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A letter to the Director of the London School of Economics*

Dear Director,

The Majority Report of the Machinery of Government Committee . . . contains the principle that students, as well as staff, should determine the general academic policy of the School.¹ This principle is clearly inconsistent with the principle of *academic autonomy*, according to which the determination of academic policy is exclusively the business of academics of some seniority. The implementation of this latter principle has been achieved – and sustained – in a long historical process. I came from a part of the world where this principle has never been completely implemented and where during the last 30–40 years it has been tragically eroded, first under Nazi and then under Stalinist pressure. As an undergraduate I witnessed the demands of Nazi students at my University to suppress ‘Jewish–liberal–marxist influence’ expressed in the syllabuses. I saw how they, in concord with outside political forces, tried for many years – not without some success – to influence appointments and have teachers sacked who resisted their bandwagon. Later I was a graduate student at Moscow University when resolutions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party determined syllabuses in genetics and sent the dissenters to death. I also remember when students demanded that Einstein’s ‘bourgeois relativism’ (i.e. his relativity theory) should not be taught, and that those who taught such courses should confess their crimes in public. There can be little doubt that it was little more than coincidence that the Central Committee stopped this particular campaign against relativity and diverted the students’ attention to mathematical logic and mathematical economics where, as we know, they succeeded in thwarting the development of these subjects for many years. (I am fortunate that I did not have to witness the humiliation of University Professors by the students of Peking University during their ‘cultural revolution’.)

Invoking these ghastly memories may seem out of place in this

* This letter, first published in C. B. Cox and A. E. Dyson (eds): *Fight for Education, A Black Paper*, was written during the student troubles at the LSE in 1968 (eds.).

¹ The Committee on the Machinery of Government of the LSE included Governors, academics and students. In February 1968 they published two reports: a Majority Report and a Minority Report, written by two students, David Adelstein and Dick Atkinson.

country. It will be said that here there is no political force or motivation behind students' demands. Unlike the demands of Hitler's, Stalin's and Mao's youth, their aim is to improve rather than erode the university tradition of informed research and competent teaching.

But is this so? The 'Minority Report' which the LSE Students' Union adopted, has an underlying philosophy which may have been taken directly from the posters of Mao's 'Cultural Revolution'. As Adelstein, one of its authors, put it:

Student representation on governing bodies is only the *beginning*, and representation can be good or bad – it can give a false sense of unity. The *next thing* is for students to begin to run their own courses, initially through their own societies, and then to demand that they should run a particular part of a course: its content, how it is taught, and who teaches it.

The *next step* is for students to appoint their own teachers and to do some teaching themselves. *Ultimately*, students should work for a certain amount of the time. Academic and intellectual problems become meaningful if they are associated with practical life . . .

I accept the word militancy, but it means for me that one is prepared to consider any action that will achieve one's end, which is in accordance with one's ends. One would not rule out any mode of action because it has not been accepted in the past . . .

We do initiate unconstitutional action.

We do not accept constitutional limits because they are undemocratic. When democracy fails, this is the only way of doing it . . .¹

Should one leave such an extremist manifesto of a member of the Machinery of Government Committee of the London School of Economics without comment? Can one accept the 'beginning' stage of this programme without argument, without having to fear that this is only the thin end of the wedge? According to the Majority Report, we can. I shall argue that we cannot.

1 The crucial shortcoming of the Majority Report is that it does not demarcate between two completely different sets of student demands.

The *first set of demands* are for free expression of student complaints and criticism and for guarantees that these complaints and criticism will get a proper hearing; also for participation in decision making in matters in which they are, nearly, equally or even more competent than the academic staff. These demands were originally opposed – and in many places still are – by the champions of the paternalistic *in loco parentis* conception of University authority, but they no longer meet opposition at the LSE, in my opinion rightly so.

The *second set of demands* are completely unjustified demands for *student power* – as opposed to demands for *student rights of criticism* – concerning appointments, establishing new chairs, positions, designing syllabuses and, in general, concerning the content of teaching and research. The policy of the 'revolutionaries' is to blur the distinction. This policy has achieved considerable success, mainly because of the

¹ *The Times*, 18.3.68, my italics.

widespread but unproven assumption that if it had not been for 'revolutionary' militancy, even the justified demands might not have been satisfied to the degree they are satisfied now. But whether this is true or not, it does not alter the plain and sad fact that these militants have no interest whatsoever in the apolitical and constructive student demands. They only advocate the demands for freedom for political expediency, in order to win the students' support for their demands for (their) power. They are turning surreptitiously the justified revolt against academic paternalism into a political revolt against academic autonomy. This is why it is so important to draw a sharp line between the two kinds of demands. The main fault of the Majority Report is that it fails to do so.

It is worth while mentioning that, for instance, the National Executive of the Association of University Teachers, in a recent decision, made the demarcation quite clear. They agree that

(1) At departmental level there should be students on joint staff-student committees of the departmental board or board of studies;

(2) In general, on any committees dealing with matters such as residential accommodation, refectory and catering, student welfare, there should be student representatives elected by the students themselves;

(3) There should be a Senate Student Affairs Committee with roughly equal staff and student numbers and this committee should advise directly the Senate and other sub-committees of Senate when matters of importance to students arise for discussion.

