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Fear of freedom [1]

Written by **Preston Byrne** [2] | Wednesday 8 December 2010

Depending on who you listen to, recent student unrest over government plans to reform education funding is one of two things: either the collective tantrum of a generation of spoilt children, or the righteous awakening of a dynamic generation of radicals. The former opinion was expressed in the Prime Minister?s recent op-ed in the Evening Standard: in headmasterly fashion, he admonished students for not knowing ?the full facts about what they're objecting to [3]?. The latter view has been on display from the students themselves: when "occupations, barricades and walkouts? were called for, they duly materialized. It is easy, too, to mistake their organization for confidence ? see the Telegraph?s Peter Oborne, who last month gushed hysterically that young people had at long last acquired ?the energy to go out and do something [4]?.

This media narrative presents a false dichotomy. There are, without a doubt, plenty of students who either 1) do know the full facts; 2) do not care; or 3) are members of Conservative Future.

So what, then, are we to make of these protesters?

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By way of an answer, I would point to the German socialist Erich Fromm?s Escape from Freedom. In brief, Fromm?s ideal state for persons in society is the pursuit of ?the active and spontaneous realization of the individual self?; however, many people fall short of this ideal, and instead possess what Fromm calls an ?authoritarian character structure.? Such people, when forced to confront an ?alienated and hostile? world as they grow into adulthood, feel increasingly alone and powerless; this burden causes neurotic anxiety. Faced with a more powerful whole which is ?strong, eternal or glamorous,? such as a political party, a person comes under a compulsion ?to tie his self to (it); he cannot bear to be his individual self any longer, and he tries frantically to get rid of it.? This is, of course, a counterproductive way of living one?s life, and the act of submission only exacerbates personal feelings of insignificance.

These protesters make a textbook case. Faced with the daunting and fearful prospect of having to make a major private decision ? that is, whether obtaining a degree is worth incurring a personal debt ? they quickly assembled a collective that allowed them to feel as if they had strength. Now, despite their stated opposition to the government, the collective?s members rush headlong into the arms of the State, begging her to keep them as dependants and absolve them of personal responsibility.

To be sure, there are students in this country who will respond to the funding cuts by working hard and preparing for the worst job market in years, instead of occupying buildings while playing acoustic guitar. They understand that all action is individual, and that their own initiative ? not the state?s ? will determine their personal success.

But for those who, in a panic, choose not take their future into their own hands, I would point again to Fromm for a word of warning: ?a man, trapped in a fire, stands at the window of his room and shouts for help, forgetting entirely that no one can hear him and that he could still escape by the staircase which will also be aflame in a few minutes. He shouts because he wants to be saved, and for the moment this behavior appears to be a step on the way to being saved ? and yet it will end in complete catastrophe."

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