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Centre for Labour and Social Studies

What is aspiration?

How progressives should respond

With contributions from
Imogen Tyler, Bruce Bennett,
Christine Blower and Owen Jones

August 2015

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How should progressives respond?

So far the term ‘aspiration’ has been used to reflect a narrow definition. In August 2015 key Labour figure Jon Cruddas wrote in the New Statesman that “Labour was sunk by a tsunami of aspirant voters”. Aspirant voters, he said, wish to "improve their social status and material wealth. They value a good time, the trappings of success and the esteem of others".

Aspiration is often the word used to describe the desire of middle-income families to ‘get on in life’. In this respect, it has been embraced by both the right of the Labour Party and the Conservative Party. David Cameron has claimed his party is building an “aspiration nation”.

Aspiration has been largely depicted as a value that cannot co-exist with left wing ideals. This essay series will explore the issue of aspiration from a progressive standpoint and asks whether aspiration can be a left wing value.

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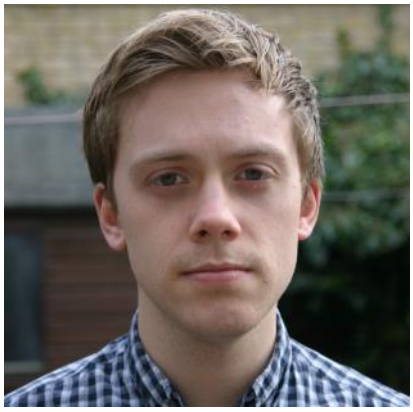
Enabling Aspiration

If you're on the left, aspiration should mean making common cause with those with similar problems, hopes and ambitions.



Owen Jones

Owen Jones is a columnist for the Guardian and author of Chavs and The Establishment.

'Ambition' and 'aspiration': it's easy to see these as euphemisms for untrammelled free-market dogma, slashing taxes on the rich and generally perpetuating inequality. Basically this approach to 'aspiration' goes like this: anybody can make it to the top, if they try hard enough. 'Success' is all down to individual effort, meaning that those with talent, ability and a solid work ethic can all rise to top. The corollary of this is that if you are poor, then you are somehow responsible for your plight: you haven't worked hard enough, you're too lazy, or too stupid, or both. Inequality is really just a reflection of how clever or hard-working people are.

But aspiration doesn't have to be used in this way, and as the right have raided the progressive lexicon with words like 'reform' and 'modernise', perhaps it's time for us to appropriate 'aspiration', too. It is a concept which speaks to that innate human need for optimism: that life will get easier, more secure and more comfortable. Technology will develop and improve. Your children will have a better lot in life than you. And so on. If you're on the left, aspiration should mean making common cause with those with similar problems, hopes, ambitions. By using your collective power together, you can each improve your individual lot.

Following Labour's disastrous election defeat, Ed Miliband has faced criticism for presenting too narrow a political vision, with little to offer those who weren't languishing at the bottom of society. Actually, his policy programme wasn't even ambitious enough for those at the bottom, let alone anybody else. A minimum wage of £8 an hour by 2020 was derisory, now eclipsed by the Tories (even though their attack on in-work benefits leaves the working poor poorer). His promise to build just 200,000 homes a year by 2020 was inadequate – we'd need 240,000 being built now just to meet need.[1] And so on. But it's true that the left wins by building a coalition of both low-income and middle-income Britons. It does that by offering a coherent, inspiring alternative that can improve their lives, their families, their communities, their country and their world – all of which are interconnected. This is aspiration.

So what would a vision to meet the aspirations of working people look like?

Some Britons wish to rent, and their needs must be catered for. For the 11 million[2] now in the expanding and badly regulated private rented sector, rents need to be controlled and tenancies given security. Councils need to be given the sweeping power to build homes so that renters have the option of a social tenancy: this would also reduce the 2 million strong social housing waiting list,[3] create skilled jobs, and stimulate the economy. It would, in the long term, mean less money spent on housing benefit, money better spent on schools, hospitals or reducing the deficit. For millions who do not have accommodation, particularly the young people living with their parents in record numbers,[4] a place to live is a simple but crucial aspiration.

