

# Equity, markets and the politics of aspiration in Australian higher education

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This paper provides a critical discussion of contemporary policy agendas to raise aspirations for university among students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds. It traces the politics of aspiration from the working class 'poverty of desire' thesis propounded by British socialists at the turn of the twentieth century to recent concerns about the educational aspirations of low SES groups. These concerns are manifest in the current aspiration-raising agenda in Australian higher education, which aims to realise equity objectives by cultivating market-rational behaviour and dispositions to maximise self-investment in human capital. However, changes in contemporary global education and labour markets present significant obstacles to the 'good life' promises made by advocates of human capital theory, and even when these promises are realised, deficit constructions of aspirations persist. The paper identifies a tension in aspiration-raising logics between (a) human capital promises of economic rewards for enterprising behaviour, and (b) the policing of aspirations and associated behaviours according to dominant social values.

**Keywords:** Equity, marketization, higher education, aspirations, human capital, education policy

Competition is as much a method for breeding certain types of mind as anything else: the very cast of thinking of the great entrepreneurs would not exist but for the environment in which they developed their gifts. The same capacity to think will take a wholly different turn according to the task set to it. (Hayek, 1979, p. 76)

## Introduction

This paper examines the aspiration-raising agenda in current Australian higher education policy, particularly efforts to widen participation through the cultivation of dispositions conducive to capitalist market competition. Aspiration and the broader concept of the imaginary (Gaonkar, 2002) have become central categories for the analysis of contemporary economic, political and cultural life in the context of globalisation. The increased mobility of people, things and ideas has expanded the imaginative resources available to people when contemplating their futures and those of their children (Appadurai, 1996). Further, governance in advanced liberal nations increasingly acts at the level of people's anxieties, fears and hopes (Massumi, 2010; Rose, 1999), including through promises of wealth and mobility for those who invest appropriately in their human capital (Brown, 2006). Such promises can produce

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conditions of ‘cruel optimism’ for many (Berlant, 2011), as the rewards and opportunities of the global knowledge economy flow to a few, while others are left striving in hope-sustaining anticipation only to find their position stagnating or becoming worse (Brown, Lauder & Ashton, 2010). Aspiration, defined as a complex disposition that spans both conscious plans and felt possibilities for the future—a kind of ‘thinking-feeling’ (Massumi, 2011)—is now an important locus for the intersection of politics and policy across global, national and personal scales.

Equity policy in Australian higher education (HE) is currently focused on raising aspirations for university among students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds. This agenda has emerged as part of broader reforms that include efforts to expand Australian higher education (HE) by uncapping places to create a demand-driven system. Policy now frames aspiration as a motivational force that can increase participation and, subsequently, social mobility for disadvantaged groups, while also reinvigorating human capital investment and improving national economic competitiveness through increased HE attainment. This current attention to aspiration borrows from English policy over the previous decade (e.g. the Aimhigher program), which also promoted aspiration-raising as a means to widen participation in HE. In both contexts, it has been argued that people from low SES backgrounds lack appropriate educational aspirations and this creates a barrier to higher education. Such criticism of working class desires extends back at least as far as the late nineteenth century in England.

The first section of the paper briefly traces the ‘poverty of desire’ thesis that emerged in English utopian socialist politics at this time and its mobilisation since to explain both lack of political motivation and social disadvantage. Contemporary concerns about aspiration have been incorporated into what Rizvi and Lingard (2010) describe as the ‘social imaginary of neoliberal globalisation’. A social imaginary is ‘a way of thinking shared in a society by ordinary people, the common understandings that make everyday practice possible, giving them sense and legitimacy’ (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 34; cf. Taylor, 2004). In the neoliberal imaginary ‘high’ aspirations are linked to the project of self-capitalisation through rational market behaviour, including investment in education to improve employment prospects. An intensified ‘politics of aspiration’ (Raco, 2009) has emerged in the context of post-Keynesian governance and the rise of human capital theory, which contends that ‘[t]he economic successes of individuals, and also of whole economies, depends on how extensively and effectively people invest in themselves’ (Becker, 2006, p. 292). While human capital was initially defined as the ‘knowledge, information, ideas, skills, and health of individuals’ (Becker, 2006, p. 292), the distinction between these attributes and the individuals who acquire them has gradually dissolved. Every aspect of life now is a potential opportunity for self-capitalisation and ‘human capital as a dominant subjective form is a defining feature of neoliberalism’ (Feher, 2009, p. 24). Aspiration is promoted as a virtue for this subjective form.

