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From Left to Right: The Paradox of Kingsley Amis' Views of University Education in Post-World War II Britain

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In the July 1960 issue of *Encounter* the well-known novelist and poet, Kingsley Amis, wrote, "Nobody who has not seen it in all its majesty…can imagine the pit of ignorance and incapacity into which British education has sunk since the war."[1] Amis was disturbed by the spread of illiteracy and what he saw as the inability among young British citizens in universities to grasp the fundamentals of their native language. He believed the situation would be exacerbated if those who sought to increase the number of places for students in the nation's colleges and universities were successful. This complaint was not the first objection Amis uttered about the state of education in the United Kingdom, yet it represents a shift in his thinking about higher education in post-war Britain. A mere six years earlier in his most famous novel, *Lucky Jim*,[2] Amis offers a thinly veiled critique of British universities in the 1950s and the elitist culture they represent. Through entertaining satire, he tells of a young lecturer in medieval history, Jim Dixon, who does not fit into the stuffy, class-dominated atmosphere of the provincial university in which he works.

Most scholars who have studied Kingsley Amis and his writings are concerned with him as a poet and novelist associated with the post-World War II group of writers called The Movement who rejected Modernist literature and its high-minded concerns in favor of producing works about ordinary people. Many scholars investigate his acerbic criticisms in later novels of British life during the "Swinging Sixties." Amis' biographers, of course, treat his literary works as a part of the larger story of his life, and they discuss his shifting politics and ideas about education at appropriate chronological points in their narratives. Historians touch upon Amis as they investigate the post-war era, particularly the 1950s and 1960s. Scholars, however, have failed to investigate Amis' educational thought and its relation to shifting politics as a manifestation of his evolving critique of post-war, British culture.[3]

Thus, in this essay I explore Kingsley Amis' polemical writings about British universities and his changing politics from the 1950s to the 1970s in an attempt to explain changes in British society and education that led him to rail against the upper-class nature of universities and their faculties from the Left in the mid-1950s and then, a mere five years later, to begin a decades-long attack from the Right on the increase in the number of places in colleges and universities that would expand educational opportunities particularly for students from the lower-middle and working classes. In order to evidence why Amis made this radical shift in his educational ideals, I first provide a brief look at the post-war economic growth of Britain and the accompanying educational reforms as social context for his criticism of the Left for their upper-class attitudes and only grudgingly accepting at university a growing number of students from the lower-middle class. Second, after describing the government's proposed reforms for post-secondary education in the 1960s, I set the stage for examining Amis' shift to the Right and his frequent criticisms of reform that eventually expanded educational opportunity in Britain. As a result of my investigation, I argue the growing affluence of post-war British society, the resulting expansion of educational opportunity, and the increasingly liberal culture led Kingsley Amis—and other intellectuals of his generation—to shift his politics and ideas about a university education from an anti-elitist, leftist position to one increasingly conservative and elitist that paradoxically would limit educational opportunity for Britons of the very social class from which he came.

Following World War II the Labour government, led by Clement Attlee, struggled to rebuild the economy and expand the welfare state in the United Kingdom. Enormous debt, a fuel shortage, and a financial crisis severely complicated the recovery effort. In response, the Attlee government instituted austerity measures and effectively used the Marshall Plan as the principal source of financial aid for the nation. These austere actions enabled Britain to depart early from the Marshall Plan in 1950 and emerge from the post-war recovery by 1954, when the rationing of goods ended.[4]

Even under the dark cloud of the Cold War and the threat of nuclear annihilation, the humiliation of the Suez Crisis in 1956, and the nation's decline as a world power with "the sun setting on the empire," Britons experienced a growing consumer economy in the 1950s to such an extent that on July 20, 1957, Prime Minister Harold Macmillan proclaimed,

> Let's be frank about it: most of our people have never had it so good. Go around the country, go to the industrial towns, go to the farms, and you will see a state of prosperity such as we have

> never had in my lifetime—nor indeed ever in the history of this country. What is worrying some of us is "Is it too good to be true?" Or perhaps I should say "Is it too good to last?"[5]

The economy, in fact, continued to grow, and by the end of the decade, prosperity and the emergence of a consumer culture were well underway, providing a strong economic base for the expansion of education at all levels.

