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In Thing 17 Chang tells us that the current preoccupation with extending access to higher education is grossly wrong. It might well be true that more people should enjoy three years at the gleaming spires (and in the modern world, the booze, babes or boys to choice) and we are indeed in a richer world so why not? We do expect to take some portion of our ever increasing wealth in more leisure and there's no reason at all why this shouldn't be three years at the start of working life rather than more days off during it or more years of senescence after it. But if we think that more of this higher education is going to make us all richer then we're simply wrong. In this argument Chang is absolutely and completely correct.

Even the blind Haplorrhini gets a banana sometimes.

As Chang points out, Tony Blair might have caught the zeitgeist with his mantra of "education, education, education", but there's absolutely no evidence at all to show that he was right. Countries with higher further education rates do not have richer economies, ones growing more strongly, ones with higher technologies. There just isn't, in the actual data, any correlation at all with wealth and university education. Indeed, there's the suggestion that going above the 10-15% of da youf going off to uni is wasteful: we just end up in a signalling game rather than actually teaching anyone anything that's useful in terms of working life. That 10-15% that Switzerland had until recently and we had historically.

Given that so very little of what we're ever actually taught at university is ever used in a job (other than teaching the next cohort through uni) this shouldn't come as all that much of a surprise.

We might also muse on the fact that Chang's book has been very popular among the Guardianista classes. Haven't seen any of them mentioning this point though. Funny that.

I would take issue with only one of his points.

"What really matters in the determination of national prosperity is not the educational levels of individuals but the nation's ability to organise individuals into enterprises with high productivity".

I would replace national and nation there with economics and economy. For the nation state isn't actually the determinant of that ability to organise into such enterprises with high productivity. Indeed, one of the major points we can make about the UK is that absolutely it isn't.

London, The City at least, is organised into a global economy that connects Hong Kong, Singapore, New York and a number of other lesser international legal, financial and banking centres. London is also the richest of the EU statistical units (ie, not nation states, next level down). Cornwall, parts of the North, the bin ends of Wales and Scotland, are some of the poorest such regions in the EU. It is the ability of an economy to organise high productivity, not the ability of a nation to do so, which is important.

Perhaps you might think this a trivial distinction. But if we keep on getting all national about these things then we'll become both nationalist and statist. Which is very much the point we shouldn't be taking from this. If such high productivity can be organised across national boundaries, without national governments

doing the planning or the regulating, then we know that the creation of those high productivity enterprises is not dependent upon the nation or the State, don't we? Nor even that "helping hand" of government.

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