

Student Revolt

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Voices of the Austerity Generation

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Introduction by Paul Mason

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CHAPTER ONE

Revolt

The student revolt that erupted in November 2010 was one of the most radical in British history. Hundreds of thousands of students – organising themselves outside traditional party or student union structures – walked out of classes, took to the streets, and occupied their universities. Out of apathy and disengagement came the forcible entry of a new generation onto the stage of British politics. The demonstrations sent shockwaves through the heart of the British establishment. The police, newspapers and government were caught unawares. Fighting the proposed tripling of tuition fees and the cuts to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA), students posed the first and most serious challenge to the Coalition government's agenda of austerity. The 'austerity generation' was made not as a victim of unjust policies, but in resistance to them. This book is the story of that movement told through the voices of those who made it.

The year 2010 represented a 'widening of the field of possibility', as Jean-Paul Sartre wrote of 1968.¹ No student movement in British history had so openly flouted the rules of political engagement. No student movement had ever caused such a 'public order' crisis, nor been met with such severe police repression. Not since the Iraq War had such a powerful social movement emerged on Britain's streets. Never had a movement been so representative of the student body, nor possessed so strong a case for their demands. Never had there been such a

radical potential for linking students struggling against fees and cuts with others resisting austerity. Never had the opportunity to politicise a whole generation been so cruelly missed.

The movement was unsuccessful in defeating the government's plans, thwarted by the intransigence of the Coalition. Like those in 1968, the rulers in 2010 also outlasted the student revolt. David Cameron – like Richard Nixon, Georges Pompidou, Leonid Brezhnev and Edward Heath – was the ultimate victor. The government knew the movement was about more than fees and cuts in education. The *Financial Times* understood the significance of the stand-off with the students: without winning this first battle, the newspaper claimed, the Coalition would come unstuck when other groups were affected by austerity.² The students' spirit of resistance could spread.

The outcome of the movement did not diminish the profundity of the experience for those present. 'It is likely the class of 2010 will be marked forever by these events', *The Guardian* predicted. 'Perhaps, 40 years from now, this week's demos will be the subject of nostalgic documentaries and writings, as those of 1968 have recently been.'³ Students in 2010 understood the historical significance of their actions. 'It was our '68', a participant in this book noted. 'We felt like we were changing the world', said another.

There is nothing new about student protest in Britain. Yet the 2010 revolt was to be more passionate and intense because of its rarity. The revolt challenged stereotypes. Networked forms of online communication allowed the twenty-first-century student protest to be simultaneously local and global.⁴ French onlookers watched in amazement as British students performed their month-long *jacquerie*. The French student

movement had a more developed tradition of direct action and a history of victories. In 2006, students had successfully united with workers to prevent the *Contrat Premiere Embauche* (CPE) law that stripped young people of many of their workers' rights. Occupations occurred at 90 universities, with 3 million people taking to the streets.⁵ In Paris for part of the 2010 movement, Malia Bouattia recounts how French students were shocked when they saw 'these otherwise quiet, tame people that usually just queue for the sake of queuing, ... suddenly ... kicking off due to the tripling of fees'. Paul Mason watched a young man address the SOAS occupation:

One man, a young Syrian, stood up to say: 'What we're doing here is having a global impact. This French journalist came up to me and said, this is amazing, this never happened before. What are the Brits doing? I said – what, you think the French are the only ones who can riot?'⁶

The government was afraid of 'contagion' from the continent. In 1968, the British student protests had been tame in comparison to those in France, Italy, Germany, Japan, and the United States. 'There is no memory of revolution in modern Britain', noted a leading activist from the time.⁷ The discrepancy between the image of passive British students and the images shown on television screens in late 2010 encouraged a feeling of rupture.

The 2010 student revolt was one instance in a wider set of global anti-establishment struggles. The movement was indelibly stamped by the fallout from the 2008 financial crisis. Movements of the streets rather than revolts through the ballot box offered the chief means of articulating a collective

grievance. From the student protests to the 2011 London riots, from Occupy to the Arab Spring, things were ‘kicking off everywhere’.

The student movement of 2010 showcased new political, economic, social, communicative and technological developments. Movements of the streets provided laboratories for new and liberating uses of social media. Students outmanoeuvred traditional political organisations and experimented with new modes of political practice. New social subjects emerged, spontaneously organising themselves from below and building through old and new networks. University students defending public education mobilised with college students defending a weekly grant (EMA) to help poorer students stay in college. ‘There was a generational un-channelled anger out there,’ remembered college student Kieran Sutton.⁸ The spectre of the ‘graduate without a future’ united with youth from the ‘slums of London’ hung over Britain in late 2010.

