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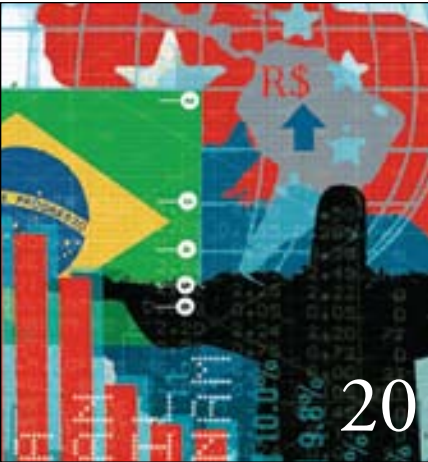
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Class War

Patrick S. Roberts

In December 2010, student protesters in London surrounded the Rolls-Royce carrying England's future king Prince Charles and his wife Camilla. The students smashed a window and splattered the car with paint yelling, "Off with their heads!" The same month, tens of thousands of students shattered store windows and set cars ablaze in downtown Rome; police used tear gas to quell the demonstration. Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi accused his political opponents of organizing the demonstrations in order to dislodge his government. Certainly someone organized the protests, but the emotions on display were too raw, and the number of protests across Europe too many, for them to have been merely the product of a political ploy.

Clearly, these demonstrations, which are ongoing, reflect student anxiety about reforms underway throughout Europe that are increasing the role of the private sector in universities without also increasing public funding for higher education. More broadly, students are anxious about their future in a European and global society in which being on the alumni list of an elite university has replaced Burke's Peerage as an indicator of class distinction. They need to join this particular club but fear that their financial ability to do so may be fast eroding.

What are the students, political activists and assorted hangers-on asking for in the comparatively rich and stable societies of Europe? They

are asking the state to spare them most or all of the increasing burden of paying for higher education; that is the proximate cause of their anxiety and willingness to protest. But something deeper is afoot, too, for the education portfolio is but one of many in a democratic welfare state. If the state is now telling young people that they must take a greater responsibility for paying the real costs of their education, what else will they be asked to pay for that prior generations could take for granted as a publicly financed service?

At an even deeper level, there is the question of status and class. Europe's university-bound youth these days are imbued with the egalitarian spirit. Everyone, they believe, no matter the condition of his birth, should have an equal opportunity to rise and thrive according to his merit and character. No doubt most believe this sincerely, as do, for all we know, their parents. But class distinctions run deep in European society, and there is perhaps a tinge of privilege in these young souls. It is good for society as a whole for its elite to be well educated. And is it anyone's fault that those meriting such support very often happen to come from certain respected families? It's all too easy for those making such arguments to forget that this set-up entails asking the lower echelons of society to subsidize the privileges of those who attain advanced credentials.

That said, radical critiques of the financing of European education are rare. Present arrangements represent a vast liberalization of what existed before World War II. Since World War II, European students have generally been able to attend university for free if they scored high enough on competitive entrance exams. This social arrangement was part of the postwar

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REUTERS/Andrew Winning

Student demonstrators jump on burning park benches during a protest outside the Houses of Parliament in Westminster, December 9, 2010.

European attempt to replace traditionally class-based societies with greater social equality. By most measures, this attempt succeeded beyond anyone's expectations, such that the ranks of those meritorious few, truly from all over the social landscape in most Western countries, have swelled immensely.

The problem, of course, is that expanding the privileges of state support to the meritorious is costly. The contemporary university-educated meritocracy in Europe, though small compared to the population at large, is much larger than the number of elite educated in the 19th and earlier centuries. Now that the rate of economic growth has slowed for demographic and other reasons, European states are faced with questions about who should pay for state educational services, and a whole host of class-inflected moral issues come tagging along with the financial questions. Europe's student protesters contend that higher university fees are a violation of the postwar European social contract in which the state takes responsibility for providing a high degree of services, including higher education. They are not being

selfish, they insist; they are standing up for principle. They are affirming the social idea of the welfare state, in which communal obligations outweigh the demands of individualism. They do not want "wild west capitalism" of the American sort. Throughout western Europe, the state's legitimacy is taken for granted as a countervailing force for good, a bulwark against the corruptions of the market.

