

Charlton, Kenneth

Education in England 1529-1640: a Revolution?

Rozprawy z Dziejów Oświaty 25, 147-153

1983

Artykuł umieszczony jest w kolekcji cyfrowej Bazhum, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych tworzonej przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego.

Artykuł został zdigitalizowany i opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie ze środków specjalnych MNiSW dzięki Wydziałowi Historycznemu Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.



KENNTHEH CHARLTON

EDUCATION IN ENGLAND 1529—1640: A REVOLUTION?

My title has been suggested by the researches of Professor Lawrence Stone, which have been concerned over the past twenty-five years with "crisis" and "revolution". They started with his interest in the social origins of the Civil War and his reaction to R. H. Tawney's interpretation of these origins in his *Economic History Review* article "The Rise of the Gentry 1558—1640". Professor Stone's own rather chequered part in that debate is recounted with disarming candour in the introduction to his book *The Causes of the English Revolution 1529—1642* (1972). In the meantime (in 1960) Professor Stone had produced his massive *Crisis of the Aristocracy*. It was in the year previous to this (1964) that he produced his long article in *Past and Present*, which he entitled "The Educational Revolution in England 1560—1640" and from which my own title is derived.

In writing about education in this period Professor Stone makes two major points. The first is that changes took place, characterized by him as "growth", "expansion", "explosion", which were "astonishing", "extraordinary" and "unprecedented" in their scale. "Few revolutions of a revolutionary age—he has concluded—were of greater importance". These are dramatic words, echoing what Sir John Neale had earlier described as "a cultural revolution". But they are the more dramatic because, secondly, Professor Stone wishes to show that the changes they purport to describe were in some sense causally related to that other great revolution "The Puritan Revolution", or "The English Revolution". In his *Past and Present* article Professor Stone maintains that "at every point the educational revolution and the socio-political revolution were closely interlocked"; in *Crisis of the Aristocracy* one of the manifold causes of that crisis was "the spread through propertied classes of a bookish education acquired at schools and university [...] [and linked with] the demand of the State for an administrative elite of proved competence irrespective of claims of rank"; again, in *Causes of the English Revolution*, he asserts that "it looks more and more as if this educational explosion was a necessary—but not of course a suffi-

cient—cause of the peculiar and ultimately radical course the revolution took”.

Historians must obviously pay attention to such a characterization and to such an interpretation of the massive data which Professor Stone has collected together, and the more so since the phrase “educational revolution” is already becoming common form and acquiring the sanctity of received wisdom—in other words it is appearing in examination scripts! It deserves, therefore, fairly close scrutiny and I would like to make a start on such a scrutiny in this paper.

If we reflect on Professor Stone’s contribution two groups of questions come to mind. The first group would include questions such as:

(i) What is meant by “revolution” and “crisis” in Professor Stone’s writings? What meaning does he attach to these words? In what sense or senses is he using them?

(ii) Is he using the term “revolution” in the *Past and Present* article as he uses it in his general “crisis” writings?

(iii) Is the word “revolution”, as used in the fields of education, religion, politics and social structure, used in the same sense in each case?

If there *was* a revolution in education, a second group of questions remains to be answered:

(i) Who were the revolutionaries in this educational revolution?

(ii) What were the preconditions, precipitates and triggers (to use Professor Stone’s own terminology) of such a revolution?

(iii) Is the term “revolution” to be applied to education as a whole, or merely to some particular aspects of education? For example, was the educational revolution revolutionary in purpose? in personnel? in content? in effect?

We may use the term “revolution” in a weak sense rather than in a strong sense, but if we look at Professor Stone’s usage of the term, as for example in *Causes of the English Revolution*, and more especially in the light of that book’s sociological introduction, then we see that he is using it in a delimited and strong sense. And for all his disclaimers (which, as Hexter gently points out, he usually then proceeds to ignore) Professor Stone does hanker after the possibility of that unified conceptual approach to and interpretation of a complex period of change which Hobsbawm sought in his original “Crisis of the Seventeenth Century” articles in *Past in Present* back in 1954.

The second question I asked was “in what sense if at all were these revolutionary changes educational?” Obviously we are not here using the adjective “educational” to mean “educative”. What we want to know is in what areas or aspects of education did these revolutionary changes take place, to what aspects of education is the term “revolutionary” to be applied? Once again, these different areas or aspects of education

can be considered by asking a series of questions: was the educational revolution revolutionary in purpose? in personnel? in content? in effect? I refer to each of these in turn.