The abruptness of the revolt laid waste the assumption of youth apathy – of a ‘jilted generation’ incapable of political interest, collective action or common purpose. Students posed fundamental questions of justice and fairness to a political class unaccustomed to open defiance. Complacently assuming that student unrest had been vanquished, the government looked on as students transformed themselves from passive consumers of education into founders of a radical movement. Youth alienation from politics and the political process had been decades in the making. One researcher claimed the ‘millennials’ were the most apathetic generation in British history.⁹ The electoral promises of all parties – Liberal Democrats, Conservatives and Labour – were broken

so brazenly, and with such little chance of recourse, that the students had no one to represent them but themselves.

Having lamented youth disengagement from politics for decades, when faced with a real movement of young people, Britain's political class closed ranks. According to Nick Clegg, young people had failed to see the 'true picture'.¹⁰ According to David Cameron, their passion was 'drowning out' the truth.¹¹ 'I would feel ashamed if I didn't deal with the way that the world is, not simply dream of the way the world I would like it to be', Clegg lectured the 'dreamer' students who challenged him on his broken promise on fees.¹² Forgive the young, the Coalition cried, for they know not what they do. Cameron refused to have his youthful 'one-nation' idealism usurped by the students: 'We've seen the protests. We've seen the marches. We've seen how passionate many of our students are about this issue. Well let me tell you this: I am just as passionate.'¹³

The government's plans were intended to increase students' choice over their education and to make institutions more receptive to student needs. 'My principle was: what is in the best interests of young people, given the public spending constraints?', argued Minister for Universities and Science, David Willetts. When students demanded a different path, they were forcibly detained in areas known as 'kettles', charged with horses and pilloried in the press. More than just a movement to defeat the fee rise, the students were challenging the government's right to rule, and political parties' right to break their electoral promises. Worst of all, from the government's perspective, the students were unable to comprehend their own best interests. Students were flagrantly disputing the 'TINA' ideology – that *there is no alternative*.

Unable to countenance a movement that so openly contradicted their claim to speak for the student interest, the government treated the protests as a problem of public order. The Coalition government pathologised its unruly challengers as violent agitators led by foreign elements, intent on sullyng the war dead and threatening the Royal Family. One Conservative MP, Julian Lewis, compared the students to 'foreign preachers'.¹⁴ Theresa May praised this 'cleverly linked' analogy between the students and threats posed by the 'War on Terror'.¹⁵ The British state remained ever vigilant against threats posed by enemies from within and without.

The students were confronted with vitriol and condescension in equal measures. Before the 2010 movement took off, a leading journalist had told students that there were more important people in society to be worried about.¹⁶ 'Boys and girls' were playing out their 'St Trinian's riots', claimed one *Daily Mail* columnist.¹⁷ A leader article for *The Times* argued that 'within every student body there are small left-wing cliques who believe in violent direct action ... They just wanted to run around in front of the television cameras saying: "Look at me, aren't I clever?" No, not really.'¹⁸ 'The truth', a columnist for *The Guardian* noted, is that adults 'are too wise to waste their energy on something so silly' as challenging austerity: 'Protesting against the cuts is like protesting against water's stubborn habit of flowing downwards.'¹⁹ 'There are swings of emotions in politics', noted David Willetts in his interview: 'Things aren't just people rationally calculating if a policy was fair and progressive or not.' With precious few exceptions, students had few friends in the mainstream media or in the political class willing to give a voice to those in the streets.

The condescension of politicians and journalists makes E.P. Thompson's concept of the 'moral economy of the crowd' all the more important for understanding the revolt. Thompson defined a 'moral economy' as a complex set of attitudes and norms of justice present within a historically discrete social group. Like other historians of social movements, Thompson refused to countenance that the movements of the English poor were irrational, uninformed and bereft of logic. So too the 2010 student generation had to overcome the haughty pathologising from those with power and influence. The students were a 'feral' mob, according to David Cameron, and enmeshed with 'malevolent forces' according to one MP.²⁰ But understanding the protestors as logical, informed, conscious of their interests and with a sophisticated conception of justice is as critical for the 2010 generation as it was for those in Thompson's study.