Widespread Protests

Demonstrations against higher education reforms have rocked many European countries, but the size and vigor of the protests in the United Kingdom have been especially striking because students there so seldom stage demonstrations or classroom walkouts. In December 2010 and January 2011, thousands of students clogged London streets and occupied university halls, objecting to government cuts and planned tuition increases in higher education. The protests had a theatrical quality: Socialist party activists handed out ready-made signs to students,

local toughs joined in the fray, and an Iranian television crew filmed the fracas.

Most students, however, had a simple grievance. Parliament had approved raising the tuition ceiling from £3,290 per year (about \$5,000) to £9,000 in 2012. The tuition hikes were supposed to make up for some of the reduced government support (there were cuts of up to 80 percent in some fields). To help students pay the higher tuition fees, the government would offer loans that students could repay once they had a job, much as students do in the United States.

None of the protesters marched in favor of the other option on the table: controlling costs by limiting admissions to 1990s levels. Higher education Minister David Willetts wrote in December to the Higher Education Funding Council, “We have to control public expenditure costs by controlling student numbers.” Last year, nearly 200,000 British students failed to gain admission to a university, despite the fact that the government had made an additional 100,000 places available at the last minute in response to the unprecedented demand. The government plans no such emergency measures this year.

Students elsewhere in Europe have expressed similar anger over their government’s educational belt-tightening. In Germany, students occupied university buildings and held mass demonstrations protesting the introduction of tuition fees of €500 (about \$700) per term, and last spring elections that put the Left in power in some states are likely to lead to the abolition of tuition fees. Meanwhile, Irish students marched in the cold against a €2,000 fee increase. Gary Redmond, the president of the Union of Students in Ireland, called the tuition reforms the “Pearl Harbour of Irish education.”

Curious metaphors aside, the protests against tuition fees merge with other grievances against government measures that put breaks on the welfare state. In fall 2010, the protest-happy French clashed with police and blocked traffic in demonstrations against reforms that would decrease pensions and raise the retirement age from 60 to 62. The most vocal protesters were not retirees but students, who saw the reforms as an attack on their social protections. In France,

25 percent of young people are unemployed, and college graduates face an uncertain future.

The tuition protests have variously elated or alarmed Europeans because they resemble the tumultuous 1960s, and because they bring to light a fraying social consensus over who should pay for public goods—and especially for public goods, like higher education, that ostensibly bestow a great deal of private benefit.

From one perspective, the protests are less significant than past ones. At the height of the ’68 movement in Paris, 800,000 workers and students joined together for an all-day strike to call for a new government. Similar protests across Europe gave voice to anger at authoritarian governments, rigid bureaucratic universities and the vestiges of the prewar class-based society. Recent protests rarely top a tenth of the number of people in the streets in 1968, however, and today’s grievances are much less grandly and ideologically freighted.

From another perspective, the protests show the limits of state-supported projects aimed at increasing social equality. The postwar European restructuring of traditionally class-based feudal societies was wildly successful, making them more democratic and more equal than almost anyone expected. In higher education, states doubled and tripled the number of university graduates, and these graduates formed the backbone of a new professional middle class. But there was an irony built into education reforms: Increased taxes and state funding for elite universities yielded greater participation in higher education over time but, as already intimated, this system nevertheless perpetuated much of the old class structures. In the United Kingdom, 37 percent of people are defined as coming from working-class families (defined as those with “routine and manual” occupations), but their representation in elite universities is much lower, making up approximately 12 percent of students at Cambridge and Oxford, for example.¹

The education system in France is even more stratified. French universities are open to all high school graduates, but the *grandes écoles*

¹Rowenna Davis, “Working-class revolution not reaching ‘posh’ universities”, *Guardian*, September 28, 2010.

have long drawn students from elite preparatory schools. These schools form an alternative higher education system that grew out of the French Revolution. They were created to give the bourgeoisie the skills and status to take their place in society alongside the hereditary aristocracy. During the 19th and 20th centuries, French state administrators, scientists and engineers reliably came from the *grandes écoles* rather than the university system, which was considered a font of radicalism. Whereas working-class children once regularly gained admittance, today only 1 percent of students at the *grandes écoles* come from working-class backgrounds, and few are from racial or ethnic minorities. With the possible exception of *Sciences Po*, the *écoles* have proven resistant to expanding access. Theoretically, they are open to all students who score high enough on an entrance exam, but in practice the students who have enough academic and cultural knowledge to score well on the exam typically come from elite backgrounds. “It’s as if in the U.S., 80 percent of the heads of major corporations or top government officials came from Harvard Law School”, François Dubet, a sociologist at the University of Bordeaux, told the *New York Times*.²

Who Should Pay?

