

NEWS

Appeasing the U.G.C.: The Threat to Philosophy at Bangor

It is now almost certain that the Philosophy Department at University College of North Wales, Bangor - of which I am a member - is to take its last student entries this Autumn, and to award degrees for the last time in 1990. No plans have been announced for redeploying staff, but it is denied that redundancies are envisaged. The decision was taken without any consultation whatsoever either with the staff and students affected, or with the unions or the local community (in which the college is the largest employer). I found out several important facts about my future from local press reports and pub gossip. The proposal was not mooted until last summer term had finished, and it was passed by Senate before students returned in the autumn. Such management practices can only be underhand, incompetent, or both.

Obviously, this situation is an effect of the Tory cuts, but in a rather roundabout way. It is not a cost-saving measure (though the college is also engaged in such measures at present). It is aimed at appeasing the U.G.C., which currently favours larger and fewer departments - so-called 'rationalization'. Although the long-term aim is presumably smaller and fewer departments. (This department, with six academic staff, is by no means the smallest existing.)

Other departments here are also affected. The decision to close Classics and Italian has already been taken; Physics is to close, and Drama to be merged with English under unfavourable conditions. Ironically enough, Bangor is sometimes billed as 'The Welsh Athens': an Athens without Drama, Classics, Philosophy or Physics.

Philosophy is obviously a particularly vulnerable subject under a government committed to revaluing commercial values and restricting non-job-oriented education to those too rich to need jobs. It is likely that there will soon be at least six colleges or universities which have lost their philosophy departments (Surrey, Exeter, Leicester, Bangor, Aberystwyth and Newcastle, with others rumoured to be in the pipeline).

In opposition to the cuts here, there has so far been a very well-organised occupation of the Senate meeting place by the students, and a public meeting at which representatives of the Students Union (English and Welsh), the A.U.T. and the City Council spoke against the cuts, as did the Labour, Liberal and Plaid Cymru parliamentary candidates. But it is not as yet clear what the effect of a change of government would be.

Andrew Collier

'Glasnost' in Soviet Philosophy?

The sterility of the vast bulk of Soviet philosophical work (with a few notable exceptions) is legendary. It is a sad reflection on the state of Soviet philosophy that it has made so little contribution to the resurgence of Marxist

theory in the West over the last two decades. Official recognition of the problem within the USSR, however, finally seems to be beginning. A Tass report on the recent Congress of the USSR Philosophy Society notes:

In delegates' speeches serious concern was felt over the fact that the results of their work do not yet meet the new requirements set forth by the party and by the life of Soviet society itself. The passivity of workers of the theoretical front, the timidity of thought and unwillingness to take up studying topical problems were noted. The developments of dogmatism and scholasticism have been observed in recent years in the teaching of philosophy. Exceedingly few philosophical works have been written which cause wide public response and are accessible and interesting not only for specialists but also for the masses.

We are facing the great task of raising philosophical scholarship to a new level and of joining in the process of restructuring of the whole public life of the country in practice,' Ivan Frolov, corresponding member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, who was elected to be the new President of the USSR Philosophical Society, said to a Tass correspondent.

Philosophical scholarship is called upon to be a genuine weapon of theory of the quality and revolutionary restructuring of Soviet public life, it was noted at the 27th CPSU Congress. In order to attain this goal, Ivan Frolov stressed, philosophy scholars must critically re-examine all the stereotypes which have developed in philosophy. Analysis of the activities of the USSR Philosophy Society, the scientist said, fully substantiates the conclusion that a radical restructuring of society is necessary.

We await the results with interest.

Philosophy in Schools and Colleges

Philosophy is one of the subjects currently being developed for the new 'Advanced Supplementary' (AS Level) examinations which are due to be examined for the first time in 1989.

The syllabuses will be designed for A level students but will cover only half the ground of an A level syllabus so that for the purposes of entrance into higher education two AS levels would be equivalent to one A level. The intention is to broaden the curriculum of A level students.

The popularity of Philosophy as an A level subject has increased rapidly since its introduction in 1985. There will be further updates on philosophy in further education colleges and schools in future issues.

