

Most are Marxists, You Know

—enemies of promise

Many education officers and advisers in local authorities are Marxists. So are many teacher trainers in universities. That is why more and more schools must be removed from local authority control, and why teacher training must be increasingly taken out of the hands of universities. Also, the teacher unions are more interested in the rights of shop stewards than in the rights of children. That is why their influence in the education system must be curtailed. These people – local authority advisers and officers, university lecturers, union officials – do not want to see a rise in educational standards. On the contrary, they are enemies of promise, implacably opposed to excellence, revering jargon and Marxism.

These, in a nutshell, are the views stated by the secretary of state for education, Michael Gove, in [a recent article](#) (*Daily Mail*, 23 March 2013). Summarised with verbatim quotations, the article maintains ‘the new enemies of promise are a set of politically motivated individuals who have been actively trying to prevent millions of our poorest children getting the education they need’. Prominent amongst these politically motivated people are [the 100 academics](#) (‘Gove will bury pupils in facts and rules’, *Independent*, 19 March 2013) all of them involved in the initial training and continuing development of teachers, who last week wrote a collective letter to the *Independent* about proposed changes in the national curriculum. ‘You would expect such people,’ says Gove, ‘to value learning, revere knowledge and dedicate them to fighting ignorance. Sadly, they seem more interested in valuing Marxism, revering jargon and fighting excellence.’

‘What planet,’ he asks, ‘are these people on?’ He answers his own question: ‘A Red Planet, if their published work is anything to go by. One of the letter’s principal signatories claims to write from “a classical Marxist perspective”, another studies “how masculinities and femininities operate as communities of practice”, a third makes their life work an “intergenerational ethnography of the intersection of class, place, education and school resistance”’.

‘It’s a battle,’ adds Gove, ‘in which you have to take sides. Now that Labour seem to be siding with the militants, it’s even more important that we support the great teachers and heads fighting for higher standards for the sake of our children ... School reformers in the past often complained about what was called The Blob – the network of educational gurus in and around our universities who praised each others’ research, sat on committees that drafted politically correct curricula, drew gifted young teachers away from their vocation and instead directed them towards ideologically driven theory ... In the past The Blob tended to operate by stealth, using its influence to control the quangos and committees which shaped policy.

‘But,’ Gove continues, ‘The Blob has broken cover in the letters pages of the broadsheets because this Government is taking it on. We have abolished the quangos they controlled. We have given a majority of secondary schools academy status so they are free from the influence of The Blob’s allies in local government. We are moving teacher training away from university departments and into our best schools. And we are reforming our curriculum and exams to restore the rigour they abandoned.’

Well, that’s enough direct quotation. Hopefully enough quotations have been given to give a fair and accurate idea of the article’s tone and content. For further accounts of the article see the [London Review of Books](#), the [LKMco](#) think tank, and – proudly and defiantly – the [International Socialist Group](#).

Time now to turn to the letter from academics that so excited Gove’s wrath and righteous indignation. The first thing that strikes you, when you read it, is that to describe it as Marxist is quite extraordinarily eccentric. Its essential thesis is the one presented though fiction by Charles Dickens in *Hard Times* (1854): an emphasis on facts, facts, facts, allied with a belief that poetry and imagination are destructive nonsense, is damaging both for individuals and for society. The same point was made by Jane Austen in *Mansfield Park* (1814), where Julia and Maria Bertram complain about their cousin Fanny Price. ‘But aunt, she is so very ignorant! ... How long ago is it, aunt, since we used to repeat the chronological order of the kings of England, with the dates of their accession, and most of the principal events of their reigns!’ Their aunt replies: ‘Very true indeed, my dears, but you are blessed with wonderful memories, and your poor cousin probably has none at all ... you must make allowances for your cousin, and pity her deficiency.’

Jane Austen's own comment is that, despite the 'promising talents and early information' of the Misses Bertram, they are 'entirely deficient in the less common acquirements of self-knowledge, generosity and humility'.

It is absurd to claim the 100 academics who wrote to the Independent are, to quote the headline over Gove's article, 'hell-bent on destroying our schools'. Clearly, though, Mr Gove and his private office have become desperately rattled by even the slightest criticisms of what they are doing and proposing.

They would presumably have been even more rattled and hysterical if the academics' letter had touched much more than it in fact did, and much more than it certainly should have done, on issues to do with equality and social justice. Why do boys have poorer outcomes than girls? Why are children from African-Caribbean or (in northern England) Pakistani backgrounds so much more likely to fail in the education system than others? Why is there an increase in children and young people diagnosed as having behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD)? Why do children from lower-income households have such poor educational outcomes? How do these various factors intersect? What evidence is there that Mr Gove's proposed changes are likely to help children who are failing? What evidence is there that he really cares?

Such questions were not, alas, asked by the academics in their recent letter. Hopefully they are going to write another letter very soon.

Source

Left Central Blogpost, March 2013