In a sense, the argument over who should pay for university education turns over how to define the value of that education. Does one seek a university education because of the literal economic remuneration associated with it, or does one seek it for purposes of social status? Or does that amount to the same thing? The question is not merely theoretical, and perhaps the best way to come to an answer is to look briefly at the social history of European universities.

Universities have always conferred status and economic advantages on their students, but the markers of status have changed over time. In the Middle Ages, wealth and class were hereditary, and the universities produced churchmen who filled secular and religious offices. Between the 16th and 19th centuries, universities became more concerned with preserving cultural heritage, and the scientific academies

emerged as competitors in knowledge production and training. Rather than rely on universities, scientists and artisans operated their own laboratories and apprenticeships. In the 19th and 20th centuries, new missions re-energized universities to staff state bureaucracies and provide scientific and technical expertise. As nobility and social hierarchy became quaint embarrassments, university systems emerged as institutions that conferred legitimate credentials on a new status hierarchy. Academic titles remain status symbols in Europe and are sought after by politicians and social climbers. Titles are also employed in more mundane affairs. In addition to the regular titles, the German airline Lufthansa allows passengers to book reservations as either Herr Doktor, Herr Professor or Herr Professor Doktor.

While status remains one of their products, 21st-century universities have largely de-emphasized their traditional role of preserving cultural knowledge and now justify themselves with arguments that draw on “information society” rationales—namely, they say that they produce the scientific research and graduates driving economic growth. It almost goes without saying that the economic benefits of the information society flow disproportionately to university graduates, creating economic and status divisions between university graduates and non-graduates. In the United States, expanded access to universities and the economic benefits they afford followed concerted efforts to create land grant public universities and postwar GI Bill support for returning soldiers. In Europe, access expanded in fits and starts, due in no small part to the question that they have not really been forced to confront until now: “Who should pay?”

Taken altogether, then, there are several ways to characterize efforts by European governments to make elite students pay more for their own education. From the angle of class and privilege, making students pay more can be seen as the next step in democratization. But from the customary welfare state angle, the same measure seems like

²Craig S. Smith, “Elite French Schools Block the Poor’s Path to Power”, *New York Times*, December 18, 2005.

an abandonment of the morally sanctioned postwar social contract. Seen from an angle of narrow economic logic, however, the effort seems both just and functional since, with the expansion of higher education, the graduates of the best universities have become the elite. If there must be an elite, then it is better for that elite to be based on merit rather than on aristocratic presumption.

Leave it to the Germans to take a practical matter and turn it into a theoretical one. The question at hand is now at the center of a public row between two German philosophers, and their ideas bring an icy clarity to the politics of the student protests. Writing in the German daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, philosophy professor Peter Sloterdijk criticized the postwar welfare state as exploitation of the productive by the unproductive classes and called the progressive income tax the “functional equivalent of socialist expropriation.”³ In this and a related piece, Sloterdijk implies that a more just and stable state would finance its activity through voluntary donations and fees rather than compulsory taxation. Sloterdijk sees the welfare state as a new feudal baron who creates a dependent relationship with his serfs, the citizens of social democracies. He writes, “[T]he direct and selfish exploitation of a feudal era has been transformed in the modern age into a juridical constrained and almost disinterested state kleptocracy.”

In Sloterdijk’s radical view, what is needed is a “revolution of the giving hand” in which the state abolishes compulsory taxation and finances its activities through voluntary exchanges. The revolution, he claims, would not only be more just; it would have healthy consequences for the psychology of modern men and women, who are prone to a passive resentment of both the power of the state and their inability to wean themselves from its benefits.

Sloterdijk’s colorful language and seemingly outlandish argument has a specific political point: to revive the idea of philanthropy in Germany as a moral enterprise. In postwar Germany, state power is assumed to be superior to private power. Indeed, philanthropists are as likely to be met with suspicion about why they have so much untaxed

money in the first place as with gratitude for their donation.