But the left can also promote home ownership, too, without flogging off social housing. Why not abolish stamp duty, and replace both it and council tax with land value tax? Such a tax could also ensure that more affluent Britons pay a higher proportion, relieving the burden on middle-income Brits, but also helping to prevent damaging housing bubbles. Publicly owned banks could also offer mortgages to those currently denied them, not least the self-employed. Jeremy

Corbyn recently suggested right-to-buy for private tenants: we could certainly start by looking at right to first refusal, for example, for tenants whose landlords are selling up. While millions of Britons aspire to own a home, the National Housing Federation warns that homeownership is becoming an "exclusive members club."[5] These are policies which ensure the housing crisis is dealt with progressively and aspirations for a secure and stable home are not the exclusive entitlement of the privileged.

What about the aspiration to improve one's quality of life through well-paid secure work? The left has so much to say to self-employed and entrepreneurs, for example. They are all too often denied loans their businesses desperately need because of the failure of private banks to lend properly. A public investment bank with a specific mandate to support such businesses must surely be built. Self-employed people often value the sense of being their own boss, but are often workers with little security, falling wages and deprived of pensions and paid sick and maternity leave: these are people the left must fight for. And what is often missed in the debate over the attack on tax credits is it will be many self-employed people worst affected by the cuts. These are people the left must fight for. We should be clear about the fact that precarious workers too deserve the ability to look into the future positively; that life's pleasures should not simply be the preserve of the rich, but available to everybody. Policies such as these should emphasise that the left is not opposed to luxury, but believes that the chance to live a full and secure life should be extended to all.

The left has been lose the battle over inheritance tax for a long time, and it is emotively portrayed as a 'death tax'. Let's learn from the Greens, then, who are advocating abolishing inheritance tax. Instead, the recipient is taxed according to their wealth, not the estate of the person who has died.

Education is not only vital for improving the life chances of individuals, but also for furthering social ideals like democracy and community building. University graduates from middle-income families are finding themselves saddled with debt for aspiring to a better education: there's an attack on aspiration if ever there was one. Their living standards will be reduced for years as a consequence. George Osborne justifies his austerity programme on the grounds that future generations must not be saddled with debt, and yet is happy to do so when it comes to education. That's why the campaign for university as a social good is so important. But then many students leave universities struggling to get secure well-paid jobs. That's why we need an industrial strategy – like Germany – abandoning the dogma of "let the markets pick winners and losers", and create thriving hi-tech and renewable energy sectors backed up by expanding research and development sectors. Many middle-income young people also find themselves locked out of the professions because they are expected to work for free to get their foot in the door, unable to do so unless they have well-off parents to support them. And so that attack on aspiration – unpaid internships – must finally be abolished.

When we argue for public ownership of rail, we are making the point that we spend far more public subsidies now than we did in the days of British Rail. This is a waste of public money, better spent on the railways themselves and reducing ticket prices. It can be cheaper to catch a flight half way across the world than to travel by train in your own country. And who does this often affect the worst? Middle-class commuters, penalised with rip-off ticket prices because they have settled in the suburbs.

That major companies don't pay taxes is unfair for many reasons: one is that small businesses cannot afford to hire accountants to exploit tax loopholes, and are placed at a competitive disadvantage. That's why the fight against tax avoidance is one to help the small business. And taxing the booming rich – and often the idle rich – is crucial to invest in services, jobs and housing for middle-income and low-income Britons alike.

Jobs, housing, education, small businesses: the British left can champion all. We understand that the ambition and aspiration of the individual is intimately linked to improving society as a whole. Collective solutions allow the individual to prosper and flourish. The right will continue to use aspiration and ambition as cover for shovelling more wealth and power to those who have too much of both at the top. What's to stop the rest of us appropriating the terms to support building a more just, equal and prosperous society?

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Against Aspiration

Aspiration is a rhetorical device that seeks to whitewash a neoliberal economic and political project and the staggering inequalities it produces.

