Booknotes

Not all books that get published are worth publishing, as a cursory look at any bookshop or even our own Books Received lists would confirm. Conversely there are books which have not been published which are certainly worth reading. These thoughts are inspired by two efforts which have recently come our way.

The first of these is, in a way, the more remarkable, for it is about something which concerns all university teachers, but about which there has been precious little comment, and certainly none of any real quality. It is about the university itself, the very forum in which there is supposed to be free consideration of everything, but which has proved remarkably unreflective when it comes to its own nature and development. There has been plenty of grumbling and plenty of crass if not actually mendacious management speak, but very little in between, an unhealthy situation reminiscent in its way of the Brezhnev era in the eastern bloc. There too no one believed the official discourse... except perhaps western university academics...

So for reasons of intellectual integrity at least, Gordon Graham deserves praise for his piece of a *samizdat*, a privately published and distributed monograph entitled *Universities, The Recovery of an Idea*. The reference to Newman in the title is intentional and, in an age of Dearings, Randalls and Blackstones, felicitous. But precisely because Graham goes some way to resurrecting the Newmanic idea—and actually giving it a better and more cogent defence than Newman did himself—he will get no hearing from the Dearings, the Randalls and the Blackstones, the people running (some would say ruining) the university system in Britain. As usual when bureaucrats and politicians (inside and outside universities) are confronted with objections to their favoured policies to which they can give no good reply, they deal with them simply by pretending they do not exist (another parallel with the eastern bloc).

Graham is not interested in defining the term 'university', nor in denying the validity of plenty of other institutions of higher education or training which do not conform to the idea he is interested in recovering. But partly by means of a brief history of universities and partly by means of philosophical argument he develops a conception of institutions (let us call them universities) which will contribute in a specific way to human flourishing. For, in Graham's view, understanding ourselves, our world and our condition is just as integral to human flourishing as are health or material welfare. Universities are institutions which should be dedicated to promoting and teaching that understanding. They are not skills factories, though they have (and have always had) an important role in providing for the professions that degree of learning and understanding which mean that lawyers, doctors, priests and others are more than just technicians. And as universities are involved in producing and promoting understanding, subjects which lack intellectual substance should not be in them. Whether a

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subject has such substance cannot be decided a priori; nevertheless Graham is prepared to question the credentials of subjects such as sports science, post modernist literary theory, creationist biology, peace studies and hotel management.

As in their teaching universities are about producing people with educated taste, teachers must be sovereign. So student choice has to be severely curtailed. As Graham remarks, students may quite reasonably find Kant tedious and difficult and Edward de Bono more to their liking; 'nevertheless, it is in Kant that far greater intellectual worth lies, which is not a judgment they are in a position to make, but one which they need to be taught how to make.' So developments which make the 'consumer' (i.e. students) sovereign should be resisted. These include modularization, most forms of student evaluation and the demand that university teachers be paid in line with the number of customers they can 'attract' to their courses. Nor (greatest heresy of all in these days of 40–50% 'participation') is it necessarily a criticism of university education if people from what Graham calls 'the lower socio-economic classes' choose not to go in for it in large numbers. Quite the contrary: making this a complaint could be no more than a manifestation of an unpleasantly patrician attitude of the part of the complainer. 'A true belief in equality would lend considerable importance to leaving them to make their own decisions. If they judge higher education not to be worth the cost, this is a decision that ought to be respected.'

Nor does Graham have much time for the assessments of research universities in Britain have regularly to undergo. What they lead to is mainly huge amounts of possibly worthy but largely unread publication. Graham quotes the startling figure that the average article in a philosophy journal is read by just four people. There is just so much that the chances of any particular article's value surfacing (assuming it has any) is remote in the extreme. What we have here is a situation very like that in eastern Europe, of five year plans producing all kinds of stuff no one actually wants (and probably very little of the stuff they might like). And analogous comments could be made about the degree of centralization, bureaucracy and sheer verbiage involved in the governmental assessments of university teaching 'quality', which despite all the machinery and preparation involved are actually no such thing, being hopelessly superficial on the things which really matter.