The second section of the paper describes the contemporary higher education policy context in Australia, particularly in relation to equity policy. The focus here is on how the politics of aspiration aligns current equity agendas with neoliberal assumptions regarding self-interested behaviour in education markets. Contrary to a common belief that such behaviour in competitive markets is innate, as implied by policy statements that call for ‘unleashing’ aspirations or potential, neoliberal theory holds that the ‘spirit of enterprise’ required to sustain competition must be actively produced (Hayek, 1979). This intent is evident in efforts to actively raise aspirations for university. While this agenda is legitimised primarily in terms of increasing

equity, it seeks to do so by encouraging the ‘cast of thinking’ that is required for market competition.

The final section of the paper examines the tensions between market logics and cultural politics in this agenda. It considers the affective terrain on which aspirations are formed, and the relation of ‘cruel optimism’ that arises when objects of desire that sustain people’s life projects simultaneously undermine them (Berlant, 2011). This relation is an increasingly likely outcome of the ‘neoliberal opportunity bargain’ described by Brown et al. (2010), which promises economic rewards to those who pursue human capital investment through higher education. These promises are proving more difficult to keep in contemporary global labour markets. Further, groups who avoid this ‘opportunity trap’ and achieve economic mobility without higher education still find themselves criticised for holding the ‘wrong’ aspirations. The paper concludes by considering possibilities for moving beyond the politics of aspiration.

### **From the poverty of desire to the politics of aspiration**

At the turn of the twentieth century, in a short pamphlet titled *The straight tip to workers: Brains better than bets or beer*, English socialist politician John Burns decried that:

So far the workmen have failed to realise their duty and the responsibility of industrial citizenship. Securing a few crumbs of reform, they are content—not asking too much is their fault. The curse of the working class is the fewness of their wants, the poverty of their desires, the overloading of a few sensuous tastes, the absence of a varied set of elevated and healthy desires. This must not be; if it is to be all the predictions of the enemies of Democracy will be justified. (Burns, 1902, pp. 12-13)

Burns believed that members of the working class were too easily satisfied with leisure activities that provided temporary release from oppressive working conditions (Waters, 1990). This ‘poverty of desire’ was perceived to be an obstacle to building popular political support for socialism. The British socialists felt it was their responsibility to educate the desires of the working class, through the publication of utopian fiction and the provision of more cultivated forms of leisure, in order to encourage ‘higher tastes’ and to stimulate transformative political aspirations (Waters, 1990).

The desires of the working class have been a matter of concern in British and Australian politics ever since. In the middle of last century, British Labour politician Ernest Bevin revived the ‘poverty of desire’ thesis, criticising the British working class for their satisfaction with gradual improvements in basic living standards, rather than desiring more rapid and radical change during the post-war period (Roebuck, 1973, p. 162). More recently, New Labour in the UK fashioned their ‘third-way’ political strategy in response to the aspirations of an upwardly mobile section of the working class. Tony Blair argued that this group of aspirational voters perceived Labour policies to be holding them back, and it was therefore important for Labour to combat shifting allegiances toward the Conservative party, which Blair believed to be a factor in Labour’s 1992 electoral defeat (Johnson, 2004). This belief also permeated the Australian Labor Party at the turn of the twenty-first century, and was particularly evident in the policy positions set out by former leader Mark Latham. Johnson (2004) notes that ‘[o]ne of the strongest Blairite influences on Latham [was] the key

emphasis on attracting aspirational suburban voters' (p. 543). Indeed, Latham (2003, p. 68) argued that economic '[o]wnership and aspiration need to be at the heart of Labor's policy platform'.