The reorganization and expansion of education in the United Kingdom began in the mid-1940s when Parliament, at the recommendation of the coalition government led by Winston Churchill, mandated free secondary schooling be made available to all children in Britain. Supplementing the law was a series of reports from committees commissioned by the Coalition, Labour, and Conservative governments, respectively, between the late 1940s and early 1960s. The *Butler Act of 1944* and the *Barlow Committee Report of 1946*, for example, set forth plans for elementary and secondary schooling, and scientific and technological education in universities during the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s. In its principal thrust, the *Butler Act* called for the expansion of educational opportunity at the secondary-school level under the control of local educational authorities through three types of schools: grammar schools with a curriculum aimed at entry into the universities, technical schools providing vocational instruction, and secondary-modern schools. Indicative of the social-class bias of British society, reformers expected a social-class percentage division of 5:15:80 among the school-age population.

What in fact occurred was a percentage division of 25:5:70 as a result of parents pressuring officials to provide schooling that would prepare their children to enter university. Working-class parents, for example, recognized that secondary-modern schools aimed at conditioning their children for working-class jobs belied the government's claims of equal status among secondary schools. Public dissatisfaction with British schools spread as sociologists and educationists revealed the inequities the educational system produced by distorted curricula from the primary school through the sixth form, the "'jungle' of competitive student awards—state scholarships, local authority awards, scholarships and bursaries given by universities and colleges," and the resulting struggles of many young people seeking admission to a limited number of places in universities, respectively, in a series of reports that exposed the class-based inequities produced by British schools. Many teachers, moreover, thought the narrow tip of the educational pyramid wasted talent leading to university.[6] It was in this context of educational controversy that Kingsley Amis issued his first critique of British universities. Before I present and analyze his critique,

however, it is important to know who he was and where he came from in order to make sense of his thoughts on British higher education.

Kingsley Amis was born on April 16, 1922, to a lower-middle-class family who lived in Norwood, south London. Educated at Norbury College and City of London, he earned an exhibition to St. John's College, Oxford in 1941 to read English literature. Following military service, he returned to Oxford and completed baccalaureate studies in 1948. There he developed a friendship with the two people in the world he most admired, poet and librarian Philip Larkin and Hillary (Hilly) Bardwell, the latter of whom he soon married. After Oxford he obtained a post as an assistant lecturer in English at University College of Swansea, a civic university in Wales.[7]

At Swansea from 1947 to 1961, Amis experienced university education from the other side of the desk, as it were. There he began to formulate a critique of British university education that had two themes. First, universities consistently admitted a limited number of British students deemed capable of benefiting from the ultimate purpose of a university education—the cultivation of the mind. Second, given the pool of "capable" students had already been tapped, engineering an increase in the number of available places for students in universities would inevitably lower university standards. Soon afterward, in the late 1950s, the higher education reform debate spread to the public at large, Amis sought an audience for his views in popular periodicals, and thereafter repeated these views for the remainder of his life in newspapers, pamphlets, and his *Memoirs*.[8]

Amis gained public recognition in 1954 for his first novel and coincidental initial critique of British universities, *Lucky Jim*, the story of Jim Dixon and his seriocomic experiences as an assistant lecturer in medieval history at an unnamed provincial university. Amis denied the setting resembled the University of Leicester where his friend, Philip Larkin, was a librarian, but the similarities are difficult to overlook. Dixon represented the growing number of lower-middle-class scholarship students who attended a local grammar school and obtained a university degree, in his case from Swansea. His words and comic actions expose the stuffy academic community of the pompous Professor "Neddy" Welch and the social circle of Dixon's superior's pretentious friends and colleagues. He hates the weekend gathering at Welch's home with its group singing, classical music, and fine wine in a social setting in which he clearly feels out of place. At the same time, he recognizes his fate for a second probationary year lies in publishing an article on fifteenth-century shipbuilding techniques despite the essay's "niggling mindlessness, its funeral parade of yawn-enforcing facts, [and]

the pseudo light it threw upon non-problems," and in giving a public lecture on the vapid subject Welch chooses for him, "Merrie England." Dixon's superior also expects him to perform the tedious labor of researching obscure references for one of Welch's lectures and indexing the notes for the professor's book manuscript.[9]

