

Should we defend philosophy?

'Fight the cuts!' The slogan has obvious validity when it is a matter of axing hospitals and nursery schools, of increasing the sizes of school classes and closing old people's homes. And so the same slogan comes easily to hand when the proposed cuts are aimed at higher education. 'Fighting the cuts' then seems appropriate enough when we are faced with possible redundancies, and the closing of departments, in colleges, universities and polytechnics. But perhaps we should pause. Perhaps we should first ask ourselves a few uncomfortable questions. What are socialists doing, defending these hallowed institutions? Not so long ago, many of us were asserting them to be the guardians of bourgeois culture and bourgeois ideology - do we now want to rally to their defence?

For people in philosophy, the question can be put even more pointedly. Rhodes Boyson has been opining about the dispensability of arts subjects and social studies. These presumably include philosophy. Do we want to disagree with him? 'Contemporary British philosophy is at a dead end', we claimed in the first issue of Radical Philosophy. Do we then want to stand guard over the corpse? Shouldn't we leave Boyson to give it an indecent burial?

A possible, though scarcely avowable, response is that it's simply a matter of political opportunism. We, perhaps, have no genuine desire to preserve academic departments or to maintain the teaching of academic philosophy, but others - our orthodox academic colleagues, maybe - do have an interest in doing so. Therefore, it may be said, we should emphasise how the government's policies attack their interests, and so recruit them as temporary allies in the political struggle.

That is a coherent position, and not necessarily a cynical one. But we suspect that many socialists, including many readers of Radical Philosophy, will be inclined to defend rather more wholeheartedly the institutions of higher education, and the teaching of philosophy in them. Why? and with any good reason?

'It's a matter of jobs,' it may be said. 'The cuts will mean redundancies, and must therefore be resisted.' And certainly those who work in higher education are not going to accept unemployment without a struggle. But again there should be more to be said, for if the jobs one wants to preserve are jobs which serve to maintain a socially pernicious institution, one's political line should at any rate be sensitive to the ambiguity. You don't defend jobs in the arms industry without also pointing out that those skills could be utilised to meet real social needs. So, if we think that philosophy departments function to perpetuate a ruling ideology, we should perhaps follow the example of the Lucas Aerospace workers, and fight redundancies on the basis of some alternative conception of the social function and value of philosophy.

What would that be? Here we come to the heart of the matter. And Radical Philosophy arguably stands for some kind of answer. Not that all of us would agree on a single formulation. Some would appeal to

the critical potentialities in the classical philosophical tradition. They would argue that though the great philosophies of the past have regularly accommodated themselves to their own society, the historical tradition has at the same time furnished the tools for 'negative' or 'critical' thinking which can stand in judgment on the actualities of existing social life. The practice of philosophy, on this view, can be a liberating and a subversive one. Others would profess less attachment to the idea of 'philosophy'; they would say merely that so long as the institutionalised discipline of philosophy exists, there is a need to combat it and provide a way out of its ideological mystifications. But common to both views is the idea of an intellectual practice which, even in its institutional embodiments, is capable of functioning as social criticism; and it is in this that the value of the activity would be seen to reside.

Now there are certainly many socialist philosophers who would reject this whole way of talking. Their perspective would, perhaps, be that of 'class struggle in philosophy'. Institutions of higher education, they might say, primarily serve the needs of the ruling class, but individual socialists who happen to be involved in higher education as teachers or students can, semi-surreptitiously, make use of these opportunities in order to do theoretical work which will be of service to the working-class movement; there are, however, no supra-class interests which this work can serve. That is a possible position. Obviously it rules out the possibility of arguing against the cuts, other than opportunistically and disingenuously, but perhaps that implication should simply be accepted.

Perhaps, again, all these contortions are unnecessary. Maybe we should simply say that philosophical enquiry, and intellectual enquiry generally, is an enjoyable activity; that the opportunity of engaging in it should be available to all; and that in a socialist society this would be fully possible (the vision of 'hunting in the morning, fishing in the afternoon, rearing cattle in the evening, and criticising after dinner').

At any rate a coherent position on these matters doesn't come ready-made, and there is work to be done. This means engaging with the received philosophies of education: with the traditional antithesis between 'education for its own sake' and a crudely utilitarian 'education for industry' (on this, see Roy Edgley's article in RP19); with the currently orthodox notion of 'worth-while activities'; and with non-socialist versions of the idea that the value of higher education resides in its fostering of critical intelligence (e.g. Leavis and Scrutiny). In the present political situation we can learn, too, from similar struggles elsewhere, such as the fight for philosophy in the French educational system, reported in RP23.

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