

Dearing Boring:

The massification of higher education

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My heart has been sinking as *RP*'s deadline approached and the Dearing debate, on which I rashly agreed to write, has guttered rather than blazed. Commentaries are now plentiful and repetitive. Across the spectrum flags have long been nailed to their respective masts. Drafts I had time to sketch have been successively binned. Finally, I thought that, as befits a piece for a philosophical journal, I should try to stand back from the technical debate and reflect on the process of which it is part.

The inevitability of 'massification'

The extension of access to Higher Education, almost all agree, is a 'good thing' – endorsed by the Left as egalitarian, and by the Right because it is market-driven. The debate about *how* it should be done is oddly inconclusive. I suspect this is because none of the competing proposals makes any great difference to the underlying economic and social relations.

If education is a right, this makes inequalities in its distribution unjust, but does not imply that it must be a free good. Its being made a free good may be instrumental to its wider distribution, if the poor would otherwise be excluded. However, this does not apply to HE: the loudly lamented student grants of yesteryear were a middle-class perk like mortgage tax-relief. The poor were excluded because they couldn't pass exams; so, happily for us, HE didn't have to worry that they had no money. The middle classes have continued to pour in despite the reduction in assistance: one way or another, they don't mind paying.

Were free HE to be financed from general, more sharply progressive taxation, as those to the left of David Blunkett would like, the bulk of the increased tax burden would fall on its past and future beneficiaries. In the event of hypothecated progressive taxation to pay for HE, as Liberal Democrats seem to want, the same social group will pay, who will equally repay income-contingent loans should those be chosen by the government. If a 'learning bank' would work, but government wouldn't set it up, then why not a 'Natwest Learning Bank' account for kindly grandparents to take out? The same money will find its way into the sector by one route or another if the consumers want to spend it there. Consumers of HE have a higher eventual income, but it may be as misleading to attribute a causal role to HE as to any other product the middle classes habitually consume.

The competing funding proposals may slightly retard or accelerate the growth of the sector, but will make little or no difference, beyond the immediate short term, to its eventual size or social composition. The gains by women and minority groups of a less unrepresentative proportion of places have largely been fuelled by factors outside universities, whose 'equal opportunities policies' basically mimic those of comparable non-educational institutions. Finally, should the line fail to be drawn on 'top-up fees',

their imposition will only marginally amplify the already massive disparities in social class background and institutional wealth (in income and capital) between Oxbridge and former polytechnics.

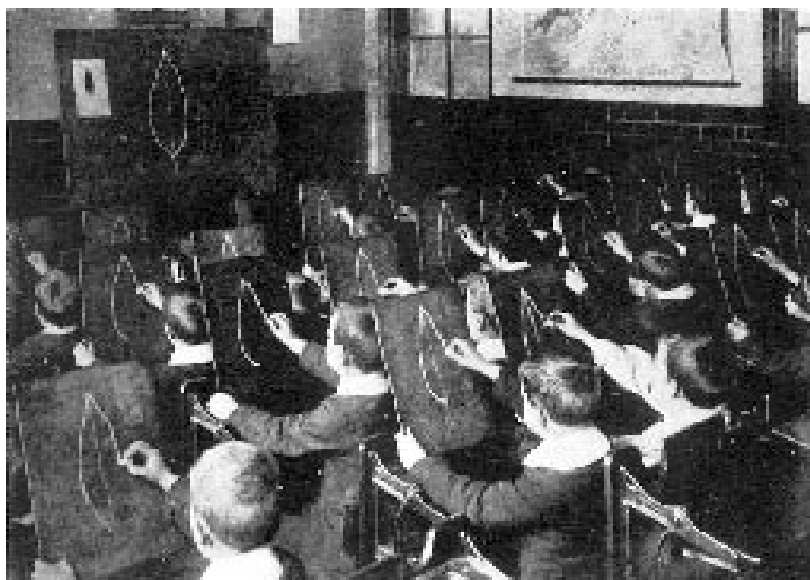
If we look beyond the question of funding, with which most commentators have understandably been preoccupied, Dearing has a number of anodyne instrumental recommendations which might make British HE less gratuitously eccentric in the context of international comparison. In fact, Britain has been slow to participate in a transformation of HE in advanced economies, which has produced institutions of a radically novel character, staffed by academics, of whom many who still take themselves seriously cherish views that would make Don Quixote seem a cynic. 'Massification' is going to continue, we hardly need worry how, but what does it *mean*?

Ethos failure

I started teaching in a polytechnic just as the sector's establishment and expansion began. Then those on the Left committed to widening access to HE could clearly draw a line between the elitist ethos of the older universities which, post-1944, had grudgingly educated us while muttering 'more means worse', and an ethos of 'public service' derived from postwar social-democratic collectivism – 'Old Labour'.

This was a basis on which new institutions could be built. So we were taken aback at senior staff demanding to be styled 'professor'; mildly amused but uneasy that students and their parents wanted graduation ceremonies; and, because we were not funded for research, insulated from certain of the pressures experienced by the older universities. But for our curriculum, the Council for National Academic Awards insisted we still stick to the three-year honours degree divided at the end between gold, silver, bronze and lead.