Philosophy and Medical Welfare

Under the auspices of the Royal Institute of Philosophy the Philosophy Department, University of York (UK) is holding a conference on Philosophy and Medical Welfare from 11 to 13 September 1987. Speakers will include Martin Hollis (University of East Anglia), John Harris (University of Manchester), Michael Lockwood (University of Oxford). Further details and booking forms are available from Philosophy Conference Secretary, Department of Philosophy, University of York, Heslington, York YO1 5DD, England.

Interlink

A new left journal (yes, another one), Interlink, hit the newstands in January. Set up jointly by the Socialist Society and the Conference of Socialist Economists, it aims to fill the information-gap left by the journals. The aim is to provide an independent non-aligned voice for socialist ideas and to provide a platform for the many campaigning groups on the left (hence the name). Issues 1 and 2 are available from Interlink, 9 Poland Street, London W1V 3DG.

Letter

Dear Comrades,

Dave Archard's review of Sartre's Freud Scenario (Radical Philosophy 44) caused me severe mental disturbance. After years of subjection to deconstruction and discourse theory I had come to think that I was the only person left in the world who believed that literary texts were actually about the real world (that Zola's Germinal, for example, is about a miners' strike).

Now, however, I discover that there is someone even more trapped in the categories of 'classic realism' than myself; Archard launches his diatribe of sneers against Sartre on the basis that Sartre was not sufficiently accurate in his treatment of biographical 'facts'.

Archard's animosity extends beyond Sartre himself to the 'Sartreans' (it is not clear who these are - we aren't exactly a democratic centralist organisation). These apparently nourish 'a favoured legend' about the genesis of the scenario. But Pontalis's introduction to the text does not go against the account given in Contat and Rybalka's Les Ecrits de Sartre (pp. 492-94). And if 'Sartreans' have any characteristic feature in common, it is probably that they know their Contat and Rybalka.

Archard is apparently shocked by the scene where Freud is subjected to anti-Semitic abuse by his fellow doctors (p. 321); it is a 'wild distortion of the truth' to suggest they would engage in 'open abuse'. Archard's faith in the good manners of the professional classes is touching; but if he really believes that 'educated' people do not indulge in overt racist abuse he should read the history of the Dreyfus case. Sartre's contempt for the intellectual chiens de garde of the established order makes a telling contrast with Archard's indignant defence of his professional colleagues.

Amid such quibbles Archard has lost sight of the real point of the scenario. In confronting the determinist Freud Sartre is dramatising the paradoxes of his own theory of freedom. For Sartre's claim that we are responsible for our own destiny can, as Michel Contat pointed out in his seventieth birthday interview with Sartre (Situations X, pp. 222-23), be easily transformed into a conservative argument - the claims of a Tebbit or an Archer that the unemployed have chosen their own situation. Yet if we abandon a belief in freedom, we abandon any hope of changing the world. (One senses that Archard would not think this was much of a loss.)

The paradox is vividly concretised in the opening scene of the film, where a blind old woman is carted round a hospital, rejected by the medical staff in charge of each ward. For current medical opinion judged that such victims of hysteria were not ill but had consciously chosen to malingere.

It may indeed be, as Archard claims, that Sartre has portrayed a 'heroic intellectual "adventurer" battling against racial prejudice' rather than the real 'historical' Freud. The question Archard leaves unasked is whether Sartre's Freud might not be preferable to the 'real' Freud.

In a recent survey French students were asked which thinker had made the greatest impact on them (Le Monde Campus, 20 November 1986). The most frequently cited was Freud (14 per cent); Sartre was runner-up with 8 per cent. If that proportion had been reversed, the recent French student struggles might not have been so emphatically 'unpolitical', nor ended so quickly.

To opt for Freud against Sartre is to opt for determinist passivity against freedom; for seeking solutions inside one's own skull instead of changing the world. It is, I suspect, to opt for Kinnock and against Marx. It is to reject the best of what Radical Philosophy used to stand for.

Yours fraternally,

Ian Birchall

The graphics on pages 11, 38 and 42 by George Grosz are: 'The Capitalist and General wish each other a "Happy New Year"'; 'The Day of Reckoning is Coming!'; and 'Song of Intellectuals'. Grosz, *The Day of Reckoning*, from which these pictures are taken is published by Alison and Busby, 1984, £2.95 pb.