Kate Soper

It has certainly not been easy to withstand government pressures on the humanities in recent decades. Yet through their failure to mount any consolidated and truly alternative opposition to them, academics must take some of the blame for the current crisis. There have been continuous complaints about the counter-productive impact of New Labour's policies on teaching and quality control, and about the loss of humanities provision. But staff have largely tolerated these moves, and some have built their careers around their implementation. Students, too, although many feel frustrated and betrayed by the low-level requirements of the work they end up doing, and are over educated in relation to it, have not always been encouraged to think in more critical and imaginative ways about their education. Nor have they themselves offered much resistance to the consumer culture now dominant in the academy.

The latest cuts are likely to result in further erosion of humanities' departments, especially in the less privileged universities. This is all the sadder because it is so short sighted about longer term social and ecological needs. The vocational turn in higher education is driven by a growth model of the economy that puts profits before human welfare, and is ultimately unsustainable. If affluent societies are successfully to meet the environmental and social challenges of the future, they need to begin now to plan for a shift to a more materially reproductive way of living, to a low or no growth economic model rooted in an expansion of leisure time and rather different conceptions of social flourishing and human well-being. From this longer term point of view, our current priorities are very skewed. We are treating free time as a threat to prosperity rather than a form in which prosperity can be realised. We are viewing education as little more than a forcing house for the economy, an adjunct of industry, when it should also be seen as

providing individuals with the resources essential to enjoying the leisure that could be made more available in a post consumerist era. We are downgrading and marginalising aesthetic resources and satisfactions when we should to be making them culturally central. We are focussing too exclusively on the conservation of the body, when we need to be attending equally to the care of the mind. And we are failing to establish any countering image of the good life to the high-stress, time scarce, work-driven existence promoted by consumer society with its massive advertising budgets.

The longstanding cross Party consensus on what counts as 'high' living standards needs to be challenged through provision of a new 'political imaginary'. Economic activity, as Stefan Collini has suggested, should be tailored to what we sense is really important in life. The universities in general, and the humanities in particular, could make a significant contribution in this respect by encouraging more talk and vision about the things that matter most. This is in line with my argument around the idea of 'alternative hedonism', where I have been emphasising the sensual and spiritual pleasures of escaping the dominant model of the good life and calling for a cultural revolution in our perceptions of prosperity as the necessary first stage in building a mandate for a fairer and more sustainable economic order.

Even David Cameron has recently admitted, when launching his new 'happiness index', that economic growth isn't everything and that there are aspects of life that 'can't be measured on a balance sheet'. What a pity it is, then, that in its educational policy the Coalition remains so bent on reinforcing the GDP gauge of progress.