In addition to its thinly disguised autobiographical elements *Lucky Jim* is Amis' critique of the traditional academic establishment that begrudgingly admits teachers and students from the lower-middle class to the universities. What is missing from his criticism of academic culture is any objection to the class structure it represents. Nevertheless, the story of Jim Dixon and his comedic antics quickly gained popularity. In addition, Amis' critique of the university establishment led journalists to place him among the "Angry Young Men" of British literature in the 1950s, a label he quickly disavowed.[10]

Lucky Jim also reflects Amis' ambivalent leftist political leanings, which he describes in 1957 in a Fabian tract entitled *Socialism and the Intellectuals*. Here Amis complains about the romanticism of 1950s intellectuals who pretend to understand social conditions with which they have no real experience, espousing sympathy for the problems of labor at a union meeting while displaying middle-class habits or deploring military action in Suez and calling for international justice from afar. Admitting his own engagement in politics is limited to displaying a poster or lending his car for a political parade, he insists he regularly has and will continue to vote Labour. He argues the Party would be better off without the romantic intellectuals who, lacking a long-term crisis about which to become incensed, were moving to the right as they complained about what he called "non-political issues": "the colour bar, horror-comics, juvenile delinquency, the abolition of capital punishment, [and] the reform of the laws relating to divorce and homosexuality."[11] But Amis would soon join the movement to the right when debate over reforming British universities began to heat up in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The "revolution [in higher education] of the nineteen-sixties," writes historian Nöel Annan, originates with the work of Sir David Eccles who issued a white paper in 1956 calling for technological education. Since universities refused his challenge, the Ministry of Education undertook the task of establishing colleges of advanced technology as sophisticated institutions, but not quite universities, that would further technological education beyond that of the polytechnic institutes. Then came the Crowther Report on education of young Britons 15 to 18 years old, the Plowden Report on primary schools, Newsom and Martin on boarding schools, Anderson on competitive

student awards, and, culminating the push for reform, the Robbins Report on higher education.[12]

Amis' skepticism and anti-establishment attitude, however, belied a gradual shift to the right that first appeared in a critique of the 1950s published in the July 1960 issue of *Encounter*. Although Lucky Jim Dixon mentions some concern for expanding university admission, Amis presents the clearest statement of his views on university reform in "Lone Voices: Views of the 'Fifties.'" He begins with a cryptic critique of sociology by lamenting the "sociologizing" of society with its penchant for labeling every aspect of the culture:

> Human spontaneity may well appear to have been worse damaged by the labelers that by any of the spectres they so clamorously and repetitively labeled—mass culture, herd values, conspicuous consumption, status seeking, success ethics—and the multiplication of diagnosis itself is coming to the point where it obstructs cure.[13]

He objects to characterizations of society and human behavior in the cinema and on television, as well as the popularity of descriptions of society in contemporary sociological studies by David Riesman, Vance Packard, and William H. Whyte as substitutes for creative literature. Although Amis admits there are problems with the 1950s, he thinks the descriptions of the decade as "…the worst, falsest, most cynical, most apathetic, most commercialized, most Americanised, richest in cultural decline of any in Britain's history…"[14] to be excessive and exaggerated. What he wanted was a lone voice who presented a viewpoint based on experience instead of some sociological study, which was what he purports to do in his soon-to-be-famous critique of the reform of British higher education.[15]

Amis' description of British society saturated with sociological pap and philistinism that an anonymous wag labeled "Hoggart-wash," a pejorative reference to Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*, provided him with a context in which to flay post-war British education at all levels, but particularly higher education. Writing as a university lecturer, he complains of widespread "ignorance and incapacity," ranging "from the kindergarten to the House of Lords." Alluding to the increase in the number of British universities already underway by 1960, he reserves his most vehement criticism for those who worry about the nation falling behind the United States and the Soviet Union and who use statistics as a basis for calling for more universities and university graduates, technologists, and schoolteachers.[16]