Why have British universities been subjected to modularization, teaching quality assessments, research audits, massive and careless expansion of numbers and courses, 'on-line management' and all the other 'initiatives' of the last few years, and why have they accepted them so meekly (and in the case of administrations often so enthusiastically)? The answer surely lies in the fact of their funding and direction by a central government (whether Labour or Conservative) which has no interest in the idea of a university. Those who, like Graham, do have an interest in this idea—and we suspect that this would include many academics and even students—have to find ways of making the universities they would like financially independent. Graham himself proposes student fees. While part of the solution this cannot be the whole answer, particularly when one considers

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the cost of research in the sciences. But rather than criticizing Graham for what he does not say, those who care about universities should thank him for doing what has needed doing so urgently. *Universities, The Recovery of an Idea* may be obtained from Professor Gordon Graham, at the Department of Philosophy, Old Brewery, The University of Aberdeen, Old Aberdeen AB9 2UB, Scotland, for £5.00 including postage and packing.

David Stove's *Against the Idols of the Age* is the second book which had difficulties with publishers, though it is the sort of book which will be appreciated by many, even those it will enrage, just because it is both different and forthright. Transaction Books, who published it (in 1999) took it only after its editor, Roger Kimball had had more than a dozen rejections from other more august houses. The reason for the rejections is easy to see, and perhaps the wonder is that Kimball got the collection published at all. The reason is simply because Stove (who died by his own hand in 1994) was politically incorrect to an astonishing degree. He really was against the idols of the age. In Kimball's collection are considerable and impassioned attacks on philosophical idealism, on Darwinism as applied to human affairs and on Popper's philosophy of science. But there are also essays asserting the intellectual inferiority of women and the naturalness of racial antagonism in themselves enough to deny Stove a hearing in polite society.

Stove's intellectual mentor was Hume, on whom he had himself written much. His own arguments have some of the directness, the unavoidability and—once stated—the obviousness of Hume. For example, it is fallacious to argue that just because our knowledge is our knowledge, it therefore cannot be about the real world; but this argument is the basis of most idealism in philosophy and much relativism, including fashionable relativisms about science. Darwinism is false because human beings just do not behave as Darwin says they should. Racial antagonisms exist because the grounds for them are pretty evenly distributed throughout the world. The intellectual capacity of women is inferior to that of men because the intellectual performance of women is inferior to that of men.

To say that an argument is direct and obvious is not to say that it or its conclusion are correct. But it is to say that it should be considered and discussed and, where necessary, refuted by reason. We hope that we are not in a situation where things cannot be published just because they will offend, and also that those who will be offended by Stove will take him on with the same vigour he himself showed in argument.

But we also hope that readers will look at a surprisingly moving piece, 'Holbach's Dream'. In this essay Stove, the atheist and Humean, comes as close as could be to regretting the Enlightenment and its pretensions. 'The source of man's misery is ignorance of nature' proclaimed Holbach in 1770. What nonsense, says Stove. None of the great discoveries of science had improved man's lot up to 1770. Although subsequently scientific knowledge did increase human happiness considerably, there is no necessary connection between knowledge and happiness. Knowledge of the sort esteemed by the Enlightenment could now be leading us to disasters and unhappiness of unparalleled extent. To-day's combination of increased

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numbers, increased wealth and increased claims to equality, which are the fruits of the Enlightenment and its social teaching are about as lethal a cocktail as the world has known.

Precisely because of the increased wealth and numbers made possible by scientific knowledge, we ourselves are not just more numerous, but more disagreeable and dangerous than people were in 1900. And, says Stove, while religion has been the cause of quite a lot of unhappiness in the world—Holbach and his circle were right about that—its absence is causing just as much or more.

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