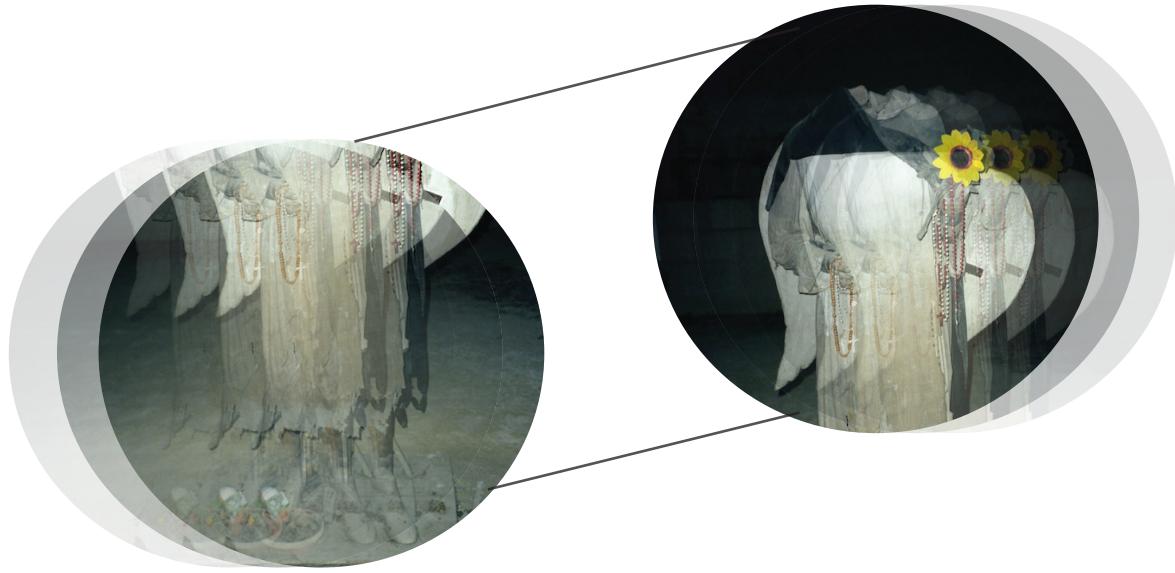


The Individual Contribution

ROSS SPEER



'Individual Contribution' as a category of reference is intended to capture the idea that a university education is primarily for individual benefit. The cost of that education should, therefore, be shouldered (at least in part), by the individual. Education is correspondingly treated as a private and not a public good. The individual contribution became concrete with both the introduction and increases in tuition fees. The same logic, however, is also present with the alternative of the graduate tax. I argue that the 'Individual Contribution' is central to the current process of refocusing higher education away from its public value and towards a commodity that provides added value to the consumer. Education is thus primarily directed towards fulfilling the requirements of business. The individual contribution has transformed from its modest roots with Labour's introduction of tuition fees in 1998, into the predominant public/private tension that characterises the Higher Education system today.

The increases in individual contribution between 1998 and today, most drastically with the 2012 increase in tuition fees by 300%, represent the means by which students are being encouraged to think of their own education as a commodity. Students at some universities will feel this process more sharply than others. Successively shifting the direct cost burden of education onto individual students has engendered this logic. A degree is transformed from being a certification of scholarly proficiency and critical thinking into something that can be 'consumed' by the individual. Thus the entire process of Higher Education becomes reduced to the conferred value of the consumed degree. The student, now the the passive receipt of commodified knowledge, may now command additional worth upon entry to the labour market.

This knowledge is increasingly compacted in to 'transferable skills'. The specific content of a degree becomes irrelevant. What matters is the attainment of a high level of proficiency in reading, writing, analysing, or any other combination of compartmentalised skills. It is surely suspect whether employers have ever cared much for what a graduate may or may not know. Whether it is medieval or modern history is rather inconsequential on reaching the labour market, apart from in a few highly specific jobs. There remains something, however, particularly insidious about the current transformation. Subsumed

under this ideology of individualism, the complex and unique combination of knowledge possessed by a particular person is reduced to a set of universal categories to be quantified and priced.