From Burns to Latham, the poverty of desire thesis evolved from an argument about political motivations to one about social mobility. While Burns and Bevin criticised an apparent lack of political zeal among the working class, Blair and Latham courted a class fraction who distinguished themselves through their consumer aspirations. At this time, in Australia, the 'aspirationals' were popularly identified with large outer-suburban homes, private education, and consumer goods such as large-screen televisions (Goot & Watson, 2007). Where the British socialists argued that 'any poverty of desire was usually the result of an emerging consumer society which blocked the expression of the innate desire for genuine pleasure' (Waters, 1990, p. 47), Blair and Latham presented the desire for economic ownership as an important motivational force for social change: 'The ownership revolution is here to stay. Aspirational politics is a logical consequence of this reality' (Latham, 2003, p. 68). This aspirational politics emerged in the context of advanced liberalism and the growing equation of citizenship with appropriate consumption practices (Bauman, 2005; Rose, 1999).

Aspiration has now become an important site of contemporary governmentality (Foucault, 2000). Raco (2009) argues that, since the election of the Blair government in 1997, social policy in England has focused on developing 'aspirational citizens' who take responsibility for improving themselves, their communities and, ultimately, their nation. In contrast to the welfare state 'politics of expectation' and its emphasis on state-sponsored redistribution, the new politics of aspiration targets the potential of consumer-citizens as a fuel for economic productivity and social mobility. Raco (2009, p. 437) argues that this is an 'existential politics ... through which dominant social *values* are defined and institutionalised'. Aspiration-focused policy partitions society into those who aspire appropriately and those who do not, while a broader cultural politics renders only a select set of desires visible as 'aspirational'.

In the neoliberal imaginary, aspirations to pursue self-maximisation through education and subsequent advancement through labour market opportunities appear self-evidently 'high'. People who do not act in ways that demonstrate their pursuit of these aspirations are perceived to lack the information required to appreciate the benefits of self-capitalising behaviour, or, more simplistically, to be lazy and recalcitrant citizen-consumers who hold anachronous expectations of state provision: 'bludgers' who suffer from a poverty of desire that is often considered even more dire than material poverty.

In the context of ongoing global financial crises, the invidious position of this group has intensified. A new politics of austerity has combined with the politics of aspiration, which in the UK the Coalition Government has inherited from Labour and repackaged, raising the stakes for those who are unable to find an entrepreneurial way through hard economic times and the disastrous consequences of the close relationship between nation-states and finance capital (Helms, Vishmidt & Berlant, 2010; Marazzi, 2010). In this context, promises of social mobility through education are becoming harder to keep. However, in Australia a mining resources boom led by demand from China has so far enabled it to survive the global financial crises better than most countries. This has helped to sustain human capital investment through educational expansion while providing visible social mobility for a few who are benefiting from high paying jobs in the mining sector. However, while some fractions of the working class are presented as exemplary, based on the social mobility they

have achieved through education and entrepreneurialism, the desires of this latter group have been criticised despite their economic success. This issue is taken up again later in the paper.

### **Raising aspiration for Australian higher education**

There has been a significant expansion and equity agenda in Australian higher education since the release of the *Review of Australian Higher Education* in 2008 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008) and the Australian Government's (2009) policy response in 2009. Equity in Australian higher education is currently conceived as proportional representation for groups who are identified as disadvantaged, and the current focus is on students from low SES backgrounds. Low SES is determined on the basis of residence at the time of enrolment, in a geographical area of Australia that ranks in the lowest 25% of areas according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics.<sup>1</sup> Equitable participation is defined as 25% of all students currently participating in the system having resided in these areas when they enrolled. Over the past two decades the participation rate of students from low SES backgrounds has stagnated at around 15% system-wide (Australian Government, 2009), although institution-specific participation rates vary markedly across universities. Two issues are important to note in relation to the current emphasis on SES. First, it has tended to divert attention from other forms of inequity, including gender and racial inequities. Second, the concept of SES displaces the language of class and tends to individualise disadvantage and its 'solutions'.