Imogen Tyler and Bruce Bennett

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On the 9th of May 2015, Tony Blair published *Labour must be the party of ambition as well as compassion*[1], an opinion piece reflecting upon the general election result. In it he argues that Labour's catastrophic defeat was the consequence of a failure to communicate a 'politics of aspiration' to voters aiming for a better life. In this analysis aspiration is defined by the experiences of the individualistic middle-classes. Blair's vision is concerned primarily with trickle-down economics, in which the government supports unregulated global capitalism and a smaller state achieved through cuts and privatisation of the public sector. He imagines a post-political, non-partisan centre-ground alliance that puts its emphasis upon "empowering individuals". Blair presents this vision as "progressive" and "future orientated", cautioning that an aspirational politics "requires real thinking with an open mind, not an attempt to find our way back to hallowed ground which represents a dead end".

Ironically however, what Blair sets out here is the operational ideology of the New Labour government, the rhetorical remnants of which are also central to current Conservative Party discourse. In 2012 David Cameron, in a party conference speech that could have been delivered by Blair, gave a vision of an "aspiration nation", claiming to be a "modern compassionate conservative".[2]

In the days following the article's publication, Blair's ideas were quickly regurgitated in the speeches of Labour leadership hopefuls and pored over in political commentary. This process revealed very little about 'aspiration' as a political concept, exposing instead its continued use as a vaguely defined value that makes free-market doctrine palatable to voters.

Aspiration is a rhetorical device that seeks to whitewash a neoliberal economic and political project and the staggering inequalities it produces. From the perspective of government there are three central elements to this project: the financialisation of the public sphere (i.e. selling off public assets), the withdrawal of state funding for social infrastructure projects, and increased freedom for corporations. In this context, the state's main function is to facilitate the accumulation of wealth by those at the top through the privatisation and 'asset-stripping' of public institutions, infrastructure and natural resources.

The ideological power of aspiration is that it describes people's "sense of themselves as trying to get on", while disguising "the reality and power of the social patterns that determine their ability to do so"[3]. Aspiration shifts the responsibility for people's opportunity to succeed or fail from the state onto individuals, and in the process obscures the class-based constraints that in reality shape social destinies. As Kim Allen notes, politicians' "incitements to 'be aspirational'" negate "the broader inequalities which characterise the contemporary climate and powerfully shape who goes where in education and the labour market"[4]. Aspiration is a political concept that seeks to replace not only the ideal of the compassionate and caring Welfare State, but along with it other political concepts such as class, democracy, exploitation, solidarity, justice, dignity and rights.

The glorification of aspiration began simultaneously with the adoption of free-market economics by the

Conservative Party in the 1970s. It constitutes part of a decades-long project to dismantle the post-War settlement. The Keynesian welfare state was imagined by its original architects as a 'cradle-to-grave' safety-net for citizens, a 'welfare commons' of shared aspirations and risks, which would ameliorate economic and social hardships in the post-war period. One of the major characteristics of welfare reform from the 1970s onwards was the emergence of a political consensus that the welfare state was in "a permanent crisis"[5]. Through this 'crisis lens', welfare was recast as the seed-bed for toxic forms of 'welfare dependency' that had a stagnating effect on economic growth and national prosperity.

In a reversal of the common aspiration for a welfare state in the 1940s, 'welfare' has come to be understood as the *cause* of poverty and social problems. These problems include 'inter-generational worklessness',[6] drug dependence, anti-social behaviours, 'troubled families', teenage parenthood, crime and other 'social ills'. The idea of a 'bloated' welfare state, responsible for both economic decline and entrenched social problems is a common-sense view of neoliberal aspirational politics. This common-sense is shared across the mainstream political spectrum, from the Conservatives:

> **The benefit system has created a benefit culture. It doesn't just allow people to act irresponsibly, but often actively encourages them to do so[7].**

to the Labour Party's Shadow Frontbench:

> **We are not the party of people on benefits. We don't want to be seen [as], and we're not, the party to represent those who are out of work[8].**

In the politics of aspiration, class inequalities are depicted as the consequence of individual choices: wealth is 'earned' and poverty is 'deserved:' hence the media presenting us with a rogues' gallery of scroungers, skivers and the undeserving poor.

