

On the Death Throes of Education: Erich Fromm's Marxist Rallying Cry for a Healthy University

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On the Death Throes of Education: Erich Fromm's Marxism and a Rallying Cry for a Healthy University

Introduction

The university sector in the United Kingdom (UK) is in the midst of deep distress: an unprecedented and escalating student mental health crisis. The Institute of Public Policy Research (2017) reported a fivefold increase in the proportion of first year students revealing mental health problems to their institutions between 2007 and 2017. In 2014-2015, a peak number of students with mental health problems dropped out of university and, in 2015, a record number took their own life. According to the Varkey Foundation's (2017) Global Citizenship Survey, young people in the UK have the poorest mental well-being out of twenty major countries worldwide, second only to Japan. The Higher Education Policy Institute (2016) has urged the university sector to treble their resources in mental health student support, noting that some universities are spending an average of £200,000 which is less than what most universities pay their vice-chancellors.

A growing mental health crisis runs concurrent with worsening material conditions. From 1998, with the introduction of tuition fees, the university sector in the UK has been exposed to market forces. In England and Wales, an initial fee of up to £1,000 per year has risen, from 2006, to up to £3,000 per year; in 2017, the average graduate debt in England was an estimated £50,800 (Institute of Fiscal Studies, 2017). The charity Mind has stated that the "unprecedented financial burden" of tuition fees and student debt, coupled with uncertainty about graduate employment, have been "major contributors" to the rise of anxiety and depression amongst university students (Buckley cited in Gani, 2016, para. 7-8). This proposition is supported by academic research which has established that financial difficulties and worry about debt among university students has led to an increased risk of mental health problems, notably, depression, stress, anxiety, and alcohol dependency (Richardson, Elliott,

Roberts & Jansen, 2017; Andrews & Wilding, 2004; Cooke, Barkham, Audin, Bradley & Davy, 2004).

Drawing upon the work of the humanistic Marxist philosopher and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, this chapter expounds the student mental health crisis as a consequence of the marketization of university education. Specifically, this chapter will explore, in the next two sections, the social character of present-day university students and university education as a relationship of capitalist alienation and, in the conclusion, the necessity of a healthy education which is capable of cultivating human connection, creativity, and the development of independent intellect and reason. Central to Fromm's Marxism is the recognition that Marx was not simply challenging capitalism on the basis of capital's exploitation of labour-power, that is, as a conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat that inherently generates inequality between the two classes. Fromm (1956) explains capitalism as critiqued by Marx as a "conflict between two principles of value: *that between the world of things, and their amassment, and the world of life and its productivity*" (p. 95). The unique advancement of Marx that Fromm makes is in deliberating the impact of this conflict for our mental well-being and our ability to progressively develop into whole people. Here, for both Marx and Fromm, productivity is imagined and understood outside of the drive of capital to extract profit from the labour force, therefore, outside of capital's relentless ambition to increase the productivity of labour-power. Productivity in democratic socialist conditions is seen as time to grow as holistic human beings - intellectually, creatively, emotionally, and spiritually. Writing during the Cold War, Fromm opposed both the capitalism of Western societies and the communism of the Soviet bloc; there "are always other and new possibilities which become apparent only when one ... permits the voice of humanity, and reason, to be heard" (Fromm, 1985c, p. 132).

The Marketing Orientation and the 21st Century University Student

The university student mental health crisis can be understood as reflecting a wider problem innate to capitalism itself, specifically what Fromm (1956, p. 6) identifies as “the *pathology of normalcy*.” Contrary to hegemonic models of psychiatry and psychology, our mental well-being, Fromm claims, is essentially not a personal matter but one related to the structure of society itself. This premise is a radical break from Sigmund Freud, who considers the libido to be the basic driving force of human desires; conversely, Fromm insists that the human situation is the most powerful force shaping us. Fromm makes plain the important political difference here. Freud’s “basic concept is that of a “homo sexualis” as that of the economists was that of the “homo economicus”” (Fromm, 1956, p. 77). In other words, Freud views human nature as fundamentally competitive and asocial, similar to how human beings are naturalised within capitalism, thus placing capitalist social relations beyond criticism and making social psychology an “apologist for the status quo” (Fromm 1956, p. 73). All societies shape what Fromm (1985a) defines as the social character, which “*internalizes external necessities*” and exploits “*human energy for the task of a given economic and social system*” (p. 29). He categorises the social character of modern-day capitalist society as the marketing orientation, which is harmful to our mental well-being since human beings, as the seller and the commodity, are beholden to market forces: if we are “successful”, we are “valuable”, if we are not, we are “worthless” (Fromm, 1985b, p. 42).