The Australian Government (2009) has set national targets to increase the numbers of Australians holding Bachelor's qualifications (40% of 25–34 year olds by 2025) and the participation rate for people from low SES backgrounds (20% by 2020). In 2012, the government uncapped the number of publically funded places for domestic students in undergraduate programs, aiming to create a system driven by student demand and anticipating that, in turn, this demand would drive expansion (Sellar, Gale, & Parker, 2011). From 2012 to 2015 the Australian Government has committed more than \$700 million to increase the low SES participation rate through its Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), including more than \$200 million of competitive funding for projects designed to raise aspirations for university study. This commitment follows a recommendation made in the *Review*, which identified an 'aspiration gap' between students in the top and bottom quartiles of socio-economic status. It argued that this presents a significant obstacle to increasing the participation of those at the bottom: 'Barriers to access for such students include their previous educational attainment, no awareness of the long-term benefits of higher education and, thus, no aspiration to participate' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008, p. 27).

The *Review* draws on Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2008, p. 60) data and analyses that recommend school-based interventions to redress the fact that 'students whose parents have lower levels of education underestimate more often the net benefits of tertiary education'. 'Aspiration gaps' are here linked to 'information gaps' that contribute to the reduced likelihood of people from low SES backgrounds engaging in what is considered to be rational behaviour: that is, the pursuit of higher education to gain positional advantage in the global labour market. Following this logic, the government aims to 'enable Australia to participate fully in, and benefit from, the global knowledge economy. ... In that

process the nation must provide educational opportunity for all, not just the few' (Australian Government, 2009, p. 5). This agenda links the project of improving equity for individuals, by raising their awareness about the benefits of higher education, to the project of increasing national economic productivity and competitiveness. Accordingly, the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) has been designed 'to create leading practice and competitive pressures to increase the aspirations of low SES students to higher education' by providing 'schools and vocational education and training providers with links to universities, exposing their students to people, places and opportunities beyond the scope of their own experiences, helping teachers raise the aspirations of their students' (Australian Government, 2009, p. 14). In 2011, the HEPPP provided competitive funding for eleven projects and these predominantly involved universities (individually or in consortia) working with secondary schools to increase students' awareness about higher education and to help improve levels of educational achievement.

The current emphasis on aspiration brings together social justice impulses and commitments to neoliberal economic policy settings and forms of governmentality. It inherits directly from 'Third Way' social democratic policy positions proposed by Mark Latham a decade ago.<sup>2</sup> In his writing on education policy, Latham introduced the notion of 'aspirational equality', which he defined as a condition 'in which all individuals and institutions are able to fulfil their potential, according to their own values and aspirations' (2001, p. 22). While retaining an emphasis on economic mobility for the working class, Latham argued that, under the conditions of neoliberal globalisation, the pursuit of economic self-interest within markets is the most appropriate means to realise this end, rather than what he argued were out-dated forms of redistribution. According to Latham, '[e]very learner and every institution needs to be given the freedom to achieve their aspirations' (2001, pp. 22–23). In this view, the role of government is to remove any obstacles to aspirations, while providing targeted funding to help people realise them.

The concept of aspirational equality presupposes beliefs about human behaviour and the role of government that are central to the social imaginary of neoliberal globalization. Aspirational equality relies on a 'conception of society as constituted by self-maximising individuals with the free capacity to choose, as well as a conception of government as necessarily inimical to individual interests' (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 87). In this view, justice is potentially 'compromised because of the perennial desire of governments to redistribute wealth that is never theirs and to seek to control human affairs that are best left to individual discretion' (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, pp. 87–88). Aspiration is often presented as an innate property of individuals that is more likely to be hindered than helped by government intervention.

