

BOOK REVIEW

ON THE PURPOSE OF A UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

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Luciano Boschiero ed. *On the Purpose of a University Education*, Melbourne, Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2012, ISBN: 978-1-921875-85-4 pb, 137 pp.

This collection springs from a workshop organized in 2010 by the Centre for the Study of Western Tradition (at Campion College, Australia) on the history of liberal arts and their relevance to tertiary education in the twenty-first century. It consists of an introduction and five chapters, each questioning the politics of higher education from a philosophical perspective supported by a specific historical concern or perspective.

Luciano **Boschiero** boldly asks in his Introduction “Why would anyone enrol in a university?” (pp. 1 sq.) As is (or should be) well known, John H. Newman argued that the purpose of university education is to obtain a free, equitable, calm, moderate and wise mind (cf. *The Idea of a University*, 1852, p. 76 of the UNDP edition, quoted p. 1). When liberal arts were ruling the world of higher education, their goal was the improvement of each and every student (and teacher) in order to make the progress of civilization possible. In old-fashioned terms: university education was a matter of cultivating knowledge for its own sake—and perhaps even of finding Truth. Hence guidance and financial support from the State was obviously welcomed. Nowadays, students happily acknowledge more mundane goals that basically amount to a better salary and a good access to status. They expect, in other words, a pedestrian training adequate to the requirements of the job market, which in turn means that university education has lost its autonomy; it has become a means for something external. Education is now an investment and, as such, it is a private matter. Hence, according

to these “valued customers,” the corporatisation of universities in a global economy is most welcome.

When did the turn happen? Newman himself singled out Locke’s utilitarianism in his work on Education (1693), but Boschiero remarks that the bifurcation is older: “as early as 1697.” Puritans, Anglicans and Dutch Protestants were arguing for such utilitarianism in education. (When, p. 4, the author provides an exemplification, he apparently got the dates wrong: “1597” does not fit with the actual chronology.) Then came Napoléon’s own blend of Republican utilitarianism and, after he defeated Germany, Fichte argued for a new culture that would draw its inspiration from Classical Athenian education. With von Herder and von Humboldt, the emphasis shifted to the concept of *Bildung*. In a nutshell: “a university should cultivate the abilities of the individual to contribute to civic duties.” Whitehead would add that education is above all “a discipline for the adventure of life” (*The Aims of Education and Other Essays* [1929], Mentor Book, p. 102).

Constant J. **Mews**’s “Learning from the Past: Hugh of St Victor and the Organisation of Wisdom” (pp. 13 sq.) focuses on Hugh of St Victor’s *Didascalicon* (c. 1125) in order to display the unified picture of learning during the Middle Ages (a picture that lasted roughly until the XVIIth): the “liberal arts” were not opposed to the “sciences” and even less so to theology. For instance, Mews underlines with Bernard McGinn that the “*Philosophia ancilla theologiae*” motto is not adequate to qualify the cultural atmosphere of the time. To start with, philosophy was not a scientific field (*lato sensu*), but a spiritual exercise (an “*askesis*”), a way of life. Mews draws here upon Pierre Hadot to show that the pursuit of wisdom was not a vain imperative (*Philosophy as a Way of Life. Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, Blackwell, 1995). No sharp distinction was made between objective (scientific or skilled) knowledge and subjective (humanistic or artistic) awareness of the world. Exact sciences were not seen as visionary, quite the contrary indeed. Hugh of St Victor was indebted for his synthesis to Anselm of Laon’s correlation of secular and sacred learning and he had a special intellectual debt to Augustine and Boethius. In both the *Confessions* (397) and the *Consolation of Philosophy* (c. 524) one finds the thread that weaves the Benedictine Rule: the pursuit of wisdom matters only in so far as it is spiritually significant, which meant that humility rather than knowledge was sought. Mews aptly remarks that “whereas Benedict urges pursuit of humility for its own sake, Hugh introduces this virtue as a prelude to the act of intellectual enquiry.” (p. 21)

In “Integration,” Stephen **McInerney** (pp. 34 sq.) praises eclecticism and scholarly versatility. According to Mark Van Doren, he writes, all genuine expertise necessarily involves some knowledge of adjacent fields. For instance, a biology scholar should also

be concerned with the demands of physics, its relationship to metaphysics and “how metaphysics relates to ethics, to poetics, to politics, to the novel he’s reading, to the person to whom he’s speaking, to the butterfly he spies in his garden, or the star that shines above his house” (p. 34) all are undoubtedly relevant to his research. Gradually, volens nolens, scientific research and its own search for truth involve the entire life of the scientist. If the world is interconnected, the knowledge of the world necessarily reflects this integration. This vision—which is basically John Henry Newman’s—is now foreign from the modern university’s ethos. What happened? According to Newman himself, “it was the Reformation that both foreshadowed and was embroiled in the fracturing of the disciplines.” (p. 37) Faith ceased to be regarded as “an intellectual act, its object truth, and its result knowledge,” but rather as an emotional act whose result was opinion (ib.). In his conclusion, McInerney underlines two traps: first, integration should protect us from uniformity; second, it should prevent mere heterogeneity of the curriculum. In sum: “at its best, an integrated education will hold in creative tension the demands of institutional loyalty and individual creativity, as well as the demands of the tradition (embodied, however imperfectly, in a core curriculum of some kind) and the need to present that tradition in our day, and pass it on to others.” (p. 46)