The National Union of Students recognise a shift in the value of university education as having a damaging impact on student mental health, as external competition is internalised:

The value of education has moved away from societal value to ‘value for money’ and the emphasis on students competing against each other is causing isolation,

stress and anxiety. It has also forced institutions to compete aggressively against each other and put more money into advertising initiatives than student support services. (Asquith cited in Gani, 2016, para. 12-13)

In fixing price tags to degrees, education has become commoditised and knowledge has become a possession, reflecting a quantity of value that one can expect post-graduation; ‘transferable skills’ and ‘employability’ are the buzzwords of the moment used by university management to market and sell education as a transaction - effectively turning the sector into a conveyor belt. Fromm (1989b) observes of the marketing orientation in education:

From grade school to graduate school, the aim of learning is to gather as much information as possible that is mainly useful for the purposes of the market. Students are supposed to learn so many things that they have hardly time and energy left to *think*. Not the interest in the subjects taught or in knowledge and insight as such, but the enhanced exchange value knowledge gives is the main incentive for wanting more and better education. We find today a tremendous enthusiasm for knowledge and education, but at the same time a sceptical or contemptuous attitude toward the allegedly impractical and useless thinking which is concerned “only” with the truth and which has no exchange value on the market. (p. 44-45)

There is a rising pressure for students to select ‘the right’ degree and the right modules, and to know ‘what to do’ to score the right marks in order to secure good graduate employment: their perceived value. Degree subjects and modules that are seen as low in transferable skills and employability are regarded as less useful. Classification marks are fetishized, with the journey of education (thinking for thinking’s sake) displaced by an urgent desire to meet assessment criteria. This internalisation of external capitalist social relations further embeds competition amongst students and competition between universities. For the twenty-first

century university student, their self-esteem is beyond their control. Their decision-making and labour are increasingly painstaking because of the fear and anxiety of failing, of being worthless, amid the accumulation of significant financial debt.

A tragedy of the penetration of capitalism into education is that it has created an expectation on the part of the students themselves that the university will transform them “into an instrument of use and exploitation for others,” depriving them “of a sense of self” (Fromm, 1956, p. 73). The external necessity of capital to continually expand itself, to extract more and more surplus-value (profit) from the labour force, is internalised in the social character of the individual. The pursuit of status identifications - ‘I am’ - substitutes for a genuinely free and independent sense of identity (Fromm, 1956). The marketing orientation generates self and interpersonal indifference, because in the drive to sell oneself, in order to survive and progress, students are prevented from seeing the interests of their true selves and one another. Fromm contextualises this indifference as a consequence of, as Wilde (2000) puts it, “what commodity fetishism does to human relations and mental health” (p. 41), that is, when relationships between things and money transcend *social* relationships between people.

Foster (2017) develops Fromm’s work on the marketing orientation to argue that neoliberalism has created a new social character, that of the “self-made individual” (p. 8) who has a highly individualised sense of responsibility. He argues that the hegemonic “therapeutic ethos of neoliberalism” does nothing to alleviate the anxieties and vulnerabilities of the self-made individual, but rather it actually utilises such suffering by steering it “into the methodical and disciplined work of self-management and self-provision” (Foster 2017, p. 12). Or, as Fromm might put it, the social character internalises the necessities of neoliberal capitalism by exploiting the energy of individuals to meet its priority for profit maximisation. University students exist in an age which demonises

dependency and aims to replace social provision with pervasive competition. Free education, as it previously existed in the UK, is a past phenomenon. As rising student debt and an increasingly competitive job market bear heavily on students, generating a mental health crisis, limited funding for mental health favours therapy-on-the-cheap: that which is done by the individual. This is the era of self-help.

In-vogue positive psychology is increasingly being offered by university mental health student support services as a set of ‘cost-effective’ tools that students can use to ‘free’ themselves by changing harmful habits and negative thoughts. Founded by the American psychologist, academic entrepreneur, and self-help guru Martin Seligman, positive psychology is politically underpinned by the idea that our external conditions of existence have little bearing on our ability to be happy. Of resonance here is Fromm’s earlier critique of hegemonic models of psychiatry and psychology as effectively supporting capitalist social relations, since mental illness is regarded as the problem of the individual rather than the result of the pathology of normalcy. Ehrenreich reveals that studies supporting Seligman’s positive psychology thesis rest on “media-driven positive spinning” and a defence of “the status quo” (cited in Horowitz, 2018, p. 222). It is interesting to note the specific case of Buckingham University branding itself, with the endorsement of Seligman, as the UK’s and Europe’s first ‘positive’ university. Here we have the centring of the self-made individual (Foster, 2017) whose suffering is channelled into self-management. Vice-Chancellor, Sir Anthony Seldon, states:

The core to the approach is ensuring that students are given the tools to learn to cope with themselves and with the world after university proactively, in contrast to the reactive model followed in most universities, which deals with students only after they have developed problems and or suicidal tendencies. [...] The job of a good university should be to help students learn how to live a productive and

meaningful life rather than just get good degrees. Universities worldwide are falling short of this. (Cited in Buckingham University, 2017, para. 5-7)

Buckingham University's (2017) website promotes a ten-point plan, all with the prefix of 'positive', which includes mandatory lecturer training and a mandatory module for students in positive psychology, and (indicating what is meant by the aforementioned productive life) the teaching of "positive work skills" where "students are encouraged to develop skills they will require in the workplace to help the transition to work" (para. 4). Cederström (2017) cautions against this "cult of self-improvement" (para. 13), reasoning that universities should reject positive psychology to enable students "to think, not positively, but soberly and critically about the present" (para. 15).

Following Fromm, the escalating student mental health crisis in the university sector can be understood not as a problem of a body of individuals *per se* but rather as a manifestation of the pathology of normalcy in which capitalism is the problem. The marketization of university education has led to worsening conditions of existence for students, namely, debt. This, in turn, is shaping the state of mental health, with a rising prevalence of depression and anxiety amongst students related to worry about debt, academic performance, and future employment prospects. University degrees have become commodities branded with particular status identifications that offer distinct use-value (ability to satisfy) which promises to transfer into exchange-value (one's price on the labour market). As Brookfield (2002, p. 104), citing Fromm, observes:

The education system "generally tries to train people to *have* knowledge as a possession, by and large commensurate with the amount of property or social prestige they are likely to have in later life" (Fromm, 1976, p.48). Educational institutions "give each student a certain amount of cultural property" (p.43) or a

“luxury-knowledge package” with “the size of each package being in accord with the person’s probabl[e] social prestige” (p.49).

The hegemonic social character (be that the marketing orientation and/or self-made individual) internalises a sense of value as exchange-value and a sense of being valueless if this exchange-value is not realised. When “the vicissitudes of the market are the judges of one's value,” both one’s “self-esteem” and “one's experience of oneself as an independent entity” are eroded (Fromm, 1985b, p. 42). If students do not score their desired degree classification, which promises to translate into a particular exchange-value of self on the labour market, then the whole experience of university, its use-value, is called into question. Education has become a process of alienation.

Education as Alienation

For Marx, Fromm (1961) explains, capitalist alienation is *estrangement*: human beings do not experience themselves as active agents critically grasping and navigating the world, but instead the world stands above and against them. Alienation “is essentially experiencing the world and oneself passively, receptively, as the subject separated from the object” (Fromm, 1961, p. 44), the consequence being that individuals “feel estranged, anxious, powerless, and lonely” (Brennen, 1997, p. 12). Fromm (1961) identifies quantification and abstractification as key processes of alienation in modern-day capitalist society, moving beyond the domain of economic production into one’s “attitude to things, to people, and to [one]self” (p. 113). A notable example of the growing encroachment of quantification and abstractification in the university sector is the application of metrics to rank institutions. In 2016, the UK government introduced a trial year for the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF). The National Union of Students (2016) formerly responded to the TEF technical consultation by stating fundamental

opposition to the reduction of the principles of teaching excellence to metrics. They specifically raised opposition to the use of employment outcomes as a measure of teaching quality and warned that the emphasis on a ‘highly-skilled’ employment metric could jeopardise the survival of certain courses and departments. Alongside the National Union of Students, the University and College Union (2017) also formerly opposed the TEF, problematizing the core metrics applied as “flawed” and warning of its potential consequences, for example, academic job cuts and further (linked) rises in tuition fees and marketization. The student activist National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (2017) has questioned whether “chasing metrics in the name of customer satisfaction is an acceptable substitute for systematically improving the material conditions of workers and students on campus” (para. 1). With the TEF the degree is commodity fetishized, because students (and prospective students) are encouraged to judge ‘the product’ by the metricised ranking of institutions on teaching quality that is quantitatively scored through the abstract measures of graduate employment outcomes and student satisfaction results, not through the quality of the *social* relationship between the educator and the educatee. This alienation is shaping how students relate to university education.

