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Unspoken resistances

David Featherstone

Stefan Collini, *Speaking of Universities*, Verso 2017

Stefan Collini has been one of the most persistent and articulate critics of the massive changes in UK higher education over the last decade or so. His interventions, in the *London Review of Books* and in his influential book *What Universities are for?*, have charted and interrogated these shifts in significant detail and with an eye to articulating progressive responses. *Speaking of Universities* brings together a number of essays that engage with what he describes as ‘forces at work in shaping contemporary universities that are more powerful and more pervasive even than the question of replacing direct funding with a system of fees plus incomes-contingent loans’. These pieces are combined with new essays which usefully position current debates in relation to a longer history of critical writing on universities, and which signal his concern with scrutinising the terms on which universities are spoken and written about.

Collini’s core argument is that there is now a profound disjuncture between current attempts to quantify and measure different aspects of academic work and the forms of judgement and critique which are central to critical intellectual work. This situation, he contends, has been produced and perpetuated in part by limited constructions and ways of speaking about universities. His interventions here are located primarily in relation to discussions of the humanities and their precarious fate in contemporary universities. Through in-depth analysis of government reports, Collini traces the ways in which increasing marketisation has exerted pressure on universities as spaces of critical knowledge. It is ‘indisputable’, he argues, that ‘in the past two or three decades governments in Britain and elsewhere have increasingly treated universities as institutions whose “performance” can primarily be improved by subjecting them to a particular form of market competition, or at least to some simulacrum thereof’.

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Collini brings a literary critic's eye to the government reports and other documents that cumulatively produce a very particular and narrow way of understanding higher education, and whose leaden prose might otherwise be dismissed as insignificant. Through doing so he moves debates on considerably beyond a concern with levels of fees, to a consideration of the impact of recent changes on the whole culture of universities and the forms of knowledge production therein. His work positions these changes in relation to a broader knowledge of Higher Education in the UK - and beyond - and helps to locate them in relation to histories of different ways of thinking the university. This approach is at its most effective in terms of his comparison between the Robbins Review of 1963, which advocated expanding higher education, and the Coalition government's Higher Education White Paper of 2011, underpinned by the economic analysis of Tera Allas, who had previously worked as a management consultant for McKinsey and Company. This comparison starkly demonstrates the shifting terms of debate, and gives a sense of the dominance of marketised ways of talking about universities. The historical imagination he brings to these essays also prevents him from simply idealising the past: he is aware of the need to go beyond narratives and campaigns that are simply articulated around a 'defence' of existing universities.

It is in his broader critical analysis and political position, however, that Collini's work is at its weakest, and where the limits of his analysis need to be considered. It is important to note these limitations, given that Collini's interventions have set much of the terms of debate for critical discussion of recent developments in UK Higher Education. Here I want to draw attention to three key areas where there is a need for more critical thinking if a challenge that is more politically alive to developments in UK higher education is to be developed.

Firstly, there is a set of questions around the 'politics of knowledge' which frame these interventions. Collini does note the significance of the many challenges that have been made to the deference associated with 'older' models of higher education. But a lingering sense of the university as a privileged elitist space of knowledge pervades the collection. Collini tends to adopt a position of speaking from the university to address 'various publics' about the proper 'nature and purpose of universities' (p214). The discussion in the essay 'Speaking out' of the modes of address by means of which such diverse publics might be effectively communicated with is particularly revealing in this regard. He advocates strategies which

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interpellate such publics as passive recipients of knowledge about universities, rather than considering how struggles over higher education might be constructed as part of broader political challenges and debates.

Further, rather than seeking to open up forms of academic knowledge production in more inclusionary and participatory ways, his account reproduces a rather established sense of what universities are and who they are for. He defines 'strong universities' as institutions that, 'having established over an extended period of time a reputation for high intellectual quality in the main academic disciplines, actively sustain an ethos that supports creativity and autonomy, thereby continuing to attract the best academics and students' (pp45-6). This refigures a construction of universities as old, elitist spaces and offers little space or recognition for institutions such as the Open University that have been shaped by powerful challenges to such dominant understandings of universities and whom they should seek to attract. There is also no substantive engagement with important recent moves to seek to 'decolonise' curriculums and university spaces.