Geoffrey **Sherington** and Hannah **Forsyth** address a complementary puzzle in “Ideas of a Liberal Education: an Essay on Elite and Mass Higher Education” (pp. 48 sq.): is there any hope of reconciling the highest goals of liberal education with the massification of education and its accompanying call for useful knowledge? The authors quote Martin Trow to summarize the stakes: “**Elite** higher education is concerned primarily with shaping the mind and character of the ruling class, as it prepares students for broad elite roles in government and the learned professions. In **mass** higher education, the institutions are still preparing elites, but a much broader range of elites that includes the leading strata of all the technical and economical organization of the society.” (p. 49) In other words, there is a remarkable contrast between the reproduction of the elite vs the creation of the elite: the former refers to the traditional caste-like system that is structuring all conservative societies; the latter refers to the Republican idea of offering to everyone the same chance to take the lead in an advanced industrial society (meritocracy). On the one hand, society has achieved an acceptable status quo and universal knowledge should be made available to the upper strata; on the other, society is in the process of rapid social and technological change and applied or technological skills are to be taught. Historically, medicine and law were the first specialities to obtain faculties, then came engineering and all the more specialized crafts.

This contrast could nevertheless be twice misleading. First, Pierre Bourdieu has shown that even so-called mass-education does not break the glass ceiling (*La reproduction. Élément d'une théorie du système d'enseignement*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1970). Second, the very idea of the university is de facto abandoned: students are not educated according to a bold cultural ideal, they are pushed into the mould of expertise and urged to enforce their skills within the limits of practical reason (no pun intended).

Arran **Gare's** "The Liberal Arts, the Radical Enlightenment and the War Against Democracy" (pp. 67 sq.) takes the bull by the horns both historically and conceptually by analyzing the emergence of the Humboldtian University in the 1800's.

Gare shoulders Wolin's thesis—the USA live in a regime of inverted totalitarianism—(*Democracy Incorporated*, Princeton University Press, 2008) and expands it to the civilized West in so far as there is a globalization of the politics of education that follows the neoliberal agenda. The first historical victims were of course social services and social policies: "eliminating job security, outsourcing wherever possible and replacing broadly educated civil servants whose positions were gained through strict selection procedures, by political appointees with economics or business degrees committed to augmenting the profitability of business corporations" (p. 68). They were followed in their fate by news media and, last but not least, universities have been transformed according to the same goals and they are now basically transnational businesses. This revolution has been achieved by steadily marginalising the liberal arts and this in turn has facilitated the transformation of everyday language. For instance, freedom is no longer seen as "the empowerment of people to govern themselves," but as "freedom to shop" (p. 69) and freedom of opinion (in the derogatory sense of the term).

As a result, defending the liberal arts is not just a matter of supporting old-fashioned modes of thought and equally prehistorical forms of culture: if the people are to govern, they need to be properly educated—and education should be the State's prerogative. Furthermore, only educated people governing for the common good can guarantee the existence of a country as an independent nation. In order to specify these stakes, it is worth clarifying the historical depths of the (Roman) notion of "artes liberales" that is anchored in the (Greek) "paideia." "Enkyklios paideia" basically means "general education" but actually refers to genuine education, which is culture per se and which grants civilisation, i.e., the very possibility of living an authentic life ("humanitas," as Cicero would say), something that involves the capacity to govern the city, to resist oppression, and to refuse to become an oppressor oneself if unfortunate circumstances could allow it. Human beings, in other words, need to be civilized: they

need both to find their own destiny and to contribute to the history of their kin. Individuation and socialization, autonomy and solidarity, work hand in hand under the aegis of paideia. It is that very notion that will be emboldened by the first Renaissance and that will surface centuries later in Humboldtian “Bildung.” In the meantime, the counter-Renaissance (cf. Toulmin) replaced free individuals by complex machines driven by appetites, Republic by Monarchy, degraded art to the level of amusement, and superseded pantheism (and the assumption of a self-organizing nature) by transcendentalism (and creationism). Communitarianism and its communist agenda became impossibilities while private property, free market and greed were built-in feature of the nascent economics.

