

CORRESPONDENCE

Dear Radical Philosophy,

Oh, come on Jennifer Todd (RP 28), why don't you stop flogging a dead horse. There's no point in making political art; there's just no meat left - the flies have taken it all. It's all been consumed away, turned into culture and thrown back at us as another form of oppression. Any hope of a radical art faded with the failure of Dada and surrealism. Dada tried to put the poor beast out of its misery and surrealism tried to transcend it; both failed and so has every attempt since. A dead horse, is a dead horse, is a dead horse....

Adorno said it's not a question of politicizing aesthetics but of aestheticizing politics. Is it a coincidence that your article should be dotted with posters from 1968 where the situationists had put the above practice into operation?

And don't drag jazz in again. The poor girl's too tired. Adorno demolished that myth: beneath the supposed improvisations it's as politically conservative as anything else. I would love to know what you listen to at home; marxists are usually culturally conservative when you get down to it.

Do we really have to wade through so many fine words to come to a conclusion that includes 'an integrated praxis is needed, where community artists look beyond the good feelings generated by their endeavours and more conventional artists look beyond the confines of the art world.' Not terribly original is it?

You can't expect art to come up with the goods on our present conditions, and all that that entails, when articles about it present arguments, let alone conclusions, that the Frankfurt School (Adorno) dealt with nearly fifty years ago and which the situationists surpassed twenty years ago. It's time to move on. There's rioting on the streets; they've taken up the bones.

Yours sincerely, Steve Dorril

Jennifer Todd comments:

Oh come on Steve Dorril. My conclusion may not be terribly original but it's better than your idealisation of any active politics without analysis of its prospects and your 'death of art' theme. Art has died so often since Hegel that I can't take the latest obituaries seriously.

The editors chose the illustrations, not me. Whatever their import, I won't accept an aestheticized politics (on Benjamin's analysis a fascist strategy) without further discussion of its direction.

The serious political question is what people with specialised skills - artistic and intellectual - are to do when there is rioting and when there isn't. If you don't think these skills are useful, I don't see why you read or write at all; if you think they can be used, tell us how. Does your unquestioning acceptance of the aesthetic judgements of Adorno (a political conservative, I fear) extend to his praise of esoteric art?

Dear Editors and Readers,

From time to time a debate surfaces in *Radical Philosophy* over the state of the magazine and the

movement, and over the direction in which they should be going. I believe it is important that the debate should now be renewed and pushed towards a resolution. Only by doing so can we hope to seize the great opportunities that confront us.

The opportunities arise from the disintegration of the analytical movement in philosophy. This event may be taken as fully certified, as all around us the sky begins to grow dark with obituary notices. The most remarkable of these to date is Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. It is to be expected that awareness of the significance of what has happened should be furthest advanced in the United States, where the best work in the movement has been done for the past twenty years. It is natural that the exhaustion of its resources should first be appreciated there. By contrast, the sedulous mediocrity of the British branch might keep it from ever reaching that point, if it could be shielded from outside influence. But no Chinese wall protects it from developments at the heart of the culture to which it belongs, and no such wall surrounds *Radical Philosophy*. Our chronic crisis of identity must enter an acute phase. So far we have managed to get by on the assurance, enshrined inside recent front covers, that, whatever might be in doubt, we could recognize ourselves by our resolute opposition to the teachings of the academy. But such an approach will work only so long as the 'Other' has itself some definite shape. Now that this is rapidly dissolving, we need some positive determination of what we are.

The reasons for the demise of the analytical movement cannot be specified here. But, clearly, some of them are internal to it, and have to do with the fact that a certain conception of philosophy has ceased to be viable. It is now apparent that Quine's assault on the analytic-synthetic distinction was a time-bomb placed in the foundations of this conception, ensuring that we would not be left alone to fustigate about on our own indefinitely. For it spelled the eventual collapse of the dichotomy of 'the conceptual' and 'the empirical', which was the only serviceable guide to the realm of philosophy the movement had to offer. With its collapse the nature of the distinctive expertise of professional philosophers becomes quite mysterious. Their claim to be providing vital, 'second-order' services for other disciplines is, at any rate, decisively undermined. Whatever the real character of those services, it becomes obvious that they can be performed as well, or better by historians, mathematicians and scientists acting on their own behalf. The threat of intellectual redundancy has a baleful ring about it in these times. In the face of the economic storms about to engulf the academy, the philosophers seem to be clothed only in a belief in their own cleverness, while their sole marketable asset is a bag of tricks supposed to be useful to aspiring members of ruling circles. But the state's need for sophists is quite small, and in Britain's case can be entirely met by the University of Oxford. What is to become of everyone else? In this situation it will not be surprising if it is discovered that philosophy has, after all, something to do with wisdom. It will not be surprising either if Anglo-American philosophy has to look elsewhere to augment its own meagre holdings in that area; if, that is, its response to the crisis takes an eclectic turn.