Estrangement from oneself, one another, and the world is the relatedness that alienation cultivates. Fromm (1979) elucidates this by making a distinction between the ‘having mode’ and the ‘being mode’, with capitalist social relations driving us toward having rather than being; quoting Marx, ““... *all* the physical and intellectual senses have been replaced by the simple alienation of *all* these senses; the sense of *having* ...”” (Fromm, 1961, p. 36). *Vis-à-vis* the commodification of education, in which degrees are marketed as providing transferable skills and enhanced employability, education-as-having manifests as follows:

Students in the having mode of existence will listen to a lecture, hearing the words and understanding their logical structure and their meaning and, as best they can, will write down every word [...] - so that, later on, they can memorise their notes and thus pass an examination. But the content does not become part of their own individual system of thought, enriching and widening it. Instead, they transform the words they hear into fixed clusters of thought, or whole theories, which they store up. (Fromm, 1979, p. 37)

In this having mode the social relation between the students and the lecture's subject matter is one of estrangement: the "students and the content of the lectures remain strangers to each other, except that each student has become the owner of a collection of statements made by somebody else" (Fromm, 1979, p. 37). The primary aim of the students is "to hold on to what they 'learned'" (Fromm, 1979, p. 37) in order to realise an end exchange-value from their use-value. Fromm (1979, p. 38) remarks that amidst such a desire to hold fast, fix down, make tangible the intangible, when students encounter "ideas that cannot easily be pinned down (or penned down)", it frightens them, i.e., it provokes uncertainty and anxiety. Education to expand one's knowledge and understanding within a critical framework as a meaningful process in and of itself is becoming obsolete.

Fromm (1961), quoting Marx, warns of the emotional poverty in capitalist alienation, when the mode of having and using makes up one's relationship to the world:

The less you eat, drink, buy books, go to the theatre or to balls, or to the public house [Br., pub], and the less you think, love, theorize, sing, paint, fence, etc., the more you will be able to save and the *greater* will become your treasure which neither moth nor rust will corrupt – your *capital*. The less you *are*, the less you express your life, the more you *have*, the greater is your *alienated* life and the greater is the saving of your alienated being. (p. 36)

Prior to the marketization of the university sector in the UK, before students had the burden of paying for their degree, conditions of existence were more conducive to students relating to education as a holistic experience: academic study as a time to critically think and university life as an opportunity to socially connect and grow. Students were less likely to have to negotiate part-time precarious employment alongside full-time studies. Students were less likely to feel a mounting pressure to achieve a top degree classification as a means to other ends. In brief, prior to the advance of capitalism into the domain of education, students were more likely to be healthier.

For a Healthy University of Being

Alienation reflects a passive and receptive relatedness to the world; its negation is an active one: what “Marx calls “productive life”, that is, “... life creating life ...”” (Fromm, 1961, p. 34). The prevention of human beings from being able to independently and freely express themselves and grapple with the world is, Fromm (1961) insists, the prevention of living itself: if we are “not productive”, if we are “receptive and passive”, then we are “nothing”, we are effectively “dead” (p. 30):

The whole life of the individual is nothing but the process of giving birth to [one]self; indeed, we should be fully born, when we die – although it is the tragic fate of most individuals to die before they are born. (Fromm, 1956, p. 26)

A conflict exists in our capitalist society between the amassment of things and the world of living, which within the university sector has led to the displacement of education-as-being by education-as-having. As such, vulnerable young adults entering university are placed in conditions of existence that are not conducive to life creating life. For many, they exist but cannot live. For a significant few, they cease to exist altogether. The Institute of Public Policy Research (2017) registered a 79 percent rise in the number of university

students in the UK taking their own life in the period 2007-2015. The need for a healthy University has never been so urgent.

All is not lost, since unhealthy conditions of existence co-exist with healthy ones, albeit in a tense dialectical struggle. What is needed is a strong political alliance of students and workers in the university sector capable of rallying for the growth and full fruition of a healthy education: a *free* education in all senses. Education must be capable of engendering loving human connection, creativity, critical intellectual capacity for reason, and an autonomous sense of self founded on one's own productive abilities; in order to counter the growing dominance of an education that fuels hostility and distrust and which is simply a means to transform students into end workers for capital's self-expansion, thus depriving human beings of a genuine self of being (see Fromm, 1956). Education-as-being has an altogether different quality to the quantifying education-as-having. Our rallying cry must envision the following as possible:

To begin with, [students] do not go to a course of lectures, even to the first one in a course, as *tabulae rasae*. They have thought beforehand about the problems the lectures will be dealing with and have in mind certain questions and problems of their own. They have been occupied with the topic and it interests them. Instead of being passive receptacles of words and ideas, they listen, they *hear*, and most important, they *receive* and they *respond* in an active, productive way. What they listen to stimulates their own thinking processes. New questions, new ideas, new perspectives arise in their minds. (Fromm, 1979, p. 38)

Fromm (1961) explains that for Marx independence and freedom from alienation means not simply freedom from, but freedom to. *Freedom to* allows for the total human being who is able to affirm their individuality in all of their relations to the world: "... seeing,

hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking, willing, [and] loving ...” (Marx cited in Fromm, 1961, p. 38).

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