Amis insisted the expansion of higher education would result in a lowering of university admission and examination standards. In other words, "MORE WILL MEAN WORSE,"[17] an assertion he repeats

several times in the essay. He writes, for example, that lowering admission standards will "…wreck academic standards beyond repair,"[18] as the result of hordes of ignorant students being admitted to universities—people who intend to study English literature—will come to the university with no knowledge of meter, rhyme, poem, and sentence. Consequently, he cynically opines,

> Not only will examination standards have to be lowered to enable worse and worse people to graduate—you cannot let them all in and then not allow most of them to pass—but the good people will be less good than they used to be: this has steadily been happening ever since I started watching in 1949.[19]

Amis then admits he does not want to be forced to teach in a second-rate college masquerading as a university. Thus, despite his flawed logic, he fears expansion represents society's rejection of "the idea of a university as a centre of learning."[20]

In response to growing calls for more scientists and technologists and for the substitution of curricular breadth in place of early specialization in the sixth form, Amis worries about the detrimental effects of such changes on instruction in all disciplines at the undergraduate level, but especially in the humanities. He contends, furthermore, that general courses really mean "…diluted, science and arts, more science for the arts students—oh, and arts for the scientists too, naturally."[21] He then expresses the ubiquitous fear of humanists everywhere: "…the demand for more science…[will mean] less arts."[22] Malcolm Bradbury, then at Birmingham University, later voices the same concern in an essay on one of the "Redbricks," Leicester University.[23]

A year after publishing "Lone Voices," Amis solidifies his elitist attitude by accepting a position as a fellow in English at Peterhouse, Cambridge University, a change that further indicates his movement to the political right. Not an unproblematic move, Amis' new colleague, the famous F. R. Leavis, made reference to Amis' novels, declaring the university had hired "a pornographer."[24] Amis would leave Cambridge in 1963 for London to continue his literary career.

Soon after Amis took his post at Cambridge, the Macmillan government's select committee on the state of higher education in the United Kingdom confirmed his worst fears about the future of university education. On October 23, 1963, Lord Lionel Robbins, chairman of the Committee on Higher Education in the United Kingdom, announced the result of what was to become the most famous, influential study of British higher education in the post-war era. The Robbins Committee proposed a significant alteration of British higher education that included, among other things, elevating regional colleges and colleges of advanced technology to university status and the

establishment of "Special Institutions for Scientific and Technological Education and Research." Although the report confirmed efforts already underway, such as the establishment of several new universities, the report clearly reflected many post-war political and social issues dominating the United Kingdom. Britain had experienced the trauma of near economic collapse and the emergence of a welfare state, both of which raised questions of social justice; weakness of its scientific and technological sector, which would have both domestic and international ramifications; as well as the loss of empire and the question of its status among the nations of the world. By the late 1950s, amid growing pressure for reform and recent growth of the economy, the government concluded there was a need to examine the whole of post-secondary education as a basis for potential reform "…in light of national needs and resources."[25] What concerned the Robbins Committee most were the problems of social justice in post-secondary education and the need for scientific and technological development with implications for other issues of the era. For instance, as the Robbins Committee was deliberating and new universities were opening, university Vice-Chancellors spoke of the ideal size of universities in Britain as having 3,000 students, but the Committee surprised everyone by optimistically calling for 10,000 students in an average institution. The Committee also supported the idea of upgrading polytechnics to colleges of advanced technology with university status as well as expansion of opportunities to study science throughout the entire system as a means of fostering growth of science and technology.[26]

The public response to Robbins was generally positive, at first. *The Times* headlines and articles, for instance, outlined the report's results and recommendations and complimented the Robbins Committee on its accomplishments. Although the coverage was considerable, it was not wholly enthusiastic: the editorial page contained skeptical commentaries, echoing Kingsley Amis' warning about the likelihood of declining standards. In contrast, Nöel Annan recognized the historical significance of the report, noting that Robbins was the first comprehensive national report to examine higher education as an interrelated system of institutions, "…not a hierarchy of institutions headed by Oxford, Cambridge, and London…." Since that time, historians note the gradual shift in language from "universities" as an all-encompassing word for post-secondary education to "higher education," implying instead a range of various types of educational institutions.[27]