Was the educational revolution revolutionary in purpose? Well, only people have purposes, so which people had revolutionary purposes? Those in authority in the universities certainly had no revolutionary purpose in mind for their institutions—quite the reverse. Any changes which took place were carefully designed to ensure that the universities maintained the *status quo* (at any particular time) in religion, in politics and in social structure. For example, one of the major *changes* which took place in sixteenth century Oxford and Cambridge was the development of the colleges alongside and often in rivalry with their respective universities. But the influence of college tutors was designed to effect a greater *control* over students; and we have no evidence either that any unanticipated or unwelcome consequences resulted from this transfer of function. Similarly, the vastly increased power of Masters over their Colleges, and indeed over university affairs, had a conservative rather than a revolutionary purpose and effect, especially after the promulgation of the new Cambridge statutes of 1570, the incorporation of both universities under the Act of 1571 which further tightened the bonds with Crown and parliament, and still more so when the new Laudian statutes for Oxford in 1636 effectively placed the government of the university in the hands of College heads.

If we look at the other side of the coin and consider those who constituted the explosion, the undergraduates, or rather their parents who sent them to university, they certainly did not view universities as breeding grounds of a new kind of scrutinizing and potentially revolutionary mind. Motivation, in this as in much else, would be mixed, but by the end of the century attendance at university was recognized as an important link in the chain of "connection", that is connection with the existing social and professional hierarchy. The students and parents involved could hardly be equated with those Professor Stone describes in his *Causes of the English Revolution*, where he writes "In every revolutionary situation one finds a group of men—fanatics, extremists, zealots—so convinced of their own righteousness and of the urgent need to create a new Jerusalem on earth (whether formally religious or secular in inspiration is irrelevant) that they are prepared to smash through the moral restraint of habit, custom and convention. It is true that the behaviour of some of the "new" undergraduates scandalized the older members of the universities, but though this may tell us something about the quality of their studies, it does not allow us to infer revolutionary intent.

Was, then, the educational revolution revolutionary in personnel? If by "revolutionary" we here mean a change in kind rather than in degree

then the answer on this occasion must a guarded yes, though in a relatively weak sense of the term "revolutionary". Whereas before the sixteenth century the vast majority of university students had been clerics preparing for their professional careers either as priests or as administrators and lawyers within the church, from the mid-sixteenth century, though not before, there was a much larger proportion of lay students entering university with a lay career in mind.

The debate about the social class distribution of these students has in a sense gone the way of the debate about the rise of the gentry, which in its early stages was so obsessed with establishing a rise and indicating its causes and effects, that little attention was paid to defining the gentry, who turned out to be a much less homogeneous group of people than the earlier protagonists had cared to admit.

The same has been true of the debate about the influx of the gentry into the universities. Sir John Neale, and later Mark Curtis, were so busy counting heads from a very limited sample of admissions registers that other variables tended to be ignored. Joan Simon and David Cressy have reminded us of the need for caution in our generalizations.

Professor Stone explicitly acknowledges the need for such caution in his *Past and Present* article when he admits that there are "grave methodological difficulties" with the status category of "gentleman", the use of which term "in most of the surviving registers is both vague and volatile". He does attempt to overcome these difficulties by noting that, "by and large, gentry lived in the country and trading and professional classes lived in the towns, so that a division into rural and urban residents can bring some degree of sophistication to an otherwise meaningless status-category"—though whether such a level of sophistication can bear the weight of Professor Stone's argument remains doubtful.

But what of their studies, once arrived? In looking at the university curriculum of this period we need to ask: was the educational revolution revolutionary in content? First of all, was there a radical change in the content of university education, and in particular did the "new" undergraduates receive a humanist education to prepare them for future responsibilities? Secondly, if there was a change of this kind would it necessarily lead to revolution, did it in fact make a causal contribution?

With regard to the first point, Mark Curtis has argued that there was a radical change towards a modernization of the university curriculum along humanist lines, though the opposite case has been argued (to my mind with much greater rigour) by W. T. Costello and Christopher Hill, the former showing in detail the extent to which scholastic philosophy continued to dominate undergraduate (and graduate) study. More important, however, Professor Stone acknowledges that in the matter of curriculum there was no educational revolution—"[it should not be] supposed—he writes—that there was something subversive about the

educational curriculum of the day. Grammar schools and universities, with their scholastic classical bias, were deliberately designed to inculcate habits of discipline and obedience [...] The cause must be sought elsewhere than in the formal curriculum [...]” Nor does he go on to claim (as Curtis does) that the revolution is to be found in an “informal” curriculum, extra-statutory teaching provided by College tutors.

The second point leads us to our fourth question: was the educational revolution revolutionary in effect? i.e. did the educational causes produce revolutionary effects? When it comes to causation it is difficult to identify Professor Stone’s precise position. In his *Past and Present* article he writes: “at every point the educational revolution and the socio-political revolution were closely interlocked”, though he ends the article (perhaps rather more judiciously): “if one allows a lag of about twenty years, both the beginning and the end of this age of unprecedented intellectual vitality coincided rather closely with the rise and fall of the graph of higher education. It is tempting to think that the relationship was something more than a coincidence”. In his later book, *Causes of the English Revolution*, he writes “it looks more and more as if this educational explosion was a necessary—but not of course sufficient—cause for the peculiar and ultimately radical course the revolution took”.

