

## R.H. Tawney and the Idea of Higher Education

Holford John, *University of Nottingham, UK*

R.H. Tawney (1880-1962) is now known principally for his contribution to democratic socialist thought, through works such as *The Acquisitive Society* (1921) and *Equality* (1931). While his contribution to primary and secondary educational reform is recognised (Simon 1974), his contribution to higher educational thought is less well-established. This paper argues that his writings – which address higher education policy, purpose, methods, organisation, finance, research, and social composition – are important, with significance for contemporary debates about the role and nature of ‘the university’.

Discussions of the ‘idea’ of HE often leap from the early/mid-nineteenth century (Humboldt and Newman) to the mid/late-twentieth century (Robbins and Clark Kerr). The intervening century is treated as a period of institutional growth and expansion, but not of original theorisation or critique. This view is damaging, as it removes from the HE ‘canon’ important critiques of HE which emerged in the context of the rise of labour movements and socialist thought. Humboldt and Newman took it for granted that students would come from social elites (as well as being male and young). For Robbins and Kerr, social elitism, swamped by the rising tide of educational opportunity, was of little more than historical interest. The demand for HE would increase with ‘continuing growth in family incomes’ and because ‘more and more parents [will] have themselves received a fuller education’ (Robbins 1963, §140). HE was itself central to meritocracy.

The omission of early twentieth century theorists from the HE ‘canon’ weakens the intellectual resources available to contemporary HE theorists. The origins of Tawney’s thinking about HE lie in the decade before 1914, when his activities encompassed both close engagement with adult students in workers’ education classes, and work with a (friendship) group of – chiefly young – Oxford dons to raise the university’s ‘academic standards and simultaneously broaden its social range and intake’ (Goldman 2013: 58). In this period of political and industrial turmoil he authored (albeit anonymously) the University’s report on *Oxford and Working-class Education* (1908) and taught the first Oxford tutorial classes for working-class students (in the industrial north-west). In this way, HE would not draw students away from their social origins, but provide education for students in their home milieu. This is very different from today’s assumption that if HE has a role in promoting a good society, this is largely to be discharged through encouraging social mobility – which draws students away from their geographical and social origins.

Tawney’s contribution to HE thought was also pedagogical. Any education which relied ‘principally on the formal lecture’ involved an ‘unintentional system of mutual deception’ (quoted Goldman 2013: 65). Discussion was central. Tutorial classes were small enough to allow tutor and students to ‘meet as friends’, to ‘discover each other’s idiosyncrasies’ and to engage in discussion. An historian, Tawney always taught from sources (along with two other tutorial class tutors, he edited a pioneering volume, *English Economic History: Select Documents* (Bland, Brown and Tawney 1914)); his classes had their own mobile libraries. A committed socialist, he ‘never felt tempted to engage in propaganda’.

Tawney’s engagement with the labour movement also contributed to his views on governance, organisation and curriculum in HE. In the days before public funding of HE, he argued that the

resources of Oxford and Cambridge colleges should be available for university purposes. He proposed the development of social sciences curricula, the reorganisation of entrance examinations to open the universities to a broader range of students, and the awarding of scholarships to the needy rather than those from privileged backgrounds. And – drawing on workers' education – he took the view that the self-governing nature of classes was a key element in the democratic education of the community.

While many of Tawney's views on HE were formed in this pre-war decade of engagement with the labour movement and workers' education, they were intensified by his experiences as a soldier on the Western Front (1914-16) – searingly recounted in *The Attack* (1916). In *A National College of All Souls* (1917), he argued that reconstructing education 'in a generous, humane and liberal spirit would be the noblest memorial to those who have fallen'. Providing, 'not merely, as hitherto, for a small minority, but for all ... an education generous, inspiring and humane' would show that 'the nation was prepared to submit its life to principles of the kind for which it thought itself justified in asking them to die'. Tawney's wartime experiences intensified his sense – also grounded in his Anglicanism – that education was not merely about knowledge, but also about comradeship and 'the higher possibilities of the human spirit'.

From 1920, Tawney's professional career was spent largely at the LSE (in due course as Professor of Economic History). He not only became one of the most accomplished and eminent historians of his time (*Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926) was the best-selling historical work of the inter-war period), but contributed to national and Labour Party policy committees. He was for a period a member of the UGC. Tawney's 'elite network (or social capital)' has been described as 'particularly strong' (Steele & Taylor 2008); his skills in committee were formidable. Significantly, however, it was his commitment to adult education which lasted longest: he served on the WEA's executive committee for over half a century.

Tawney's views on pedagogy, governance and democracy challenge contemporary managerialist and outcome-based views of HE. His work provides an ethical and political perspective on the role of HE grounded in an era when labour challenged capital. His call for a HE 'for all' which was 'generous, inspiring and humane' challenges today's dominant trends policy, for which 'social mobility' legitimises HE's role in intensifying inequality and reproduction of social elites.

## References

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