Immediately after Lord Robbins presented the report, the Conservative government announced support for the expansion with a recommendation for initial funding to start the effort. In the national

election of 1964, Harold Wilson led the Labour Party to victory on a platform touting a new era of science and technology, one fostered by an expanding system of universities. Not two years later, however, the euphoria had subsided as the economy began to sputter and Labour became very tentative about carrying out Robbins' recommendations.[28] The efforts aimed at dramatically reforming education in Britain would form the context of the debate about higher education and Kingsley Amis' evolving views of British higher education.

In the years leading to the Robbins Report, not all dons opposed university reform, however. After Amis had issued his slogan, the well-known historian Asa Briggs wrote a 1961 essay entitled "Universities for Tomorrow" describing plans for Brighton University, the newest of the "plate-glass" institutions, which he said would entail "…re-arrangements of the map of learning in universities." Brighton was to have schools of English studies, European studies, Asian studies, and social studies. In their first year, students would take general studies, after which curricula would be interdisciplinary. For example, in European studies students would learn a foreign language in association with history, contemporary economy and society, and patterns of culture, all linked with non-European studies in another school. He also mentions plans to add scientific studies in 1962. Unlike his fellow dons, Briggs, who would soon become a university administrator, saw great promise in university expansion and curricular reform.[29]

Kingsley Amis was like many dons whose legitimate professional concern centered on teaching and research. In the wake of the Robbins Report, dons' letters to the editors of newspapers and periodicals such as *The Spectator* concerned the quality of instruction in universities, the need to preserve the strong tradition of the tutorial characteristic of Oxbridge, whether certain tutors were effective, whether the new universities ought to have tutorials at all, and other professional concerns. With the exception of comments from Peter Townsend of the University of Essex who opined the Robbins reforms potentially would further class divisions, most dons failed to mention the proposed expansion of opportunities for more qualified young people, particularly those of the lower-middle and working classes. University dons seemed blithely unconcerned about promoting social justice. Most of the correspondents were humanists who said nothing of society's scientific and technological needs, let alone of fostering the expansion of education to meet those needs.[30]

Although Amis was not alone in his criticism of the proposed expansion of higher education, the British public appeared to be of two minds about university reform, particularly the Robbins Report's recommendations for significant expansion. Beginning the day after the Robbins committee issued its report in October 1963, newspapers and

other periodicals carried expressions of support for most of the Robbins recommendations, including reports that the Conservative government welcomed the report and intended to move quickly to implement some of its recommendations. Many on the Left and within the Labour Party also hailed the report, and Harold Wilson later campaigned particularly on its emphasis on science and technology. At the same time, there were expressions of concern about the potential lowering of standards coming, for example, from the editors of *The Times*, comments they frequently reiterated.[31]

Support for reform also came from some university administrators. In 1967, Lord Nöel Annan, then Vice Chancellor of the University of London, joined the debate over the reform of education when his international reputation took him to New York where he addressed the Modern Language Association at its annual meeting on the subject of recent changes in British higher education. He sought to inform his listeners of the struggle then underway in the wake of the Robbins Report, and immediately it became clear where he stood in the debate then raging in his home country. With an air of great satisfaction, Annan recalled the visits of more than a hundred American academics in 1964, who had come to observe the first significant results of the post-war reform movement that had occurred just as the work of the Robbins Committee was heating up—seven new universities. By then, he said sardonically, the only opponents of expansion left, still muttering "'more will mean worse'" were "…that daring, unconventional, swinging novelist, Mr. Kingsley Amis, and that great British daily newspaper that proclaims 'Top People read *The Times*.'"[32] Annan went on to note the irony of change occurring in British and American universities in the mid 1960s. He saw academics in both countries taking trips "through the looking glass": While the British Alice found a land desperately trying to rid its universities of the traditional hierarchy, with Oxbridge at the top followed in order by the "Redbricks" and the so-called "White-Tile" (another term used to identify the new universities) and rid of overspecialization of the sixth form, the American Alice entered a land where university teachers were finding their students already familiar with the arts and literature, the social and natural sciences, and advanced mathematics.[33]