It is difficult in the circumstances to determine how far Professor Stone is following the argument of, say, Thomas Hobbes who argued that the universities were the direct and prime cause of the disaffection which led to the revolution, because just as the Presbyterians brought their “divinity” into the churches from the universities, so too many gentlemen brought their politics from the universities into parliament. Thus there were ambitious ministers envying the authority of the bishops whom they thought less learned than themselves, and ambitious gentlemen envying the privy council whom they thought were less wise than themselves. At other points Professor Stone seems to be following Mark Curtis, who, though denying Hobbes’s interpretation as being over-simple, nevertheless finds university education not simply a necessary but a prime cause, not because it produced seditious men, but because taking their task to be the production of governors in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century humanist sense, the universities were too successful, in that they produced too many men highly trained in the humanities to be absorbed either by the church or by the state—too many men for too few places. Thus were produced what Curtis calls “alienated intellectuals”.

But since Stone also claims that “a second important reason for the radicalism of the early seventeenth century was that so many schoolmasters and dons were religious dissidents” we need to ask whether the claim is being couched in absolute or relative terms. The arithmetic

to produce an absolute number of dissidents has not yet been done, and until that has been done the relative importance of such a number will elude us. We simply do not know the religious and political affiliations of those graduating from the universities in any particular decade during the period. More important it would be extremely difficult to decide how far the universities were responsible for such affiliations. For example, how many disaffected graduates were the sons of disaffected non-graduate fathers? There were, of course, "Puritan" colleges, but such colleges were in a minority and in the half century prior to the outbreak of the Civil War it could well be argued that royal and/or archiepiscopal control, through the revision of statutes and the appointment of masters and fellows of colleges, increased rather than decreased.

Of course what I have presented is not meant to indicate that whilst Professor Stone claims that there was an educational revolution I claim there was not, for as I have tried to show it depends on what is meant by "revolution", and it depends on which particular part of the educational scene is being referred to. There were certainly *changes* going on. We have nevertheless to ask, first, were they extensive enough over the whole range to count as an educational revolution, and, second, were they revolutionary in effect—to what extent did they contribute (in an intended or unintended way) to the general crisis, to the great revolution?

The final acceptance of the Tudor gentry of the humanist call to get their sons educated was an important sixteenth century change. But even if this new type of student *registered* at university, it is far from certain that he received a humanist education, or became educated in the humanist sense of the term. And Professor Stone rather reluctantly admits this is one of his characteristic formulations: "in terms of the formal attendance of its members at the institutions of higher learning, the House of Commons of 1640 was the best educated in English history before or since". Six years earlier in his *Past and Present* article he was rather more circumspect: "it seems very likely that in terms of formal enrolment at the institutions of higher learning (though possibly of not a severe and intellectual training) the House of Commons of the Long Parliament was the best educated in English history". As with the status category of "gentleman" there will certainly be very grave methodological difficulties with the educational categories "formal enrolment", or even "formal attendance" as indicators of "being educated".

So, though there were changes in education in the early modern period—and a change in the social class and professional aspirations of some of the students was one of them—they can only be called "revolutionary" in the very loosest of senses. If one wants to persist with the word "revolution" as meaning simply an important change, though not necessarily leading to revolution in the sense of the Puritan Revolution, then one would do better to turn to the influence of the print

ing press on the methods of and opportunities for *study*—though not necessarily on the methods of *teaching*. As Professor Stone himself put it “of all the institutions of civilized society none is more resistant to change than education. Even constitutions are altered more frequently and with less fuss”.

It is odd to think of education and change, education and revolutionary change going hand in hand, when the essence of education has been and still largely is a conservative activity, consciously planned to hand on, or to hand over, to a younger generation, a society’s heritage, that parcel of values, ethos, culture and so on which are approved of, which are valued by the handing on generation.

If we bear this in mind (however much some might disapprove of it), and link it with another reminder, namely that some historians have begun to wonder whether the words “crisis” and “revolution” are the most appropriate to characterize the early modern period of history, then I think we might arrive at a clearer, even though more complex, picture of the period. Just as a doctrine needs to be more carefully and more precisely defined after the appearance of some heresy, so too, I would suggest, we need to look more closely at our use of the word “revolution” in this early modern period, and especially in so far as it used to describe the educational ideas, assumptions and practices of the period. A good deal more work needs to be done before we can decide how far the notion of an educational revolution will be useful in helping us understand the political, religious and educational changes which undoubtedly took place. It will entail not only a very careful piece of exegesis of Professor Stone’s writings on the subject of education, but it will also need the exact setting of education in what has been called, some would say inaccurately, “the general crisis” of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.