As we live through the deepest and swiftest cuts ever made in social provision, the better life that the majority desire will become increasingly unattainable.[9] Even for the sharp-elbowed middle-classes who are sufficiently aspirational, social mobility involves a fight up a ladder, which is dependent upon the perceived failures, exploitation and misery of others. Yet, as Stefan Collini noted in 2010, the politics of aspiration "is almost entirely silent about what happens to all those left behind in their original class after the 'talented' and 'able' have sped off to success"[10]. The promises produced by the political class in manifestos, speeches and policy initiatives disguise this cruelty, as they are designed to garner votes, not change the socio-economic conditions required for a better life. Aspiration is not progressive politics, it is "a symptom of the abandonment of what have been, for the best part of a century, the goals of progressive politics".

The left should not seek to rebrand aspiration, but should expose it as an 'ideological displacement' that, as Emma Dowling and Davie Harvie argue, enables the "structural conditions of a deep social, political and economic crisis"[11] to be defined as a problem of "individual behaviours"[12]. The sheer scale of this task is currently paralysing those who seek to reinvigorate progressive left politics. What the left lacks is a political vocabulary with which to articulate these conditions and imagine alternatives. This language would traditionally have been that of class struggle. However, one of the effects of the transition from industrial to financial capitalism is that people may no longer recognise themselves as belonging to an existing social class. In particular, there has been an erosion of the 'working class' as a political identity deployed by people in everyday struggles against exploitation and inequality. While a political vocabulary of class has been undermined, social class hasn't dissipated or dissolved under neoliberal conditions. In the basic sense of the economic position in the society into which one is born, class remains "a much more powerful determinant of life chances than any other variable"[13]. Inequality remains a matter of class, even when it is not explicitly understood as such by those who perceive or indeed experience inequality. What is missing is a way of articulating this fact as a common and popular politics against neoliberalism.

On June 11th 2015, billionaire owner of Cartier, Johann Rupert, declared in a speech at the *Financial Times* 'Business of Luxury' summit in Monaco that his greatest fear - what makes him lose sleep at night - is the "the poor rising up to bring down the rich"[14]. It is a salutary reminder that a politics of aspiration – a politics, literally,

of rising up – can be understood not as an accommodation to the neoliberal status quo, but as the basis for a politics of class struggle to overthrow the current neoliberal order – and that this is where the left should begin.

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This article draws on previously published work by Imogen Tyler, including Classificatory Struggles: Class, Culture and Inequality in Neoliberal Times (Sociological Review 2015), Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain (Zed, 2013), Thinking with 'White Dee': The Gender Politics of 'Austerity Porn' (Sociological Research Online), and with Tracey Jensen "Benefits Broods": The Cultural and Political Crafting of Anti-Welfare Commonsense.

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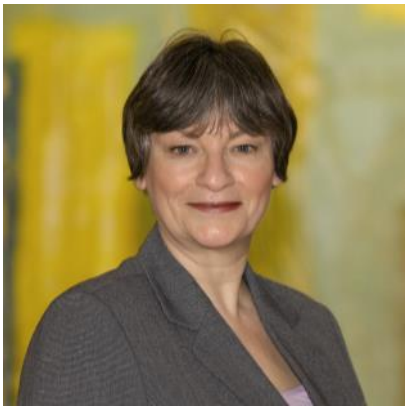
Teaching Aspiration

Education is essential to fulfil the aspirations of the individual, but unless we also educate each other about building a society in which we all have the chance to flourish, the education system will not be enough.



Christine Blower

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If the language of the labour movement had a dictionary, the entries for 'desire' and 'aspiration' would take up several pages. William Morris saw the work of the socialist movement as the "education of desire".[1] Ernest Bevin argued that working people had "cultural aspirations" and a "love of the beautiful"[2], which the harsh disciplines of work and poverty quashed or stunted. In this vocabulary, 'desire' and 'aspiration' were collective passions. They denoted yearnings for the kind of social change which could realise individual freedoms.