It is, once again, to the United States that one should look to see which way the wind is blowing. The clearest indications are given in excerpts from a pamphlet prepared by Hubert Dreyfus and John Haugeland which are published in the April 1981 *Newsletter* of the American Philosophical Association. The excerpts speak of signs of a 'general malaise' among American philosophers and of the insistently expressed needs of their students for 'metaphysical comfort'. The response is a proposal to forget 'old antipathies' and to combine the resources of 'analytic' and 'continental' philosophy to construct a new curriculum. This is not seen as a matter of adding courses entitled 'Existentialism' and 'Phenomenology' to the teaching repertoire. The goal is 'more radical': 'to integrate the study of analytic and continental philosophers in the same courses'. Thus, the model syllabus in 'Contemporary Philosophy' seeks to integrate the study of Quine, Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Foucault. The creation of this syllabus should not be taken as an innocent academic exercise, a re-hanging of exhibits in the ivory tower. It is part of a project with a quite specific ideological purpose, to unite professional philosophers through a new legitimating consensus promising better protection in a hostile world. The project is funded by the Federal Government and supported by the APA in its pursuit of the interests of the profession within the system. It would be naive to expect anything genuinely 'radical' to emerge under such auspices. For that one must look elsewhere, and indeed, the 'Contemporary Philosophy' syllabus is most interesting for what it leaves out. The most striking omission is the tendency whose major 'contemporary' representatives are Lukács and Sartre, and from an earlier period, Feuerbach, Marx, and Engels. What is excluded is the tradition of Left Hegelianism, the only substantial body of radical philosophy we possess. It is the only substantial body of such philosophy in that it is the only one with the authority and resources to mount a serious challenge to the new consensus in the academy. My proposal for *Radical Philosophy* is that it should devote itself to developing this challenge and carrying it to success. This is how it should solve the problem of acquiring a positive identity.

Perhaps the most depressing feature of the developing crisis in academic philosophy is the insignificance of the role played by the magazine in bringing it about. Throughout the decade of its existence it has been a marginal factor on the British philosophical scene, an object lesson in the ease with which a hegemonic tendency can ignore or patronize alternatives. This situation can be acknowledged without any false modesty. The worst that can be said about the general level of contributions is that it has been fully representative of the standard of British intellectual life in the period. Moreover, there have been heartening exceptions to the rule, so that we need not fear the comic embarrassment shown in 1976 by the commentators trying to find recent traces of intellectual distinction in *Mind*. It nevertheless remains the case that we have failed to present any serious threat to the official philosophical culture, or even to make a significant dent in its self-confidence. If this is now beginning to shatter, it owes little to our efforts. The work that has been published qualifies the magazine to be situated as another journal of 'Left Theory', distinguished from the rest by occasional excursions into officially neglected areas of philosophy. All this lends an uncomfortable edge to the gibe that what has been philosophical in it has not been radical, and what has been radical has had little to do with philosophy. At any rate, we have failed to make the contribution for which we were uniquely qualified and situated, to develop a radical philosophy for this time and place.

It is, of course, not simply an intellectual failure. Important elements of the dominant ideology have their roots in, and derive their show of authority from, what passes for philosophy in the academy. The struggle for a radical philosophy is a struggle to shift the centre of gravity of a strategic element of the culture. The *political* significance of this struggle hardly needs to be insisted on at length.

The detailed implications of what is being proposed will emerge only in the course of more sustained discussion than is possible now. There is, however, no reason to fear that in practice it may lead to a programme conceived of along narrow or dogmatic lines. On any interpretation there must always be room for discussion of the various forms of 'radical' opposition to the project of Left Hegelianism, such as, for instance, the enduring sub-plot that prefers to draw its inspiration from Kant, as well as the tendency to see all Hegelian influence as a symptom of infantile disorder. Moreover, the proposal should serve to uncover new sources of aid and encouragement. Most notably, there is the Hegel revival, now at last getting seriously under way in this country, with the British Hegel Society as an institutional focus. It must be an important part of our task to form links of mutual support with the 'Young-Hegelian' elements in this development. Admittedly, it is as yet hardly a tidal wave. But it is at least a strong current and one that is fed by springs from deep in our intellectual history. Their significance has for too long been obscured by the deformed and enfeebled view of the past imposed by the analytical movement. Yet, in trying to make a realistic assessment of what is possible in the present situation, we do well to remember that it is less than a century since a version of Hegelianism was the dominant force in British philosophy. It is vital to ensure that when this occurs again, it will be a Hegelianism with a difference that emerges to set the tone of research and discussion.

If *Radical Philosophy* decides on a new identity along the lines suggested here, it will not, of course, mean any overnight change in the quality and character of work submitted for publication. But in the longer term we shall certainly benefit from clearer public perceptions of what we represent, and from the fresh sources of support that will then be available. In areas more directly subject to the control of the Collective, the effects should be immediate. The key issue here is the dialectics project, now dormant after a short spell of activity. It must be revived and made the main focus of our efforts. The project serves to encapsulate a major portion of the unfinished philosophical business of the Hegel-Marx nexus, and it constitutes the critical test of the enduring philosophical importance of that nexus. If it turns out, after all, not to be intellectually viable, the idea of 'radical philosophy' is doomed to lack substance, and the phrase itself had best be acknowledged as a rhetorical hangover from an earlier time. The implication will have to be drawn that our philosophy has nothing distinctive to contribute to our radicalism, and that we may as well go on cultivating them in separate boxes. But it would be unwarranted and pusillanimous to conclude in advance that this must be so. What my proposal amounts to is that *Radical Philosophy* should become the house journal of 'the materialist friends of the idealist dialectic', and that it should struggle to win for the problematic underlying that description a central place in British philosophy. I believe that this proposal will unite the collective around a goal which it can have a rational hope of attaining, and one whose attainment has the largest significance for ways of thought and life in this society.

Joe McCarney