Unfortunately in Britain, laments Annan, the primary force resisting the reform is,

> …the middle-class intelligentsia…[that] until recently [sees] Matthew Arnold…[as] the protagonist in spreading an official culture of the upper classes to the lower, the defender of Oxford as the last barricade of age-old prejudice and

> untroubled somnolence against the inroads of applied science and of the scientific method.[34]

This "aristocratic notion of learning and culture," he continues, is manifest in British universities in myriad ways, which led many dons to fear having to give up the rewards of seeing very high performance of their students in traditional subjects for what they thought was the "dubious advantage of increasing the number of students."[35]

The context of this debate over British higher education was the significant economic, social, and cultural changes underway in the period sometimes stereotypically referred to as the "Swinging Sixties." The growing economy of the late 1950s and early 1960s brought an increase in the number and availability of consumer goods, as well as growing demand for them. The economy also created more opportunities for occupational advancement that led working- and lower-middle-class parents to demand improved educational access for their children. This new affluence and the freedoms it brought also saw the emergence of more liberal values that especially rankled many intellectuals of the generation who had come of age in the 1950s. Citing Amis and Robert Conquest as representatives of that generation, historian Dominic Sandbrook explains that,

> [t]he fashionable intellectual values of the late 1960s, which emphasized sensation and spirituality, were very different from the pragmatic detachment they had celebrated in the fifties, while their moral values were affronted by what they saw as the excesses of the permissive society.[36]

The culture of the 1960s gave Amis, in particular, an obvious reason to reiterate his objection to the expansion of higher education despite the fact it was growing in popularity among the public.

On July 2, 1967, Amis publically explained his shift to the right and his hostility to the culture of the 1960s in *The Sunday Telegraph* in an article entitled, "Why Lucky Jim Turned Right."[37] He begins by noting that after the Russian invasion of Hungary in 1956, he gradually became annoyed with the Left while remaining a Labour supporter. It was, however, the proposed changes in university education in the early 1960s, first by the Conservatives and then in earnest by Labour, that disturbed Amis the most. He reminds his reader of his earlier claims regarding the expansion of the universities:

> I think I was right [when I wrote "MORE WILL MEAN WORSE"]. Not that one had to be specially observant to be right. My prediction was based on the simple fact, well known to any teacher available to all at the cost of a little reflection,

> that if you pack your class with thicks you either have to ignore them and teach only the bright people, or, if like most teachers you feel responsible for all levels of pupil, you will compromise, i.e. lower your standards.[38]

Amis went on to insist that Labour's policy of eliminating "streaming" (tracking in the U.S.) in schools is "almost consciously destructive," and in the long run, it will have a detrimental effect on the universities. He then returns to the larger political context of his complaints to launch an attack on Labour's foreign policy and what he sees as their failure to disavow the damning of the "system" by mindless "Leftys." Finally, in a postscript to the essay published in 1970, he responds to his critics by hammering away at the contradictory positions of Leftists who, for example, strongly protest "…U.S. 'imperialism' in Vietnam," but hardly object to the "…Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia…."[39]

"Why Lucky Jim Turned Right" was not Amis' final statement on the state of higher education in Britain. Even in the face of the arguments of Lord Annan and other proponents of the Robbins reforms, his objections to university growth were unrelenting. In 1969, for instance, he joined Angus Maude, Robert Conquest, and other opponents of the educational reforms, including one familiar to many American academics, Jacques Barzun, in a series of pamphlets called "Black Papers."[40] Edited by C. B. Cox and A. E. Dyson, the "Black Papers" were written in an effort to counter the introduction of progressive educational methods in schools and what the authors continued to believe were the detrimental effects of admitting more students to the universities. Amis, in particular, objected to the demands from British students who spoke in words familiar to those who lived through the 1960s in American universities calling for "relevance" in the curriculum, elimination of examinations, and student participation in university governance. He called their demands "pernicious participation" and argued students engaged in learning a subject were in no position to determine what bits of knowledge were best to acquire; they were incapable of evaluating their own performance in the acquisition of knowledge; and they were not capable of determining who is most qualified to teach them in their studies.[41]