But they oppose students' participation on the Council and Senate: 'The undergraduate, who by definition is still learning what the content of his subject is, is not in a position to take decisions on matters like curricula...'

Of course, this does not mean that they are 'not in a position' to *criticize* such matters. But the students of our School do have the right to criticize, both in private (for instance to the Dean of Undergraduate Studies) and in public (for instance in *Beaver*¹ or in departmental staff-student committees) the content and method of teaching and of research, or even individual courses, classes, appointments etc. and request their discussion. The problem is rather that they have not yet made real use of this right. They should be encouraged - and even helped - to make the best of it.

But there is a world of difference between the right to criticism and consultation and the power to participate in decision making. No academic would deny the right of the Government or of students to *criticize* any aspect of University life, or to have access to relevant information. But no academic would agree that Parliament (or Party Politbureaus) should have a voice in *deciding* about appointments, syllabuses, etc.

There are no arguments for Student Power that would not be

¹ *Beaver* is the newspaper of the LSE Students' Union.

arguments also for Government Power. Students may be part of the academic community in an important sense in which the Government are not; but they receive their education at considerable expense to the taxpayers, whose representatives may therefore be said to have more right to interfere with University life than the students whose education they finance. Militant students frequently use the analogy that the consumer ought to be able to influence the production of the goods he buys: they do not notice that in this analogy the real consumer is the State – *they* are the goods to be delivered. It is the thin wall of academic autonomy and nothing else that protects students from political interference in the age of State-financed education.

This is perhaps the most important reason why we should resist student power while accepting student freedom to criticize: because we resist government power while accepting government freedom to criticize. Of course there will be people both among students and politicians who believe that freedom of criticism is useless without power. But the history of universities is full of evidence to the contrary. Indeed, the main danger is that academics, fully aware that academic autonomy has no real power basis, are too quick rather than too slow in yielding to outside criticism and pressure: the latest evidence is exactly this Majority Report. I contend that, if students were now denied membership on Council and Senate, and if they were asked in three years' time which of their constructive criticisms and proposals have not been seriously considered, the answer would be 'none'.

One may ask whether the qualifying adjective 'constructive' was not a device for ignoring arbitrarily some of the criticisms. This objection brings me to another demarcation between student demands. *My first demarcation was between freedom of criticism and power in decision making.* Freedom of criticism and expression of demands must be, of course, unlimited and extend to both 'constructive' and 'destructive' criticisms and demands. But if we look at the *concrete content* of students' demands we find that they can be separated into two classes. Some students want better teaching facilities, more rational examination structure, better coordinated syllabuses, better lectures, classes, seminars, reading lists, better library facilities, etc. etc. These students want universities to serve better the old ideal of expanding and transmitting knowledge. Other students want to demolish universities as centres of learning and turn them into avant-garde centres of social and political conflict and commitment, whatever this may mean. As the Adelstein-Atkinson report puts it: 'Discovery itself lies in action'. *My second demarcation is then between the 'constructive' demands which seek to improve the University as we know it and the 'destructive' demands which seek to destroy it.* It is sad that these two have been conflated.

Now my two demarcation lines coincide: I claim that *those who concentrate on 'constructive' demands are content with student freedom while those who concentrate on 'destructive' demands want student power.*

2 As a matter of fact, there is not one single argument in the Majority Report as to *why* students should be admitted to Senate and Council; nor are obvious counterarguments refuted or even mentioned.

I should like therefore to set out some of these counterarguments in concrete form. The first argument is implicit in what I have already said. Academic autonomy is being assaulted with different degrees of vehemence and of success all the time, everywhere (the most recent examples being the purge of Greek Universities by a junta of colonels, and the dismissal of seven 'liberal-Zionist' professors of Warsaw University). Therefore the principle of academic autonomy must be clearly stated and argued for. I do not know, however, of a coherent and convincing defence of it published anywhere. The reason is simple: good academics prefer doing their research and teaching to writing manifestos in defence of academic autonomy as long as its erosion is bearable. However, when it becomes unbearable it is too late to try to defend it publicly because this has become politically impossible. This is why it is vital to stand up when the corrosion *starts* and let the argument penetrate to those countries where they cannot be published any more.

I have little doubt that a forceful defence of academic autonomy will be understood and appreciated by the majority of our students. The absence of any such effort is one of the most perplexing features of the whole affair.

But let us now consider the more immediate practical consequences of students' membership in Senate and Council.

