Booknotes

A cursory glance at trends in contemporary education and the philosophy of education would probably leave the observer with the impression that the progressive view is one that favours child-centredness and a relativistic multi-culturalism, while at the same time undermining the authority of the teacher and the value of a curriculum based on high cultural values.

In *Social Radicalism and Liberal Education* (St Andrews Studies in Philosophy and Public Affairs, Imprint Academic, Exeter, 2015) Lindsay Paterson shows emphatically that this was not always the case. For much of the 20th century, in Britain anyway, progressive politics, indebted as it was to Matthew Arnold, William Morris and the English Idealists, saw the role of mass education in terms not of undermining existing cultural values, but in terms of bringing 'the best that has been thought and known' to those whose social background and circumstances had previously made this hard, if not impossible.

In the slogan of the somewhat later Arts Council, the attitude of R.H.Tawney, Harold Laski and G.D.H. Cole, the intellectual luminaries of Labour politics in the first half of the 20th century, was very much 'the best for the most'. They would probably not have countenanced words quite as vulgar as that, but the slogan does encapsulate their spirit and also that of the fiery ex-communist and Jarrow marcher, Ellen Wilkinson, the first minister of education in the Labour government of 1945–51. She proclaimed that her aim was to promote a 'Third Programme society'. (The Third Programme was a long suppressed station on the BBC, which from the mid-1940s to the 1960s was exclusively devoted to classical music, drama, poetry and unadorned literary and philosophical discussion.) Even after Ellen Wilkinson, when the Labour party became committed to comprehensive education and the abolition of grammar schools, its leaders stressed that what they wanted was a 'grammar school education for all'.

One could argue quite reasonably that such an ambition was, almost by definition improbable of achievement, but equally one could argue that cultural effect of free market policies in culture and the media more generally would be (is?) to foster a degenerate populism. And also in education? Is there a malign convergence between to-day's so-called progressives in education, who deny the

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validity of judgements of quality in culture and the arts and espouse a form of education driven by the choices and social or ethnic background of pupils, and the media moguls who, in free market spirit, track down ever to the lowest of tastes and sensibility? So, if not a grammar school education for all, should educators not aspire to initiating all pupils, of whatever background, ethnicity and initial tastes, into 'the best that has been thought and known'? And should not education, at least in spirit, aim at producing, not immediate social and political engagement, as many of to-day's feminist and post-modernist educators urge, but (reverting to John Henry Newman, Cicero and Aristotle) a spirit of intellectual and emotional disinterestedness in those who come under its spell?

In his book Paterson shows how thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu and Iris Marion Young – hugely influential in academic educational circles – have seen any attempt to see culture and value more generally in universalistic terms as a form of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu) wreaked by the hegemonic elites on groups excluded by birth and upbringing from those élites. Talk of 'reason' and of 'universal values', given the truth (as they see it) of relativism, and also the deterministic working of social systems, is no more than a mendacious pretence designed to legitimise and shore up the dominant groups in society at the expense of the marginalised. It is noteworthy that Bourdieu's relativism is at the same time an attack on the authority of the teacher (though leaving his own analyses and prescriptions vulnerable to a devastating *tu quoque*); and, as Paterson shows, in purporting to give a voice and an identity to marginalised groups, Young nevertheless airily brushes off the need to say clearly just how she is defining membership of a group (most people surely belong to a number of groups, and most people, until they read Bourdieu and Young, probably do not see themselves as totally defined or wholly constrained by any of them).

Paterson is inclined to downplay the influence of the thought of Bourdieu, Young and their followers in educational circles today – he says that the liberal universalism they despise is nowadays the 'taken-for granted common sense of society'. When, for all the efforts of some politicians, there are still too many teachers in state schools who, by accident or design, would turn contemporary Judes away from the gates of Oxbridge (or who would rather prevent them from getting near them), this might seem over optimistic. However Paterson does supply us with some more recent thinkers from the radical left who would be on Jude's side. Thus Richard Hoggart, the founder of Cultural Studies in British academia, where judgements of value are now ritually and humourlessly

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frowned upon, was the enemy not only of populist egalitarianism and the endless quest for material prosperity (often associated with the laissez-faire wing of the political right), but also of the 'aggressive philistinism' which would put the Beatles on the level of Beethoven, and of the 'ceaseless leaking away of the will-to-decide' which would prefer 'a fuzzy form of egalitarianism' and the comforts of unreason to the hard discipline of judgement.

Even more strikingly Paterson invokes Hannah Arendt, who wrote that 'complex of modern educational theories which originated in Middle Europe and consists of an astounding hodgepodge of sense and nonsense (aiming) to accomplish under the banner of progressive education a most radical revolution in the whole system of education', in which 'all rules of sound human reason were thrust aside'. Such systems were based on 'the absurdity of treating children as an oppressed minority in need or liberation', and to substitute as far as possible doing for learning. They attempt to replace traditional learning with vocational training and the inculcation of skills; they make pupils and their innocent newness the focus, instead of insisting on the authority of the teacher and the need for humility on the part of uneducated learners. They thus make the acquisition of 'the normal prerequisites of the standard curriculum' and the development of reason which will follow from that impossible. It is gratifying to see so forthright a statement of the value of liberal learning coming from the political left, because it shows that within the tradition of progressive politics there are the resources to oppose what have come, perhaps misguidedly, to be seen as progressive practices in education.

While it would be unfair to attack Paterson for too easy an assumption that there are universal values in cultural as well as in moral and epistemic matters – that, after all, is not what he is examining – the question does naturally arise from what he says, and not just from the perspective of 20th-century relativism. One is reminded of Gibbon's reflection on having launched his work, that he has now given himself to the universe, 'that is to say a small number of English readers'. This aperçu is to be found in David Ellis's memoir of Frank Cioffi (*Frank Cioffi: the Philosopher in Shirt Sleeves*, Bloomsbury 2015). Ellis is, by profession, a professor of English literature, and, although there is a philosophical postscript by Nicholas Bunnin, most of the book lies in the hinterland between philosophy, literature and biography.

It is none the worse for that, as this will engage the reader in difficult and important questions, which along with Freud, occupied Cioffi throughout his philosophical life. On the precise point on

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the universality (or not) of literature, there is in the book a fruitful reference to Leavis's notion of a third realm, a realm of discourse in which subjective responses to a poem, say, are then tested and refined in conversation with others, in what Eliot referred to as 'the common pursuit of true judgement' and Leavis himself thought of in terms of a critical-collaborative dialogue (just what is absent from tracts of literary 'theory'). In this way we may hope to avoid both the solipsism of purely subjective responses to literature and the arts and also the impersonal objectivity of natural science, while at the same time keeping alive a sense that a (or even the) human story must, if it is to be thought true, 'advance and retreat erratically, must flicker and flutter here and there, must debouch at a thousand targets' (J.C.Powys, also quoted by Ellis).

It is clear from Ellis's portrait that Cioffi in his thinking about literature and about human life and psychology more generally was always at pains to resist false simplifications, whether of science or of an ignorant appeal to unreflective experience, in a certain sense to oscillate continually between reason and cause, between subjective and objective poles, and in the case of a writer, between the work and the writer's biography and historical context. If this approach leads to insight and illumination rather than to conclusions or results, that would all be part of what Cioffi may be trying to tell us. As far as his own biography is concerned, readers will judge for themselves whether it is helpful (as opposed to amusing) to learn that the philosopher in shirt sleeves was notoriously clumsy, that he loved pulp magazines and television, and that he had once been arrested for hitting a ticket inspector on Liverpool Street Station.

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