Twenty years later, the clearly conservative Kingsley Amis who supported Margaret Thatcher was still ranting about the dangers of expanding universities in his *Memoirs*, even in the face of growing sociological evidence to the contrary. Recalling his time at Swansea, Amis complains,

> …there were quite enough [students] there in the university who should not have been there, in the sense that they were

> not capable of benefiting from that kind of education. They had not wanted to be there and did not know what to do when they got there.[42]

At the same time, he praises the good students whom he had taught whose quality did not diminish, except when degree requirements were lowered.

Thus, at this late point in the life of Kingsley Amis, the growth of educational opportunity amid the affluence of post-war British society and the liberal culture that emerged in the 1960s continued to disturb him. He had become conservative and elitist in his politics and educational thought. In the 1950s, Amis' objection to opening universities to more students paradoxically meant that Britons from the very social class from which he had emerged as well as from the working class would be denied opportunity for higher education. By the 1990s, the paradox of his story had become even more dramatic as Amis still thought colleges and universities were admitting too many unqualified students. What he did not know, however, was that in the last two decades of his life evidence grew that later would undermine his viewpoint: In 2000, sociologists A. H. Halsey and Josephine Webb demonstrated the student population in British institutions of higher education dramatically rose between 1971 and 1991, and standards for admission had become "…distinctly higher in 1991 than they were in 1971."[43]

Amis' viewpoints on higher education closely paralleled his shifting politics. Having come from the lower-middle class and benefitted from scholarship opportunities to attend a grammar school that enabled him to enter a university, he had taken an ambivalent leftist position in his critique of the elitist nature of universities in the 1950s while never objecting to the class structure of Britain. In the character of *Lucky Jim*, he had aimed his not-so-subtle barbs at the pretentious Professor Welch for whom Jim worked, and perhaps even Swansea where Amis himself worked, roundly criticizing the upper-class culture of universities and their faculties of the 1950s. Soon, however, he began drifting to the right, eerily assuming the perspective of the don he would become in one of the ancient universities known as Oxbridge. The political nature of his objection to opening universities to more lower-middle class students and, much to his chagrin, the working class, was misguided, particularly in the face of contradictory scientific evidence. In fact his dismissal of the potential of the working class was clear in the snide remark about "Hoggart-wash," an overt reference to Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*, a thorough analysis of the life and language of working-class Britons by a scholar who originated from the working

class himself. Finally, Amis' drift toward the right is evidenced by his co-authorship of the "Black Papers" and, without question, in his praise for Margaret Thatcher's government.

Although there is much more to be studied in the life and writings of Kingsley Amis in the post-war era, this brief exploration of his political and educational thought carries important implications for understanding how the political and social context of a period can affect an individual's ideas about politics and education. Nevertheless, there is no simple relationship between the two categories of ideas. Such ideas often are more complex than they appear on the surface. In the 1950s, for example, Amis was a Socialist, and in his literary writings, his politics were anti-elitist like others in The Movement, an attitude evidenced in his literary work within the character of Jim Dixon and his feelings about being out of place in the pretentious, intimidating atmosphere of a provincial British university. Yet, Amis' politics evidently never led him seriously to question his own class-dominated society. It was only as he moved toward the right that his political and educational ideas became more consistent. Finally, the story of Kingsley Amis' politics and his thoughts about university education indicate the importance of being clear about our political ideas and how they can affect our educational thought and practice as we endeavor to teach others.

Endnotes

[1] Kingsley Amis, "Lone Voices: Views of the 'Fifties'," *Encounter* 15, no. 82 (July 1960): 8.

[2] Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim, A Novel* (Larchmont, NY: Queens House, 1977 [1958]).

[3] Blake Morrison, *The Movement: English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s* (New York: Methuen & Co., 1980); Zachary Leader, *The Life of Kingsley Amis* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006); Eric Jacobs, *Kingsley Amis: A Biography* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995); Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (London: Time Warner Book Group UK, 2005; Abacus, 2006), 158–163, 173–177; *White Heat: A History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties* (London: Abacus, 2006), 585–587.