Latham (2003) argues that aspiration is spurred by previous success in market competition and the desire to emulate the successes of others. For example, he heralds a new era of aspiration that has emerged as a result of previous economic mobility for the working class, spurred in Australia by the provision of greater educational opportunities during the 1970s and market reforms in the 1980s: 'The workers have had a taste of economic ownership and, not surprisingly, they want more. ... Mobility the likes of which we have never seen before is fuelling further aspiration' (Latham, 2003, p. 67). The fraction of the working class who now aspire—the 'aspirationals'—have enjoyed mobility in conditions of market competition and this has left them wanting more; those who have not, require better information about what they are missing. Here we can see how a supposed poverty of aspiration is configured as a lack

of information about how to gain advantage in markets. Making this information available and providing people with a taste of success can ‘unleash’ previously fettered aspirations and drive social mobility.

However, neoliberal theory recognises that individuals cannot be relied upon to engage in market behaviour in relation to higher education. Marginson (1993, p. 2) observes that ‘market behaviours in higher education ... are neither ‘natural’ nor inevitable’ and ‘[e]conomic identities are a product of their context ... these identities can be constructed—not only by market forces but by deliberate policy’. He refers to Hayek’s (1979, p. 76) argument that market competition produces market-rational behaviour, rather than this behaviour being the precondition for market competition. The success of a few entrepreneurs in markets compels others to behave in a rational manner. A number of implications follow from this argument. First, as Marginson (1993) notes, this behaviour, and the dispositions that animate it, must be actively cultivated. Second, raising aspiration among those who ‘lack the spirit of enterprise’ requires the example of an elite few who have gained advantage in markets (Hayek, 1979, p. 76). Finally, contexts where advantage seeking actions of the elite are subject to contestation or prohibition by others are inimical to markets and the entrepreneurial spirit:

If in a society in which the spirit of enterprise has not yet spread, the majority has power to prohibit whatever it dislikes, it is most unlikely that it will allow competition to arise. I doubt whether a functioning market has ever newly arisen under an *unlimited democracy*, and it seems at least likely that unlimited democracy will destroy it where it has grown up. (Hayek 1979, p. 77, emphasis added)

In this view, aspiration is animated by competition that provides a few with disproportionate rewards and thereby stimulates desire among the many. If the many are able to prohibit this behaviour then they also risk suffocating the aspirational spirit. There is an evident tension here between the logic of aspiration-raising and the equity objectives it is being mobilised to serve in current Australian higher education policy. Aspiration is presented as a force for social mobility and redistribution, yet the neoliberal principles on which this logic of aspiration draws clearly apprehend that it can only be sustained under conditions of market competition that necessarily produce relative advantage and disadvantage.

### **The false promises of aspiration**

Aspirations are formed in relation to a set of promises about the future. Berlant (2011, p. 23) suggests that objects of our desire comprise ‘a cluster of promises we want something or someone to make to us and make possible for us’. These promises operate affectively, as well as at the level of conscious intentionality, and are imbricated in the ongoing production of subjectivities. For example, multiple and contradictory promises may cluster around higher education as an object of desire, with very different implications for senses of self and relations to others: for example, the promise of economic mobility might be coupled with the promise of losing a sense of belonging to family and peers; a loss that is often overlooked in discussions about what is gained through higher education. Attachment to these promises can give rise to a relation of ‘cruel optimism’, which ‘exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 1):

What's cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have *x* in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the *content* of the attachment is, the continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world. (Berlant, 2011, p. 24, emphasis in original)

Contrary to 'poverty of desire' theses, investments in objects of desire that promise a 'good life', however diversely this might be conceived, sustain most of us much of the time. The project of constructing market-competitive aspirations—a 'spirit of enterprise'—entails the potential displacement of objects that sustain senses of identity and meaning for people whose lives are not currently animated by the project of increasing their value as human capital. This symbolic violence inherent in the cultivation of desire is rarely mentioned in aspiration-raising agendas.

