracy' and 'neoliberalism', recognising diversity and pluralism within these liberal strands.
- In my thesis, I argued that the expansion recommended in the famous Robbins Report, for example, was based not on so-called 'manpower' needs determined centrally (note the obviously gendered language).
 - Instead, it was based on student demand with the state and young people encouraged to see their time in higher education as a self-interested investment in their human capital and in support of human flourishing, so they might become citizen-consumers in the good free society.

Slide 4

- What's more, reformist university leaders generated a new form of university liberal education.
 - They developed arguments of the 1930s and 1940s of the likes of R. H. Tawney, Lord Lindsay, developed at Keele, and Sussex and beyond by Fulton.
 - These university leaders were deeply concerned that the education system in Germany had insufficiently inoculating the population with the necessary liberal moral virtues to resist tyranny and Fascism, enabled by modern technologies
 - TO ensure the same did not happen in Britain, young people needed to be educated in broad educations from 'Plato to NATO', like at Keele.
- In my thesis I identified a group of what I called 'reformist' vice-chancellors along with a number of industrialists who developed this idea further.
 - They retooled these liberal virtues to include an appreciation of the moral mission of liberal capitalism
 - Students needed an 'holistic' appreciation of the place of their technological specialisms to securing freedoms needed in liberal capitalism.
 - These reformists additionally stressed that they would need to 'understand' the profit motive:
 - That profit was not about the pursuit of self-interest but about demonstrating that there was a social need for a product and being able to expediently provide that
 - In the midst of the Cold-War, students needed to understand and justify capitalism.
 - This was relevant for gendered male working citizens, and also women, who it was assumed would become mothers and teachers and perpetuate these values onto their children
 - 'Overseas students' – often used as shorthand for non-white commonwealth students - were expected to 'return home' and perpetuate these values in decolonising spaces.
 - Higher education was therefore a programme to generate citizens who pursued their self-interest to further their personal flourishing so that this would generate individual and social returns, and perpetuate the conditions necessary to secure prosperous liberal capitalism.
 - From this perspective its particularly treacherous to call this expansion social democratic or neoliberal – there's a lot going on.
 - I can talk more about this argument if people are interested another time.

Some limitations (600) – Slide 5

- So when I first wrote the proposal for this paper, I was making corrections to the thesis and I was particularly thinking about a problem I had with 'the student' in my thesis.
 - This student, the 'citizen-consumer' imagined by university reformists, was just that, imaginary. In the thesis I had little to say specifically about how far students absorbed, rejected, or remixed these expectations
 - I was also acutely aware that my source base had primarily been derived from the written records of that reformist group, with some oral histories, student media, and other ephemera.
 - These are of course problems of existing university histories too, which tend to focus on the stated aims of higher education policy and institutional strategies
 - At worse, this dissolves into celebrations of institutional leaders and strategies at the expense of critical investigations of learning and teaching

- If you're seeking to integrate the story of post-war HEIs within the cold-war and they're expanding, its imperative we understand how far the imagined vision for students translated into social behaviours and understandings.
- That might seem really obvious to this audience, but I think what it means is that histories of *universities* need to become much more histories of *students* if they are to actually be satisfactory histories of universities.
 - Student histories are not just important for their own sake but essential to understanding HEIs as a whole.

Slide 6

- But I also have reservations as to the way existing histories of universities and students are conducted, some of which we've discussed in these workshops.
 - We've talked in these sessions about using student media, oral histories, and media culture and I think these have been used to really valuable ends
 - There remain louder voices
 - Our histories seem to rely on the reminiscences of a number of often self-selected and confident alumni body: those who came to hold important institutional roles or became student political leaders
 - Both groups I think are more alike than they let on, and tend towards nostalgia and collective-memory making rather than something more critical
 - we've known for a long time that these groups' experiences are not representative of broader student experiences.
 - The constantly repeated example is that while student politicians were very active lefties, it was the Conservative society sherry parties that were the largest on campus
 - I suspect there is a great deal of room for dynamism even within that idea
 - Similarly, the storage of ephemera and material culture seems to depend on similar archival practices

A future project (600) Slide 7

- In this final section I want to make a suggestion as to the sort of methodological approaches and source bases that might be handy in beginning to bring HEI histories into dialogue with 'social change and with broader intellectual and cultural developments'
 - So. Welcome to my Leverhulme application
- Firstly, I think a big part of HEI histories is missing
 - Is scope for a much stronger appreciation of pedagogy - where policy and student learning and living coincide.
 - That to me points towards using a range of sources which seem underutilised at the moment – departmental archives, student assessments, student feedback,
 - alongside material culture of student living, and oral histories, as we talked about last-time, as valuable aids to understanding this material.
- Secondly, it might be worth taking an almost microhistorical approach or case study approach
 - A limited number (6-10) of case studies of the pedagogic practice and careers of innovative teachers in HEIs from across the British higher education system and from through its global sphere of influence,
 - Not develop a representative account but to illuminate the margins in the hope of shedding light on the possibilities within these spaces
 - For example – there are two or three people I've already identified would make interesting case studies

- Physicist Arthur Vick taught at Keele, went to Queens Uni Belfast, then became Pro-VC at Warwick over his career.
 - Chemist Tom Cottrell who became the first Vice-Chancellor of the University of Stirling when it opened in 1968, before coming to teaching was a research chemist at Imperial Chemical Industries, and before coming to Edinburgh
 - Those who have taught on both sides of the binary divide or between and within teacher training colleges
 - Joan Brown, for example, at Coventry Teacher Training college, I think the only Teacher Training College to be absorbed by a university (Warwick)
 - Following their careers opens up the possibility of longitudinal studies of student cohorts that they taught
 - Relies less on alumni networks associated with single institutions
- This would hopefully build a messier account of the different ways in which the way policy and pedagogy imagined students learned was filtered through the complicated process of student living at HEIs, and gain a better appreciation of what roles HEIs actually played in post-war society:
 - How did their time at university prepare them for the challenges they faced in their lives and their relationships with others? How has this changed over time?
 - attitudes to work and entrepreneurialism, but also attitudes to personal health, gender and sexuality.
 - Not just limited to curricula, not just limited to experiences living in digs, but what was *learned* by students through the process of applying and graduating from university with student support
 - I often wonder if this *pedagogy* is particularly evident to me as a member of the first student cohort to have to pay the new £9000p/a tuition fees from 2012.
 - The exciting thing for me is then the possibility of a kind of collective reflective practice, and think about, what does this mean for how we teach and how students learn? And what does it mean for policy and perhaps the way HEIs are funded?
 - Put another way, what forms of liberal governmentalities were HEIs sustaining during this time?

Questions to the audience (200) Slide 8

- Ok so the questions I have then at this stage
 - First and foremost – has this project been done before?
 - There are of course accounts of teachers' legacies, particularly of people in History like E.P. Thompson that I'm aware of, or particularly Chris Hilliard's English as a Vocation on F.R. Leavis' influence.
 - Is there a reason this sort of project hasn't been done before? Methodologically, archivally...
 - From those who have conducted oral histories before – how feasible do you think such an approach would be? Is that one way around the hierarchies of audibility in student histories?
- Thank you!