‘I have just come back from my annual weekend with the miners at Ashington in Northumberland – a really thrilling time.

‘I gave them four lectures, but I learned more from them than I could ever teach.

‘It was sometimes grim talk, for there are hard times ahead for the mining community in England. But, in general, it was of books and men ...
‘I stayed with Snow and his three thousand books, and talked each night with them until the dawn came. There was one to whom the truth had been brought by Lester Ward; another who had learned Greek in order to read Homer in the original; ....

‘These twelve every Friday for thirty-six years have met to read and discuss a book. They argue grimly with text and counter-text and you have to know your piece to get by them.

‘They were saddened, while I was there, by the death of a miner who was found killed by a fall of coal; in his coat was found a translation of Thucydides with the page turned down at the Periclean speech.’

(H. Laski to O.W. Holmes, 15/9/25)
‘Education & the working-class’

• ‘natural for a new educational philosophy to spring not from the leisured class but from the working class’

• ‘education is not an individual but a corporate matter ... the stimulus of a group of like-minded students ...
  – ‘if their association is based on a common purpose, they become something akin to a new personality’

• If Erasmus came to England today to meet scholars, ‘he would be taken to the Potteries’ (to a university “tutorial class”)
  – ‘not merely a class, but a club and a college’; library (book-box) of 50-60 volumes
  – ‘The miners and potters of North Staffordshire make sacrifices in the cause of education, because they themselves bear the responsibility of management; and the movement ... is democratic in ... that it is for the benefit of the group as a whole, not individuals.’

(Alfred Zimmern, The Round Table 1914)
Oxford & Working-class education

At University/WEA conference 1907:

- John Mactavish: ‘I am not here as a suppliant for my class. I decline to sit at the rich man’s table praying for crumbs. I claim it as a right – wrongfully withheld – wrong not only to us but to Oxford.

- ‘What is the true function of a University? Is it to obtain the nation’s best men, or to sell its gifts to the rich? Instead of recruiting her students from the widest possible area, she has restricted her area of selection to the fortunate few. ...

- ‘We want workpeople to come to Oxford [and] ... to come back as missionaries. ... We want her [Oxford] to inspire them not with the idea of getting on, but with the idea of social service’ (In Mansbridge 1913)
Argument

• Left critiques of universities as privileged go back to 19th century; related to popular social movements
• Pressure for universities to relate to wider “public” stem from same time
• Main trends: (i) internal critics; (ii) external reformers; (iii) advocates of radical alternatives
• “Alternatives” addressed curriculum, pedagogy, and political/ideological role, not just access/participation
• “Democratisation of education” under welfare state has weakened arguments for “alternatives”
‘Joint Committee of Oxford University and Working-class representatives’, 1909
"Shut out that light!"
The Ruskin Strike

• Ruskin College founded 1899
• Divergent views of ‘labour college’
  – Impartial/objective education for workers
  – Marxist/socialist/class emancipation
• Alleged university ‘take-over’
• Plebs League formed 1908
  – ‘to bring about a definite and more satisfactory connection between Ruskin College and the Labour Movement’
• Dismissal of principal; student strike
• Formation of Central Labour College (1909) by Plebs League students

[Plebs July 1914]

[Image: A Fool’s Paradise!]

Oxford University (to Ruskin College) ~ “Come and dwell with me, my boy — and forget all about nasty things like wages and class struggles. They are so sordid!”
CENTRAL LABOUR COLLEGE
Rochdale Branch.

Outline of Lectures

: : BY ::

CHARLES L. GIBBONS
Of the South Wales Miners' Federation,

Commencing TUESDAY, OCT. 7th,
1913.

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Classes are held in the
POWER-LOOM OVERLOOKERS' CLUB
LOWER GATES.

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Secretary: FRANK JACKSON,
8, Windsor Terrace,
Newbold Street, Rochdale.

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PHILOSOPHIC LOGIC.

Lecture 1—Man's attempt to explain the Universe.

2—The Nature of Thought.

3—The Nature of Things.

4—Applied to Physical Science.