Evidence also suggests that relationships between educational attainment and global labour markets promised by the 'neoliberal opportunity bargain' (Brown et al., 2010) are changing, and this bargain may now be creating objects of desire that sustain people in hopeful anticipation, across both middle and working class locations, while quietly undermining their socio-economic position. Brown et al. (2010, pp. 7–9) identify three dynamics at work in what they describe as an 'opportunity trap': credential inflation as a result of expansion in global higher education provision; a 'quality-cost revolution' that is driving down the costs of high skill work while sustaining or even improving the quality of what is produced; and a 'global war for talent' in which corporations are competing for a small, elite cohort of workers, despite many others holding equivalent educational qualifications (see also Brown & Tannock, 2009). As a result, human capital and global knowledge economy rationales that underpin economic and education policy in countries like the US, UK and Australia appear increasingly flawed. The belief that these nations are best positioned to attract high skill jobs is being challenged by the emergence of economies such as China, which in some areas is now able to provide equivalent skills and quality at lower prices. Further, assumptions about the individual payoffs for human capital investment, in terms of employability and economic mobility, are being placed in question by the falling value of higher education as a positional good. Brown et al. (2010) argue that '[e]xpectations of middle-class lifestyles, fuelled by the rise of mass higher education, have sucked more people into already congested labour markets. ... the supply of aspirants greatly outstrips employer demand for their services' (p. 12). Raising aspiration is a fragile technology of government in this context.

However, a small working class fraction in Australia has managed to side-step this opportunity trap by finding employment in the currently lucrative mining sector. Yet, this group often still find themselves positioned in deficit terms by the politics of aspiration. Pejoratively described as 'cashed-up bogans', these workers have experienced significant economic mobility in recent years. In Australia, 'bogan' is a derogatory stereotype in popular culture applied to the white lower working class, similar to the use of the term 'chav' in the UK (see Jones, 2011). 'Cashed-up bogans' ('Cubs'), like the 'aspirational' before them, are popularly identified in terms of their conspicuous consumption practices: 'the Cub emerged in a very particular economic context of a resource boom and skill shortage which allowed the seemingly impossible—that is, the opportunity to be financially well rewarded for manual labour' (Pini, McDonald, & Mayes, 2012, p. 12). Like certain fractions of the working class in post-industrial Britain, this group has avoided the most severe effects of the decline in manufacturing industries, but occupies an uneasy place between working



and middle class cultures (for example, see Nayak, 2006, for a discussion of ‘Real Geordies’ and their positioning in north-east Britain). The ‘cashed-up bogan’ has been subject to considerable criticism in Australian popular culture and the media, focusing on their lack of education and thus perceived lack of entitlement to the considerable remuneration they receive, as well as their poor cultural ‘taste’ (Pini et al., 2012). This group is also now buying residential property in leafy urban areas that have long been the preserve of the middle-class, thus using ‘their economic capital to transgress a multitude of middle-class spatial boundaries and [this has] consequently destabilized class-based ontologies of belonging and place’ (Pini et al., 2012, p. 12). Here we can see how aspirations for economic mobility have led to perceptions that the ‘wrong’ people now occupy the ‘wrong’ places.

This receipt of significant financial reward for manual labour is limited to a relatively small group who have specific sets of skills and qualifications. However, it illustrates that demonstrating the ‘spirit of enterprise’ is not necessarily enough to be considered appropriately aspirational. The logic of market competition suggests that this group deserve esteem and imitation for successfully exploiting high demand for the skill-sets they possess and for their willingness to undertake shift-work at mine sites in remote locations; however, they are often popularly represented as greedy individualists whose crass tastes present a threat to middle-class values (Pini et al., 2012). The politics of aspiration seeks to cultivate economic desires, but at the same time these desires are policed according to class and cultural norms. Aspiration is ‘unleashed’ with one hand and ‘policed’ with the other. According to Hayek (1979), the ‘spirit of enterprise’ cannot endure the constraints of ‘unlimited democracy’; however, this is not simply because the majority might prohibit the productive behaviour of the elite, but because, in practice, the elite reserve the right to judge and reform certain behaviours among the majority. This assumed power to determine ‘appropriate’ desires, and to propagate them throughout society, is explicitly manifest in concerns to elevate the desires of the working class for their own good, from the creation of didactic socialist fiction in early nineteenth century England to the cultivation of desire through university outreach activities in contemporary Australia.