Secondly, there is a set of tensions round Collini's engagements with marketisation and neoliberalism. While he clearly charts the processes of marketisation that have had direct consequences for contemporary universities, there is a striking reticence about positioning universities as part of wider neoliberal contexts. Thus Collini eschews any positioning of current debates around universities in relation to broader understandings of neoliberalism, arguing that 'it seems to me too simplistic to suggest that this is the straightforward outcome of the imposition of a single ideology, usually called "neoliberalism"' (p37). It is true that accounts of neoliberalism can sometimes function in ways which miss nuanced shifts or complex articulations, or flatten out social relations. There is, however, plenty of nuanced work that engages with the dynamics of neoliberalisation in ways that can assist efforts to analyse and locate these changes within wider processes, as usefully demonstrated by Michael Rustin's essay 'The neoliberal university and its alternatives'.¹

The result of Collini's failure to develop a deeper theoretical analysis is that his target becomes a somewhat ill-defined critique of 'managerialism', shorn of any foundation in neoliberalising logics - which is fine as far as it goes, but means that his argument loses some of its potential traction (e.g. p47). This is a pity, particularly since his analysis of the Coalition government's interventions provides excellent

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examples of the ways in which marketised principles were forced on the sector through state intervention. A narrower focus on lampooning the 'manageriat' also risks ignoring the importance of struggles over the role of the university as itself an important site of the formation and production of neoliberal knowledges.²

Thirdly, this abstraction of questions of 'managerialism' from broader political contexts leads to important silences around the political articulation of questions about Higher Education. There is some astute discussion of how both New Labour and Conservative policy has shifted constructions of universities in more functionalist and narrow terms, for example in Gordon Brown's influence on the 'impact' agenda. You would certainly not guess from these essays, however, how bitterly contested these changes have been, both within and beyond universities. The mass student protests in December 2010 against the introduction of higher fees warrant one sentence in the essay 'Sold Out' - and half of this sentence is taken up in querying the students' tactics (though its overall tenor is supportive). The many occupations that broke out across universities in Britain do not even get a mention. This abstraction of debates over contemporary universities from such resistances has significant consequences for the kinds of political narrative and strategy that emerge in Collini's work.

For all its sustained critical discussion on the direction of UK Higher Education, this rather de-politicised framing of universities means that the book is decidedly muted in terms of proposals that challenge the wider context of change. As Arunima Gopinath has argued in relation to struggles over universities in contemporary India, 'the ongoing debates and protest in public universities, and on higher education in India, reveal ways in which campus politics is an important site for understanding the complex relationship between education and the pedagogic processes in the university, political life and critical thinking'.³ This emphasises the necessity of positioning the university as a site of political struggle, and raises questions about the ways in which such struggles relate to different ways of envisioning knowledge and politics.

Collini's concerted lack of engagement with the forms taken by actually existing opposition to the changes he discusses has real consequences - for his analysis, his strategic thinking and his wider political imagination. This is powerfully symbolised by the absence in *Speaking of Universities* of any reference to either the Universities and College Union (UCU), the main union representing academic and related

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workers in Britain, or any of the other unions that represent other workers in universities. (Though the essay ‘The “English Problem” and the Scottish Solution’ was, as Collini notes, given at a UCU conference, the union similarly fails to make an appearance in *What Are Universities For?*.) UCU has arguably not played as vocal a role as it might have done in attempting to resist and chart alternatives to marketisation, but it has made important interventions, and the recent pension strike indicates a new-found militancy, at least in the union’s membership.

To attempt to ‘Speak of Universities’ in ways which chart critical directions without any substantive mention of unions or the opposition of students is a problematic venture. One of the most inspiring things about the recent UCU strike, as Bill Schwarz’s recent editorial in *Soundings* indicated, was that so many (though of course not all) students refused to be interpellated as consumers, and sought to construct solidarities with staff, linking staff struggles around pensions to their own critiques of the marketisation of the sector. The strikes and mobilisations of many low-paid workers, such as 2017’s cleaners’ dispute at the LSE, emphasise the diversity of labour struggles in contemporary universities. These kinds of collective action - and engagement across different constituencies within higher education - need to be nurtured, deepened and intensified if the negative changes foregrounded by Collini’s work are to be effectively challenged.

Notes

1. M. Rustin, ‘The neoliberal university and its alternatives’, *Soundings* 63, summer 2016.
2. R. Kelley, ‘Over the Rainbow: Third World Studies Against the Neoliberal Turn’, in A. Choudry and S. Vally (eds), *Reflections on Knowledge, Learning Movements and Social Change: History’s Schools*, Routledge 2017.
3. Arunima Gopinath, ‘Thought, Policies and Politics: How May We Imagine the Public University in India?’, *Kronos* 43, November 2017.

New worlds from earlier ashes?

Daryl Leeworthy

Hywel Francis, *Stories of Solidarity*, Y Lolfa, £9.99pb

Every year, on or around the fourth of November, when I was a student at Coedylan Comprehensive School in Pontypridd, we used to gather for what later became known as the 'Chartist' assembly. The headmaster, Phil Raybould, a former Swansea City midfielder, did this to ensure that each succeeding generation of that school - my school - understood something of the fellowship that abounded in industrial South Wales. At least once he told us about the international brigadier Morien Morgan. I listened especially closely to that one because Morien, like me, came from Ynysybwll. But what meanings do such stories as these have? What relevance have they for our own times? It is to this that Hywel Francis, one of Wales's leading historians, now turns his critical gaze.