That binary divide was not viable, irrespective of the ideological hue of the government that abolished it. Moreover, there were increasing problems with the 'public service' ethos – basically it demands students with gratitude, rather than 'attitude'. The consequences, for institutional ethos and culture, of the rise of a mass market in HE as a middle-class consumer product is that students who have to pay are not prepared to



be told 'you are lucky to be here, and to be taught by me'; 'whatever is not specifically permitted should be assumed to be forbidden'; 'this asset belongs to the nation, so if you don't like what you are getting, step aside for someone rather more appreciative.' They might have had to lump it, were it not that 'public service' paternalism is also just too expensive to operate in a mass consumption industry. So, like the Co-op losing out to Tesco, the 'public service' ethos is going to lose the battle with the ethos of 'customer care', products, missions, people employed to ask 'What is a

graduate?', marketing and contracting-out, and service-level agreements.

Monastery or menagerie

What of the consequences for academics of a mass market in HE as a middle-class consumer product? No one is in any doubt of the relative market positions of UK

universities once deregulation is allowed; and the USA provides a clear indication of where we are headed. How distinct are we from other comparable industries? What are consumers buying? The popularity of graduation ceremonies and the slanting of league tables makes clear that they are buying upward social mobility with the usual appurtenances of tradition and kudos. We are in a sizeable segment of the economy whose closest cousins are the entertainment, culture and heritage industries.

Of course, there are those universities whose market position is so secure that their academics can affect not to notice any of this, supposing that their autonomy is uncompromised, and that the character of their activity remains unaffected by the changing social and economic relations within which they operate. They are not actually part of a latter-day monastery, a redoubt for intellectual values secure against the ravages of the market. Rather, they are the quaint denizens of an intellectual menagerie, a heritage theme park instantly recognizable to the television audience of *Brideshead Revisited*, which is essential to the marketing of their institution. They are prize exhibits and, when they don't have to be pompous about it, well aware of their value in the transfer market. This is just as true of self-styled social critics and scientists engaged in 'blue skies' research as it is of scholars in the humanities, while no one would claim autonomy for business studies or technical research and development contracted out to universities.

Is it unprofessional to say such a thing? Of course – that only reinforces my point, however. It is 'professional' precisely to refrain from entertaining such a thought. Why 'professional'? Consider the contemporary pressures on aspiring academics. The *Doonsbury* cartoon where teachers are hired outside the gates, like dockers in *On the Waterfront*, and one shouts 'I'll work for food', is so close to the mark that it would be more reasonable to expect intellectual independence amongst members of a telephone sales force.

The philosophical point this raises (at last) is whether universities can continue to be thought a fit context for the production of certain kinds of knowledge (bearing in mind that, if the context is not fit, 'knowledge' may not be the product). Medieval novices who would 'work for food' successfully transmitted a culture (or, if you like, an ideology). But the production of *knowledge* in the modern era did not enter the universities in earnest until the nineteenth century. Perhaps it has already started to slip away without anyone noticing.

The unprecedented volume of research generated today must be seen as the production of intellectual commodities – most of it is out of date before it has been read and understood by more than a few hundred people worldwide. It is produced primarily for the purposes of institutional score-keeping. That doesn't mean it can't be knowledge – the very best books are still bought and sold – but, given the rationale for its production, it might be fortuitous if it *were* knowledge.

'Knowledge! Isn't it rather naive of a *philosopher* to make so free with *that* concept?', postmodernists will titter. Let's put that view in the current perspective, where university departments will secure resources and customers by claiming epistemological advantage (most easily done by natural science). Then, hey, it's not so hard to see the appeal for humanities and social science departments of an all-purpose toolkit for deconstructing rival departments' epistemologies (read 'budgets' and 'marketing plans'). What is more, now there are so many of us that no-one has the remotest chance of featuring as even a minor hero(ine) of the grand narrative, let's take that particular bat home and refuse to play. Finally, it would undoubtedly harm many of us if anyone were to find the thread we have lost, so isn't it best to maintain as strenuously as we can that there never was a thread? Of course, an ulterior motive need not invalidate a well-founded argument if such a thing were allowed to exist. If it is not, then only motives remain.

Whether or not they ever had any secure foundation, all the old articles of faith about the profession of university teaching are now profoundly undermined by the economic and social realities of the HE sector. This is particularly true of philosophy as a discipline. If, as I have maintained, our activities are closely related to those of the heritage, culture and entertainment industries, we should be aware of the resonances. After all, we could be seen as involved in a ‘campaign for real philosophy’ which is warm and cloudy, contains all the traditional ingredients, and is really about the meaning of life, the universe and everything, as opposed to philosophy which is transparent and thoroughly chilled, but has to be pumped full of gas in order to be remotely palatable.

The current debates seem to assume that however much more HE there is, it will still be the same activity that it was when a tiny proportion of the population participated. Whatever basis there once was for supposing our activity to be autonomous, it must surely have evaporated. It cannot do that you merely *feel* that you are pursuing your intellectual work for its own sake. Myopia is not a bulwark for the defence of academic autonomy. The meaning of our activity in its true economic context remains woefully unexamined, and debates about the niceties of funding mechanisms and curricula are no substitute.