One reading of Hayek’s point regarding the risk of ‘unlimited democracy’ for markets would be to emphasise the problems it presents for the cadre of elites who have carefully regulated and exploited markets in their own self-interest (Harvey, 2005). However, Hayek emphasises that, for market competition to be possible, *no* group can retain the right to impose its view on how others ought or ought not to behave (Hayek, 1979, p. 76). There are tensions here between the manifestation of this neoliberal ideal in the contemporary politics of aspiration and the longstanding cultural politics of desire. The neoliberal position contends that ‘unlimited democracy’ risks prohibiting the spirit of enterprise necessary for a small group to gain advantage from and promote competitive behaviour (Hayek, 1979). At the same time, enterprising behaviour among the working class is itself presented as a form of ‘unlimited democracy’ that threatens the proper functioning of society (Ranciere, 2006). While desire for higher education is now cultivated according to a promised relationship between learning and earning, the aspirations of groups who disrupt the rules of this game by obtaining the latter without the former are seen to be crass, disruptive and in need of further cultivation.

Rizvi and Lingard (2010) argue that the neoliberal imaginary ‘has given rise to a range of contradictions that can no longer be ignored’ (p. 91) and here it is possible to discern one such contradiction at the intersection of neoliberal ideals and class politics. There is a tension in the logic of raising aspiration between economic

rationales for cultivating the enterprising spirit and cultural distinctions between 'high' and 'low' aspirations, between 'right' and 'wrong' forms of enterprising behaviour. In this respect, the most properly neoliberal approach to aspiration-raising would be to retain the injunction to cultivate an enterprising spirit while refraining from prescribing appropriate objects of aspiration. However, this is not to suggest that a 'purer' realisation of neoliberal ideals is required. Rather, the important issue here is that the 'neoliberal opportunity bargain' (Brown et al., 2010) and aspiration-raising logics operate in conjunction *and* contradiction with longstanding, anti-democratic class politics through which some groups arrogate to themselves responsibility for the aspirations of others.

## Conclusion and discussion

[P]olitics in its entirety is accounted for by an anthropology that knows but one opposition: that between an adult humanity faithful to tradition, which it institutes as such, and a childish humanity whose dream of engendering itself anew leads to self-destruction. (Ranciere, 2006, p. 28)

For over a century, the dreams of the working class in Britain and Australia have been considered potentially disruptive to the proper functioning of society and in need of reform by those who know better. While 'poverty of desire' theses have evolved under conditions of neoliberal globalisation, the belief of the political class in the need to reform working class desire has not. Contemporary Australian higher education policy aims to raise aspiration for the good of individuals and the nation, combining aims to provide more equitable access to university places and to increase economic productivity and competitiveness. To this end, the Australian government is providing substantial funding for projects that, among other objectives, seek to promote higher education by making promises that sustain people in an optimistic relation to future education and employment opportunities, and expectations of social mobility. However, the 'opportunity trap' identified by Brown et al. (2010) holds troubling implications for this equity agenda, which risks inflating expectations to levels that cannot be met, even if it succeeds in its own terms by increasing the participation rate of students from low SES backgrounds. Increasing the number of people who have access to higher education is an important equity objective in itself, because it provides numerous non-economic benefits regardless of changing employment prospects. However, Brown et al. (2010) remind us that Australia's higher education policies must also be evaluated in relation to contemporary global developments. Global markets will not necessarily deliver the rewards that national governments promise to their citizens.

The politics of aspiration animating this agenda draws on neoliberal logics and assumes that many working class groups lack appropriate knowledge to make decisions about futures that are in their best interests. The solution is to provide these groups with information and incentives that encourage the market-rational behaviour of participating in higher education and investing in themselves as human capital. The current policy ensemble combines its equity objectives with two market objectives: (a) increasing demand for higher education during an expansionary phase by (b) cultivating the competitive 'cast of thinking' required to sustain activity in higher education markets. Aspiration-raising policies and programs are thus one means through which the social imaginary of neoliberal globalisation is being partially (re)produced through equity policy in Australian education.