One of the movement's notable features was that most of the student protesters wouldn't be affected by the fee increases. This often went unacknowledged by Coalition politicians. Unlike in continental Europe, fee increases would only effect new entrants into higher education – leaving out all those already studying for their degrees. Thompson's eighteenth-century crowd rioted for a 'just price' for bread, just as British students rioted to assert their own 'moral economy' of education. The 'mobs' carrying out 'popular direct action' – be they students at Millbank or bread rioters in the late eighteenth century – have behind them 'some legitimising notion of right'.²¹ As Thompson writes:

It is possible to detect in almost every eighteenth-century crowd action some legitimising notion. By the notion of

legitimation I mean that the men and women in the crowd were informed by the belief that they were defending traditional rights or customs; and, in general, that they were supported by the wider consensus of the community.²²

Such popular conceptions of justice made the student revolt more than a movement against fees and cuts. Young people were defending the values of the ‘commons’ – of a future without debt, where education would not be a commodity to be bought and sold.

Those students not cowed by parliamentary defeat and police repression took their experience into new projects. The history of UK Uncut – a protest group which put the question of tax avoidance onto the agenda of British politics – is indelibly linked to the student movement. The 2010 generation participated in the 2011 London riots, organised solidarity with the public sector strikes in November 2011, founded the Radical Independence Campaign in Scotland, and took part in the ‘surge’ into the Green Party before the 2015 general election. They would also play important roles in the campaign to elect and re-elect Jeremy Corbyn as Labour Party leader, as well as in the party’s unexpected success in the June 2017 election.

When the student movement of 2010 ended is a point of debate amongst its participants. For some it was the vote on the 9th of December 2010. For others, it came after the TUC-organised march on 26th of March 2011. That the movement didn’t continue past the 21st of November 2012 is not contested. On this day an NUS-organised rally at Kennington Park in south London ended in mud, freezing rain and an invasion of the speakers’ platform. In an irony lost

on those drenched and demoralised, the student movement of 2010 was buried in the same place (and in the same dreary rain) as the Chartists – the great democratic movement of the nineteenth century – had been, on the 10th of April 1848.

Participants looked back on their experiences as profoundly liberating. For them, the movement became a liminal space that broke with the strictures of what Mark Fisher called ‘capitalist realism.’²³ Whether or not that was the case, they were certainly openly flouting ‘*austerity realism*’ – the assumption that there was no alternative to austerity. ‘The only thing I can compare the current situation with is emerging from a state of deep depression,’ Fisher wrote of the 2010 movement:

There’s the rush that you get ... the occasional lurching anxieties, a sense of how precarious it all seems ... and yet not only is it maintaining itself, it’s proliferating, intensifying, feeding on itself – it’s impossible, but it’s happening – the reality programme resetting itself.²⁴

It was this asymmetry with the times that made the 2010 generation so exceptional.

Though defeated, the students showed that mass movements in an age of austerity were possible and necessary. The student revolt laid the basis for the leftward shift amongst young voters at the June 2017 general election. On 8 June 2017, an electoral ‘youthquake’ saw an estimated 60 per cent of those aged 18 to 24 vote for Corbyn’s Labour Party in the largest youth turnout since 1992.²⁵ This growth in politicisation did not emerge from nowhere. The 2010 student movement was the first to expose the growing generational cleavage that has now

gripped British politics. The political class chose to ignore its warnings and are now living with the consequences.

Young voters in 2017, like the protesters in 2010, refused to believe that there was no alternative to austerity. In the student revolt and the June 2017 general election, the austerity generation was made not as a victim of unjust policies, but in resistance to them. In both cases, young people chose to be the generation to *end* austerity. Both rejected worsening standards of living, debt and precarity. Both asserted that the misfortune of growing up after the 2008 financial crisis would not define their future. In 2010, young people chose to be the subjects of their political fate by taking to the streets; in 2017, they used the ballot box. Like those in 2010, the struggle of young people in 2017 is over who should pay for the economic crisis: the many or the few. The result at the general election shows how powerful a force this new political subject can be. To understand the radical changes to British politics since 2010, we need to start with the generation which came of age politically in that year.

The political economy of the revolt

The headline issue that was to define the movement was the proposed rise in tuition fees. Commissioned under the Labour government by Peter Mandelson, and published in October 2010, the Browne Review advocated a transformed higher education system. Students were to face potentially unlimited fees set by universities, an expansion of government-guaranteed student loans, and the substantial marketisation of the higher education system through inter-university competition.²⁶ The Browne Review's one major suggestion that was not