The directive principle of the university, conceived as a public good, is that each student makes a contribution, however small, to the production and reproduction of the totality of knowledge in general. They thus partake in a ‘community of scholars’. This is now replaced by attempts to claim superiority in certain quantifiable skills that may command a higher price with a specific employer. Here the notion of ‘employability’ enters. The only contribution a student is now meant to make is to their own value as a commodity to be traded on the market. The value of the commodity traded in this way will oscillate relative to that of its competition. The ideal of a ‘community of scholars’ is replaced by the ‘competition of commodities’.

The risk here is great. Once one accepts the validity of the individual contribution, whether it be via fees, a graduate tax, or some other method, employability as a guiding theme follows in logical sequence. This is the path taken by National Union of Students and many local Students’ Unions. These now serve as tools to put employability in to the core of education, not necessarily because of a fervent belief in individual contribution, but due to a capitulation to the contributory principle as the appropriate funding method for Higher Education. If students are paying directly for their education then they will surely begin to demand a financial return. This is only the application of basic consumer rationality. If education is primarily to be about employability, then it makes sense to allow businesses to specify what they want out of a graduate. The restructuring of education towards individual financial benefit allows Business to command a greater influence in Higher Education’s content and direction. In this way an entire array of neoliberal policies can be instituted with the assistance of the very institutions that may otherwise be inclined to resist them.

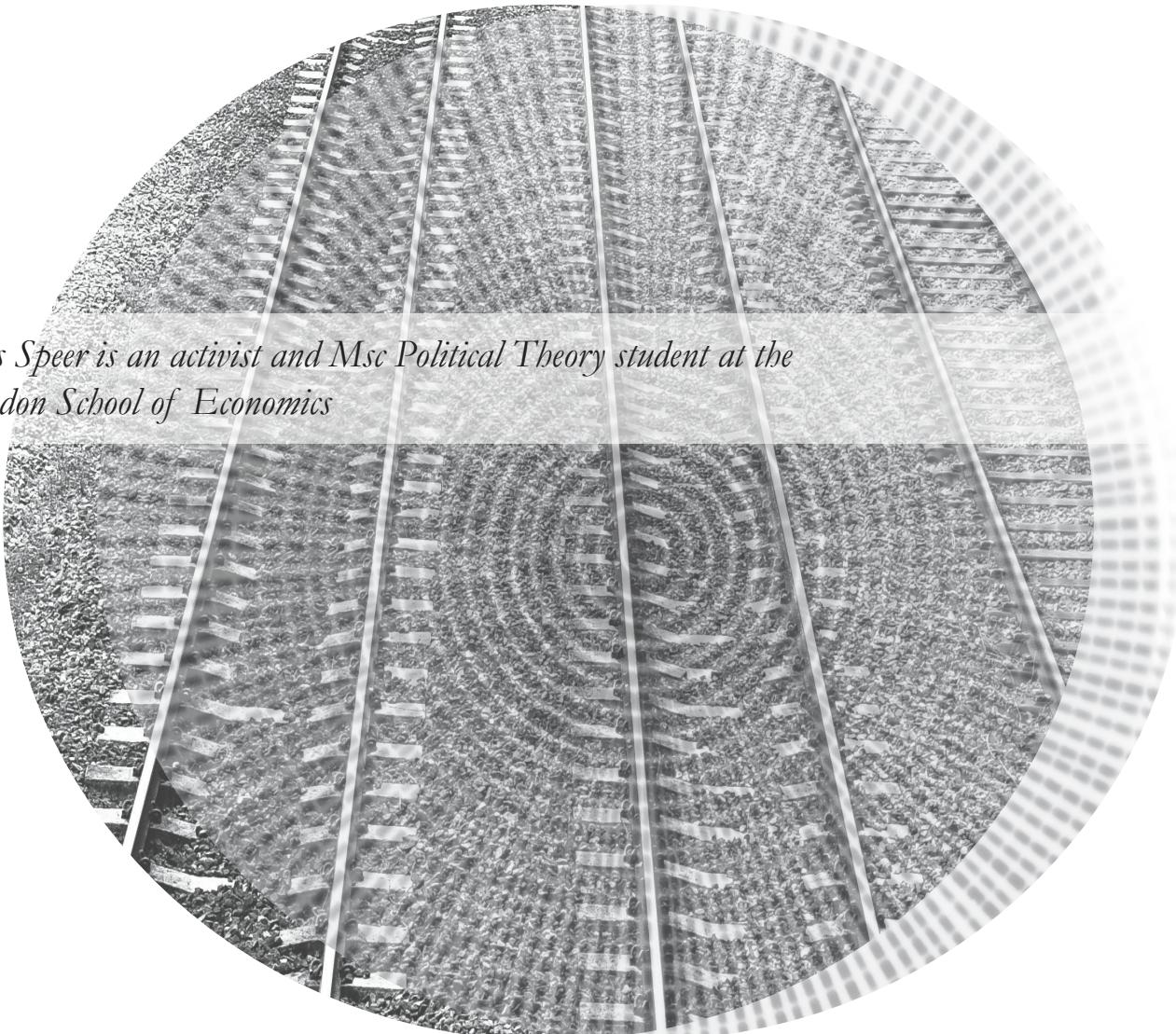
Right from the moment of application in Higher Education, employability has become the guiding attitude. Funding was cut to a greater degree from the humanities than the sciences, precisely because businesses continue to demand science graduates, not philosophers. Taking a humanities degree is now a gamble, especially for those that cannot reach the top universities. Humanities degrees will be increasingly open only to those from class backgrounds that provide a relative degree of security in the job market. Degree courses that one may be interested in, or good at, are becoming closed to most in favour of degree courses that increase net worth in the eyes of employers.