However, this politics of aspiration also harbours tensions that cannot be ignored. While the cultivation of aspiration accords with ideal logics of market competition, the contempt directed toward groups who hold ‘uncultivated’ aspirations creates expectations about the behaviour of others that Hayek (1979) argues are inimical to markets. The politics of aspiration is conjoined with a particular form of ‘police’ order (Ranciere, 2006, p. 47): that is, ‘practices of authority based on this or that distribution of places and capabilities’. This order institutes and sustains distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘low’ aspirations based on cultural norms—indeed, it makes certain desires ‘visible’ as ‘aspiration’ while rendering others ‘invisible’— and confers on those with appropriate expertise (i.e. technocrats) the task of establishing what is in the best interests of all. ‘Low’ aspirations are ‘raised’ as a means for increasing access to educational and economic goods, but the benefits of this access are deferred to a promised future. There is an essential temporal delay in this logic that maintains the authority of those making the promises. Some groups who circumvent this delay find themselves on the wrong side of the police order; criticised and ridiculed on cultural grounds despite their economic success. Groups who enter the meritocratic competition of education endure the temporal delay, in which the value of higher education as a positional good can decrease and new strategies for gaining advantage in labour markets can emerge, and therefore risk finding themselves in a relation of ‘cruel optimism’ as they wait in perpetual hope for the ‘good life’ to come.

Over a century ago, John Burns (1902, p. 13) lamented that the poverty of desire among the working class would ensure that ‘all the predictions of the enemies of Democracy will be justified’. In contrast, Ranciere (2006) proposes that the policing of desire according to socialist ideals is equally likely to satisfy the enemies of democracy:

Demands for democracy were for a long time carried or concealed by the idea of a new society, the elements of which were allegedly being formed in the very heart of contemporary society. That is what ‘socialism’ designated: a vision of history according to which capitalist forms of production and exchange constituted the material conditions for an egalitarian society and its worldwide expansion. Understanding what democracy means is to renounce this faith. The collective intelligence produced by a system of domination is only ever the intelligence of that system. (Ranciere, 2006, p. 96)

Raising aspiration for higher education partakes in a vision according to which a more egalitarian society can be produced from and through capitalist relations. While it could provide people from low SES backgrounds with a more equitable share of educational goods, the purposes for the distribution of these goods have already been decided. The politics of aspiration still involves the architects of egalitarian society extending to others an invitation to participate in their vision.

It is not the purpose of this paper to attempt to resolve the tensions in current aspiration-raising equity agendas. Indeed, to do so would risk adding another ideal vision as a corrective to those that have been promoted over the past hundred years. Instead, I will conclude with a question: Can we support the aspirations of others without imposing ideals that police desire? Experimenting in response to this question might make a small contribution towards the emergence of ‘unlimited democracy’; that is, the emergence of political events in which all are considered equal in their capacities for thought and are encouraged to engage these capacities in the task of imagining what is in our collective best interests, whatever risks this might hold for market competition and practices of authority based on people knowing their place.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Since 2009 the Australian Government has been combining this area-based measure with the number of students receiving specified government benefit payments to determine low SES. The specific formula is to multiply the number of students from low SES areas by two, add the number of students receiving specified Centrelink payments, and then divide this total figure by three.

<sup>2</sup> Latham's (2001) book on education policy was titled *What did you learn today? Creating an education revolution*. The Australian Labor Government elected in 2007 announced an 'education revolution' in its 2008 *Quality Education: The case for an education revolution in our schools* (Commonwealth of Australia 2008), and a 'tertiary education revolution' in *Transforming Australia's higher education system* (Australian Government, 2009). Each of these documents mobilise a third-way logic of weaving together economic productivity and social responsibility through education policy.

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