The contribution of 'constructive' student members may be useful but very limited, and, indeed, it can scarcely be expected to exceed the contribution which they can make through the already available channels without being members of Senate or Council. Let us remember that it takes at least a year even for a senior academic member to become a competent member, and students will have to leave the Senate as soon as they become more acquainted with its problems and procedures. What will be the contribution of the 'destructive' members? Once on Council and Senate they will follow what used to be called by some Komintern leaders the 'salami tactic': piecemeal slicing of the academic tradition. They will fight first for increased student membership, then for the erosion of 'reserved subjects';¹ they will propose additional items on the agenda protesting against discontinuation of teaching contracts for their favourite academic misfits, demanding new Chairs in alienation, in cultural revolution, or in American (but not Communist) war crimes in Vietnam, etc. etc. They will fight for an *increased* role of Lay Governors in the

¹ The Majority Report recommended that students should normally be excluded from the discussion of a list of 'reserved subjects' which included academic appointments, promotions, etc., and also 'any other category or item of business declared by the Chairman [of the respective committee] to be a "reserved subject"'.

School's affairs, with the difference that they will want to have as Governors the representatives of the Trade Unions, of the 'avant-garde culture' etc., rather than the present 'City type'. They will devote full-time energy to further their aims which we shall be able to counter only by abandoning academic life for the full-time defence of academic life. They will ruthlessly and systematically use the pressure of Students' Union meetings on the Senate and there can be no doubt that they will exploit to the limit any mistake made by the Chairman; they will issue distorting statements, etc. etc. I do not think they will win their cases; but very soon the most sensitive agenda will be discussed and agreed upon in a Director's informal caucus before the Senate meetings and driven through without discussion to avoid Maoist filibuster. They will be sprung on the Senate under 'Any other business' in order to avoid previous build-up of student pressure. But then the students will feel – rightly – deceived and mass protests will follow. The militants will *not* be isolated.

I think this clearly shows two things. *First*, it shows the inconsistency of those who are pressing simultaneously for the elimination of Lay Governors, for increased student representation; *and* for more democratic Government of the School. But surely students are as incompetent in strictly academic matters as Lay Governors; and nothing is more dangerous to a democratic Senate than an (even tiny) minority openly dedicated to its destruction and thereby creating a siege psychology. *Secondly*, it shows that student membership, in the presence of a Maoist minority, does not lessen but increases the danger of student riots. This, in fact, already shows at the Free University of Berlin where the extremists, having fought their way into the Senate, now are pressing for the second 'stage' of their revolution: for one third representation for students, one third for junior and temporary staff.

One may, of course, hope that 'destructive' elements will not be elected to Senate and Council. Some signatories of the Majority Report privately pin their hopes on the Students' Union Reform which would turn it into a fairly representative body – which now it is certainly not – and thereby reduce the chances of a Maoist party appearing on the Senate. But such a Reform, I understand, is being successfully obstructed and even if it is passed, will not close the doors to the political extremists. For, let us face it, whatever electoral structure the Students' Union will adopt, there will be very few future academics among the students who will offer themselves as candidates on Senate and Council. Serious undergraduates who want to profit maximally from their short three years' course will not normally stand and canvass for election. At least a sizeable number of student members will belong to a group of 'activists', who openly seek to destroy the universities as places of learning and to turn them into centres of political commitment and who openly confess that they want to use

membership of Senate and Council for furthering their political aims.

The adoption of the Majority Report would be a considerable encouragement to the numerically weak group of student extremists. The LSE riots seem to have blinded LSE academics to the national weakness of this group. The National Union of Students has not demanded student membership on Senates and Councils; but if the LSE academics accept it, how will they be able to resist their militant wing? But most academics in Britain, unlike the appeasers at LSE, *will* resist. Years of unrest will follow, both at the 'resistant' and the 'appeaser' universities. It is not at all impossible that a conservative reaction to the permissive mood of the 1960s could even bring a demand that Parliament should have watchdogs on Senates to ensure that the Universities give that sort of education which the taxpayers expect for their money.

It may be objected that I exaggerate the dangers. But I do not contend that the University tradition will *necessarily* be destroyed within a few years if we adopt the appeasers' position. I do claim, however, that it is a miracle that the University tradition was ever established and that it has survived until this day. There is nothing necessary about this survival: we have to fight against its erosion all the time in order to be in a better position when, with the periodical social and political crises, the onslaught on universities, as so frequently happens, becomes acute.

3 Of course, I do not think that academic autonomy is sufficient in itself to guarantee the growth of knowledge and to uphold and improve standards of university education. There are many dangerous ills which are *consistent* with academic autonomy. But seeking the cure for such ills through the erosion of academic autonomy is no better than curing the ills of parliamentary democracy through fascism, communism, or Maoism. I would propose a motion based on my demarcation between 'constructive' and 'destructive' student demands as follows:

This Board welcomes any proposal which would provide channels for an improvement of the staff-student dialogue on the content and method of teaching. It approves of the departmental staff-student committees and of student membership on School committees where students may have useful direct contribution. At the same time this Board firmly opposes any erosion of academic autonomy and upholds the principle that academic policy within the University should be determined solely by academics.¹

28 March 1968

Yours sincerely,
Imre Lakatos

¹ The Academic Board of the LSE rejected both the Majority and the Minority reports. However, on 13 November 1968 the Board passed a motion that 'the responsibility on behalf of the School for the determination of matters involving general academic standards must rest, and be seen to rest, entirely with the academic staff of the School'.