For New Labour, this was the language of the bad old days and it needed reworking. The meaning of aspiration shifted. Aspiration came to mean individual success, achieved through competition. Conservatism took the process further, nowhere more clearly than in the rhetoric that accompanied its education policies. For the Tories, 'aspiration' linked together a series of arguments, in which the barrier to individual success was not the economic system but the state and the professionals that staffed it. The Conservatives, according to Cameron, were the party of the "want to be better off".[3] They aimed to create an 'aspiration nation', but believed their efforts were frustrated by a "toxic culture of low aspirations." This was the culture attacked repeatedly by former Education Secretary Michael Gove. According to Gove the educational establishment was standing in the way of aspiring parents by excusing low expectations and blaming social disadvantage for educational failure. "Some in this country," said Gove, "still argue that pupil achievement is overwhelmingly dictated by socio-economic factors. They say that deprivation means destiny, that we can't expect children to succeed if they have been born into poverty, disability, disadvantage." [4]

These were the arguments that underpinned Gove's reforms to education. The relentless pressures on teachers to increase the test scores of their pupils were justified in terms of this wider social mission. The National Curriculum was redesigned to "drive up standards and fuel aspiration."[5] The introduction of free schools was explained in the same way. Those who pointed to the difficulties of these initiatives, and the distance that separated Conservative ambitions from social realities were dismissed as "enemies of promise."[6] Some schools were closing the 'attainment gap' between pupils of different social classes, and if this was not happening everywhere, then the fault could only lie with teachers.

Perhaps the major grievance that teachers had against Gove was the way that he sought to deny their commitment to the success of their pupils, at the same time as he dismissed the social factors that stood in the way of that success. In any constructive discussion of aspiration, they argued, these social factors would be registered, but in Conservative discourse they were not. Instead, teachers found themselves being warned not to make poverty an excuse. And yet in a polarised labour market, and a society marked by rising levels of child poverty, to talk of 'low aspiration' and 'low expectations' as the main obstacles to educational progress is fatuously one-sided. Most research confirms that most young people, and their parents, actually have high aspirations; underachievement resulted not from low aspiration itself but from a gap between the aspirations that did exist and the acquisition of the knowledge and skills required to

achieve them – and social factors were crucial to such acquisition.[7]

To hear Labour politicians endorsing a Conservative vision of aspiration is a dispiriting experience. Dispiriting because of what it promises to teachers – the prospect of unending blame for situations that are not theirs to control; dispiriting for students because the unyielding demand for high performance in test after test is not matched by any guarantee that effort and educational success will result in material security. Figures on the British left who make use of the current language of aspiration need to reflect on the oppressive practices that are perpetrated in its name.

Schools cannot change social structures; nor can they cancel out the effects of wealth and privilege. For that, a much broader programme of change is needed. In the meantime, teachers will lose no opportunity to promote the success of 'disadvantaged' students within the existing system: they have a practical understanding that imbalances in economic, cultural and social resources never entirely preclude individual success. But this is not to say that between waiting for systemic change, and nurturing the hope of small successes against the odds, no other educational project is possible. Despite all the constraints of recent decades, new approaches to education that are aspirational in a way Morris would have recognised continue to break the surface.

The wave of social movements that erupted since 2010, including student protests, Occupy and UK Uncut, have introduced alternative forms of education – such as teach-ins, teach-outs, classes in public spaces such as banks, supermarkets and railway stations – that sought to restore to education a public and critical character.[8] At the other end of the educational spectrum the teachers of very young children, perhaps more than any other group of teachers, have asserted a strong set of aspirations for the children they teach, based on the idea that education should be about the all-round development of children's personalities and potentials – not just about the passing of exams. These ideas explain the strength of current opposition to the introduction of 'baseline testing' of reception-age children which goes against the wish for aspiration that is broader than academic ability. In contrast, the Welsh Government has announced a far-reaching reform of curriculum and assessment that will reduce the influence of tests, redesign the curriculum and ask teachers to play a major role in the shaping of educational change[9].

These movements differ greatly in their focus and scale. Yet they all respond to Bevin's belief that children should not have their aspiration stunted by an education system that treats them as part of a production line. Education is essential to fulfil the aspirations of the individual, but unless we also educate each other about building a society in which we all have the chance to flourish, the education system will not be enough.

Two powerful questions remain: what kind of education do we want? For what kind of childhood and development? These are questions which require collective answers and a direct discussion about the conditions under which children and other students learn and develop most fully. No leading politician, Conservative or Labour, has yet addressed these debates, yet they are a crucial starting-point for opening up broader issues of aspiration and educational purpose. This is an invitation to re-educate desire and develop a different kind of aspiration.

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