[4] Peter Hennessy, *Never Again: Britain, 1945–1951* (London: Penguin Books, 2006 [1992]); *Having It So Good: Britain in the Fifties* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007 [2006]). See also Peter Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900–1990* (London: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1996), 224–231.

[5] Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good*, 80.

[6] Clarke, *Hope and Glory*, 283–287; Noël Annan, "The Reform of Higher Education," *The Political Quarterly* 38 (1967): 236–238; Robert Anderson, *British Universities Past and Present* (London and New York: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), 139–140.

[7] Obituaries of Kingsley Amis, *The Times*, *The Independent* (London), and *The New York Times*, 23 October 1995.

[8] Kingsley Amis, *Memoirs* (New York: Summit Books, 1991).

[9] Amis, *Lucky Jim*, Chapter 1; Philip Gardner, *Kingsley Amis* (Boston: Twayne, 1981), 25–32.

[10] Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good*, 176–177.

[11] Kingsley Amis, *Socialism and the Intellectuals* (London: The Fabian Society, 1957).

[12] Annan, "The Reform of Higher Education," 236–240.

[13] Amis, "Lone Voices," 6.

[14] Ibid., 7.

[15] Ibid., 6–8.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid., 9, emphasis in original.

[18] Ibid., 8.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid., 9.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Malcolm Bradbury, "Rise of the Redbrick: Leicester University," *Holiday*, November 1963, 84–87, 162–170.

[24] Leader, *The Life of Kingsley Amis*, 454; Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good*, 155; *The Independent*, 23 October 1995.

[25] Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education: Report of the Committee Appointed by the Prime Minister under the Chairmanship of Lord Robbins* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1963), 1, 277–291. See also Michael Shattock, "The Creation of the British University System," in *The Creation of a University System*, ed. Michael Shattock (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1996), 1–27.

[26] Annan, "The Reform of Higher Education," 237; Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education*, 151–152, 164–165, 271–272.

[27] *The Times*, 24 October 1963; Editors, "The Robbins Report"; Annan, "The Reform of Higher Education," 238; Anderson, *British Universities*, VII.

[28] *The Times*, 25 October 1963; Harold Wilson, *A Personal Record: the Labour Government, 1964–1970* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971).

[29] Asa Briggs, "Universities for Tomorrow," *The Spectator*, 3 March 1961, 338–340.

[30] Eric Ashby, "Letter to the Editor," *The Times*, 26 October 1963; G. A. Barnard, "Letter to the Editor," *The Times*, 26 October 1963; Geoffrey Crowther, "Letter to the Editor," *The Times*, 28 October 1963; Peter Townsend, "Letter to the Editor," *The Times*, 29 October 1963; Editors, "Dealing with Oxbridge," *The Spectator*, 6 March 1964, 299; "Letter[s] to the Editor," 13, 20, & 27 March, 3 & 10 April 1964.

[31] *The Times*, 24 October 1963; Editors, "The Robbins Report"; *The Times*, 25 October 1963; Annan, "The Reform of Higher Education," 238–239.

[32] Noël Annan, "Through the Looking Glass," *PMLA* (*Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*) LXXXII, no. 3 (June 1967): 3–5, 3.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid., 5.

[35] Ibid., 5–6.

[36] Sandbrook, *White Heat*, 587.

[37] Kingsley Amis, "Why Lucky Jim Turned Right: Confessions of an Ex-Radical," *Sunday Telegraph*, 2 July 1967.

[38] Kingsley Amis, "Why Lucky Jim Turned Right," in *What Became of Jane Austen? And Other Questions* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 202.

[39] Ibid., 207–211.

[40] Kingsley Amis, "Pernicious Participation," in *The Black Papers on Education*, eds. C. B. Cox and A. E. Dyson (London: Davis-Poynter Limited, 1971).

[41] Ibid., 170.

[42] *The Independent*, 23 October 1995; Amis, *Memoirs*, 122–123.

[43] A. H. Halsey, ed., with Josephine Webb, *Twentieth-Century British Social Trends* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000), 240.