The increasing use of Postgraduate Teaching Assistants and adjunct professors is also linked to these developments. Being at the forefront of research in a particular subject area ceases to be a relevant qualification when the assigned task is to churn out graduates with transferable skills. The deployment of video lectures and MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) assists only in the process of displacing expensive professors for large and impersonal lectures. Professors can be replaced with cheap and mass produced knowledge for the bulk of the required student interactions. Employability comes to transform education away from anything resembling critical thinking, and towards a generic production line. Rather than being bearers of unique combinations of knowledge, graduates are made to order according to standardised templates.

This also forms the ideological rationale behind the increasing prevalence of working students. The driving force for this has been the coercion implicit in the ending of living grants and the failure of maintenance loans to keep up with living costs. Nevertheless, once the purpose of university mutates from knowledge production to employability, students-as-workers become a surety. If there is one thing employers value above the aforementioned ‘transferable skills’, it is a proven ability to put up with the drudgery of work. Internship completions become the new Firsts.

Linking together each of these transformations within the contemporary university can demonstrate that the processes are not distinct, but organised around the unifying logic of the individual contribution. We can now see why accepting the individual contribution (in whatever form it takes), entails the complete restructuring of what education means. Consequently, if the left is to put forward an alternative type of education orientated towards a public good, it must be centred on the sole opponent of the individual contribution: free education. Free education is not just one principle among many, but the cohering element around which each other point of antagonism over education must be structured. Only in a system funded by society as a whole will we reclaim a system directed towards the needs of society in general. There should be no doubt my account of the emerging developments in Higher Education has been one sided: video lectures and MOOCs, for instance, open up possibilities for bringing education to those lacking the chance to benefit from the traditional university. What matters is whether these innovations act either as tools for employability or profit, or for the expansion of access to knowledge as a good in and of itself.

The (re)emergence of a movement at the University of Sussex demonstrates that possibilities of collective resistance for a different kind of education remain, even if centred at a local level. This means that struggle within individual universities is now (in comparison to the movement of 2010), likely to emerge over symptoms rather than causes. That is why free education is the only alternative to the individual contribution and the neoliberalisation of higher education in its entirety



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