5—Applied to Social and Moral Science.

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ANCIENT HISTORY.

Lecture 6—Stages of Human Development.

7—The Development of the Family.

8—The Rise of Private Property.

9—The State: its Origin and Functions.

10—The Rise of Private Property and the State in Greece and Rome.

11—Rise of Private Property in Great Britain.

12—The Materialist Conception of History.

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TEXT BOOKS:

"Positive Outcome of Philosophy" ... J. Dietzen.

"Origin of the Family" ... ... ... Frederick Engels

A Library is at the disposal of the Students.

FEES FOR THE COURSE - 3/-
Three strands & their impact

• **Internal critics** – academics in universities:
  – e.g. Tawney, Temple, Smith, Zimmern; Laski, Stocks

• **External reformers** – chiefly from labour movement:
  – workers should also have university education
  – for collective and/or individual benefit; e.g., Mansbridge, Mactavish

  *Impact → WEA/liberal adult education; extra-mural/tutorial classes; Uses of Literacy (Hoggart 1957); Culture & Society (Williams 1958); cultural studies; Making of the English Working Class (Thompson 1963)*

• **Advocates of radical alternatives**:  
  – chiefly Marxist/syndicalist – universities as ideological apparatus of state or capitalist class; ‘independent working class education’
  – e.g., Plebs league, Maclean

  *Impact → labour colleges (NCLC); ‘The Miners’ Next Step’ (1912); critique of economic orthodoxy*
‘Welfare Spending: Soaking the Poor’

– ‘A famous old cartoon shows a grand man at the top of a ladder which slopes down to a river, with less flashy fellows on each of the rungs below him. “Just one more step down,” yells the man at the top, paying no heed to the man at the bottom, whose head is only just out of the water. The test of George Osborne’s budget ...’ (Editorial, The Guardian, 23 June 2010)

‘Osborne’s claims of fairness are now exposed as a fraud’

– ‘This isn't the first time in Britain's history that politicians with a programme of savage cuts have claimed “we're all in this together”. An iconic Labour movement cartoon from the early 30s, when another coalition came to power in the wake of a financial crisis and slump, shows four class stereotypes of the day on a ladder. A cloth-capped unemployed man is standing at the bottom, up to his neck in water. “Equality of sacrifice – that's the big idea, friends!” says the silk-hatted figure at the top. “Let's all step down one rung.”

– ‘Strip away the anachronisms and that’s exactly the message George Osborne tried to give in his budget, ...’ (Seumas Milne, The Guardian, 24 June 2010)
THE PLEBS

Monthly, 4d. 

OCTOBER, 1931

Special Financial Crisis Number.

THE MAN AT THE TOP:—
“Equality of Sacrifice—that’s the big idea, friends!
Let’s all step down one rung!”

[Image of a cartoon showing a ladder with a man at the top and another man at the bottom, pulling the ladder towards himself.]
Raymond Williams on adult education in the welfare state

• The WEA “has always stood for the principle that ordinary people should be highly educated, as an end justifying itself and not simply as a means to power.”

• Many thought that as the welfare state expanded, the need for adult education would decline: “the exceptional mind in the poor family” would be “spotted young, and ... given a real chance”. This was “never at the heart of the WEA’s purpose.”

• “Of course the exceptional minds must get their chance, but what about everyone else? Are they simply to be treated as rejects? The W.E.A. stands for an educated democracy, not for a newly mobile and more varied elite.” (Open Letter to W.E.A. Tutors, c.1961)
University adult education

• ‘Fifty years ago dons and senates gave time and energy to adult education because they saw it as a means of correcting or mitigating an injustice: the denial of educational opportunity to intelligent “working men and women”.

• ‘Such feelings do not survive in a meritocracy; they are replaced by a conviction (which though unwarranted is extremely comfortable) that justice has now been done and that secondary and higher education is now freely available to all who can profit by it.

• ‘Those left behind are therefore seen not as the dispossessed but as the incompetent, and the sense of obligation which impelled the Universities into extension and extra-mural activities between 1870 and 1945 is weakened or destroyed.’