For those concerned about reviving philanthropy, Sloterdijk sparked an overdue public debate about the legitimacy of state power over money, which is traditionally assumed without question across the German political spectrum. For others, Sloterdijk was guilty of importing alien, Anglo-American-style Tea Party ideas to the Continent. Philosopher Axel Honneth led the public rebuke, labeling Sloterdijk a Nietzschean who offers up philosophic caricatures of the welfare state bargain of high taxes in exchange for a more equal society.⁴ The Nietzschean flavor, says Honneth, becomes apparent in Sloterdijk’s account of *Ressentiment* (not “resentment”), which means a thirst for revenge driven by a sense of powerlessness. In Nietzsche, the weaker members of society resent the stronger, and they keep the stronger in check with the power of the state and social mores. Extending the idea to contemporary Europe, the socially disadvantaged use the state to turn the advantaged into a scapegoat for their own shortcomings and compel the rich to pay high taxes. For Honneth, this is demagoguery of the first order and a distortion of social democracy.

What Drives College Costs

Pace Sloterdijk, the roots of higher education’s increasing costs lie not in a conscious effort by the weak to punish the strong. They lie, rather, in the basic economics of providing labor-intensive training to increasing numbers of people in societies dependent on intricate forms of expertise.

European universities are caught between two trends: increasing enrollments and cuts in

³Sloterdijk, “Die Revolution der gebenden Hand”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 13, 2009; a shorter English version is Sloterdijk, “The Grasping Hand”, *City Journal* (Winter 2010); More in Sloterdijk, “Das elfte Gebot: die progressive Einkommenssteuer”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 27, 2009.

⁴Honneth, “Fatale Tief Sinn aus Karlsruhe”, *Die Zeit*, September 25, 2009.

government support. Since the end of World War II, the number of young people entering university in Europe has more than tripled, such that in some countries nearly half of young people go on to college. In the United States, 40 percent of 25 to 34 year olds had an associate's degree or higher as of 2008; among Europe's largest countries, the percentages range from 41 in France to 37 in the United Kingdom, 23 in Germany and 19 in Italy.

Traditionally, costs at European universities have been constrained by national cultures that rewarded, for instance, Italian scholars publishing in Italian journals, and reduced mobility among students and faculty. Now, increasing international competition for faculty and students is pushing universities to offer more competitive salaries and more amenities for students. Cafeterias offering organic produce, student services such as career counseling and free wi-fi, and of course espresso bars are now *de rigueur* at European universities. Many universities now have a vice president for "the student experience", an obscure uni-speak term of art.

All of these features, common at American universities, cost money, and with budget crises across Europe, governments have targeted students as the only relatively untapped revenue source. At the same time, European universities are loathe to cede their research prominence to institutions in other parts of the world, as much for reasons of prestige as for developed countries' dependence on research and development for innovation-fueled economic growth. The British reforms reduce teaching and facilities budgets but leave research budgets untouched. Meanwhile, the German government is increasing research awards, distributing €1.9 billion to winning proposals for research and graduate education innovation. Finland is following a similar path, concentrating resources in elite universities, unbalancing what was once a more equitable system among schools.

Unlike factory work, the economics of higher education do not lend themselves to cost-savings through greater efficiency. It is the same with other labor-intensive professional services; lawyers and doctors have increased their fees at roughly the same rate as those in

higher education.⁵ The face-to-face time required to provide these services has remained the same, even as costs for food or clothes have decreased thanks to labor-saving technology. This phenomenon is sometimes called the "cost disease." The "treatment" for it hinges on increased productivity in other sectors of the economy, so that more people can more easily afford such services. One main result of this treatment, however, is to skew income distribution toward the service providers. When productivity stops increasing or slows, something has got to give.

All this does not mean that college costs will spiral out of control. As universities have taken on ever more ambitious roles in society—stimulating innovation, providing a gateway to the middle class, even preserving culture—they have naturally begun to command a greater share of society's resources. Some of this cost will be borne by the students themselves, who after all stand to reap the most direct benefits of this public good. Human beings feel losses more acutely than gains, and the protests reflect the sting of new costs and students' anxieties about the future.

There is a way that European governments can make a virtue out of the necessity of stinging students with new fees. The current troubles represent an opportunity to help forge a new social contract. As enrollments swell, an increasing percentage of society reaps the benefits of higher education, including skills to meet the demands of an information economy and the status imprimatur of a university degree. In return, students who benefit can be expected to contribute toward their education both while at university and later as taxpayers. This compromise neither robs European social democracy of its relative equality nor handicaps European universities relative to their peers around the world. Student protesters portray new fees as a break with the past, but in fact fees may be a bridge to a more equitable future in which university education is open to a wider swath of society. 🍷

⁵See Robert B. Archibald and David H. Feldman, *Why Does College Cost So Much?* (Oxford University Press, 2010).