Stories of Solidarity is a personal reflection on the changes and continuities in South Walian political culture: the spirit and tradition of international solidarity, the fundamental significance of the labour movement, and the remarkable opportunities it afforded for the nurturing of organic intellectuals through workers' education. And the collection is also an encouragement to listen and to reflect; to be compassionate and to hear the voices of the geographical margins. In so doing, in the words of Michael D. Higgins (a man whose work is important to Francis), 'we have an opportunity to construct all the alternative values of generosity, of tolerance, of openness, of courage that the times demand'.

Some of the struggles documented here are long forgotten. As Lord Dubs points out in his insightful introduction, not many people remember the Anthracite Miners' Strike of 1925. They are more likely to remember the strikes of 1926, 1972 or 1984-5 - national strikes, though with local consequences. Yet, as a moment, the

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anthracite strike was - and remains - an instructive lesson in building solidarity in the face of marked external pressure, and offers valuable insight into how things once were and may be once again. Two questions motivate: have we lost that world of solidarity in the face of struggle? could we, in the words of the Wobblies, 'bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old'?

On the second question, Francis is hopeful, offering the stories he has gathered as evidence of precisely that: new worlds built from earlier ashes. The first question is more difficult to answer. To me it seems that, two years on from (what is now simply known as) *the* referendum, the lines of solidarity and common purpose seem at best frayed and at worst shattered. Anger pervades. In a nation bifurcated into 'leavers' and 'remainers', whosoever shall bridge that divide shall be powerful indeed.

Need such a bridger be a politician? A leader of a political party? One senses that Francis the historian and organic intellectual, rooted in his community and drawing inspiration from two others of similar backgrounds - Higgins and Raymond Williams - would say firmly 'no'. Maybe a lesson can be gained here from revisiting the 'popular front' which emerged in Wales during the 1984-5 miners' strike, which was, Francis suggests, a broad democratic alliance encompassing women, ethnic minorities, the Welsh language movement, the LGBT community, and trade unionists from across Britain, Ireland, and further afield. This alliance provided the platform for resistance to Thatcherism, and the means of turning 'all those so-called "minorities" who have supported us' into 'an irresistible and united majority to fight for peace, jobs and communities' (pp83-4).

Perhaps. With significant interest in the experiences of Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners (LGSM) following the release of *Pride* (2014), a moment explored in the second edition of Francis's *History On Our Side* (2015), such in-the-moment observations (the original account was written in February 1985) have had a second wind. But was there really a broad democratic alliance except on a local scale? Or even, perhaps, only in the Dulais Valley? A more critical observer might suggest that there was not, particularly in the larger and more anglicised areas of the South Wales Coalfield, where most of the support for the strike came from links made within the Labour Party. But the idea - the story, the possibility - is what matters, and is what has contemporary resonance.

And what of Francis the activist, Francis the member of parliament? Some of

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these aspects are also apparent in the book - certainly in the stress on compassion (a key theme of Francis's time at Westminster) and his role as chair of the Neath, Dulais and Swansea Valleys Miners' Support Group in 1984-5. I would argue that these are best understood as pointers to what Williams called resources of hope: culture, knowledge, heritage and history. These, rather than the temporary nature of politics, and the even more contingent existence of a politician, are the true inheritance of a lost world. The paintings of David Carpanini and Josef Herman, the acting talents of Richard Burton, and the remarkable musical milieu inhabited by Paul Robeson - all of these feature here. The stories point, also, to internationalism, that other great resource of hope - embodied in Robeson and Herman as well as in the international brigaders, their families, and the Basque refugee children who came to Wales in the 1930s.

The present is turbulent: austerity, the 2016 referendum, populism, all things which threaten, and to which a historically-informed response must be offered. At one point Francis reflects on the fate of our community: 'Any constitutional change will require the enthusiastic endorsement of ... the working-class housing estates of Penparcau, Penrhys, Gurnos and Sandfields ... *they* will determine our fate' (pp181-2). Since three of these estates were in leave constituencies - determine it they did. There is a value in looking back to understand ways of successfully building community and fellowship, but what happens when current anger and frustration is channelled into fear and despair rather than hope? If the book has a weakness, it is the absence of a consideration of this question.

But it does not do to dwell. For in *Stories of Solidarity* Hywel Francis offers a powerful message, Welsh in accent but universal in scope. Traditions can and do have a place in the present, particularly cultural traditions of solidarity and community: we need them to survive.

David Featherstone is a member of the *Soundings* editorial collective.

Daryl Leeworthy is a writer and historian. His latest book, *Labour Country: Political Radicalism and Social Democracy in South Wales, 1831-1985* is out now.