The first Renaissance did not, however, entirely vanish from the scene. Its ideals were kept alive by Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans in a parallel movement that Margaret C. Jacob calls the *Radical Enlightenment* (London and Boston, George Allen & Unwin, 1981) and that champions Bildung (meaning “education,” “self-cultivation,” “character-formation” and “culture”). It flowered in the thought of Immanuel Kant (who was nevertheless neither a pantheist nor a freemason), of his students—Johann Herder (who was both), Johann G. Fichte (idem)—, of the Post-Kantian scholars—Goethe (idem), Friedrich Schelling, Hegel, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt—, and later of Oxford’s British Idealists inspired by T. H. Green. They all conceived “Bildung as enculturating people to realise their potential to be free, to recognise each others’ freedom and to discover and realise their vocation to advance freedom.” (p. 78) Of course, one has to provide the metaphysical means to match up the ethical goals: hence, according to Schelling himself, nature is process-like, i.e., intrinsically creative and open to human beings’ creativity.

After this precious contextualization, Gare raises the question of the contemporary destiny of the Humboldtian model of the university, a model that remained until the 1970s the guiding idea of the modern university, despite the initial failure to realise its full potential. (p. 83). He argues that time is ripe for a full actualization of Humboldt’s ideal, especially in the light of the recent advances in sciences and process metaphysics and especially of the current ecological and political threats: “this civilisation is required to reverse the destructive imperatives of the existing world-order, and take as its ultimate goal, augmenting the resilience of the global ecosystem and its component ecosystems.” (p. 86) The Humboldtian model of the university—“one of the most successful forms of organisation ever created”—could strike back as an efficient weapon against corporatocracy and the commoditization of knowledge and culture.

Within university itself, a new Humboldtian ethos would foster genuine research and ensure that citizen can govern themselves. Whereas education classically involves opening the mind to meaning and necessitates a focus on the liberal arts, we are now dealing with corporations selling training and feeding upon nihilism. This nefarious transformation of the educational system amounts to shifting from an organics designed to produce free citizens to a mechanics designed to produce slaves. And this is never only a local problem: “as enslaved, Australians have become a threat to the rest of humanity. Australia was singled out not only by Jared Diamond as one of the two countries most likely to collapse through ecological destruction.” (p. 94) Exactly, in the Australian context, it would be advisable to refresh Humboldt’s Schellingian roots with Samuel Alexander’s vision, that showed “how British Idealist ethics and political philosophy could be reformulated and defended on naturalistic foundations on the basis of post-Newtonian science” (p. 88) and its impressive legacy (Alfred North Whitehead, W. E. Agar, Charles Birch). Process philosophy champions indeed creativity, emergence, not only change and evolution.

Finally, let us note that Wolin’s interpretation actually oscillates between two poles—Hobbesean and de Tocquevillean totalitarianism—and that they share the same premises: atomicity and conformity of individuals. From that perspective, it is not surprising indeed that “oppression works from the bottom up and works not by mobilising people to heroic effort, as with Bolshevism and Nazism, but by rendering them intellectually, culturally and politically inert.” (p. 68) Still we are confronted with the luring power of a new ideology, and this ideology has no existence of its own; it owes its efficacy to the dedicated actions of the oligarchs and the, decisive indeed, submission of the people, including the academics

In “After the Fall: Standing in the Ruins of Liberal Education” (pp. 103 sq.), Gregory **Melleuish** explores the religious dimension of culture and (liberal) education. He basically asks how far could culture be a replacement for religion and function as if it were religion? (cf. p. 110) In so far as religion has to do with permanent principles while education is the attunement to a changing world, the correlation is plainly obvious: the (religious) purpose of liberal education is “to be the means through which [...] permanent principles can enter a world that is not only changing but which, in its worship of the idea of progress, embraces that change with an almost indecent enthusiasm.” (p. 103) Furthermore, culture is about the “transformation of individuals through their immersion and participation in culture.” (p. 109) It is not merely about the acquisition of knowledge (classically understood as dealing with eternal principles), but about the love of perfection (which involves an endless process of transformation).

The ideal of liberal education was thus, either explicitly or implicitly, religious in nature.

In the English-speaking world, this changed however in the late nineteenth century when a secular ideal of a university emerged, together with the central role of the State in directing society (cf. p. 115). The State's technical rationality took the place left vacant by the Church and citizens gained freedom of belief to the point of total disbelief or nihilism. In sum, Melleuish argues, technique became an end in itself (its connection with a greater telos was broken), the balance between the cognitive ("logos") and the wider intellectual elements of human nature ("nous") was distorted, and reason was turned back on itself only to demonstrate that rationality leads nowhere (cf. p. 118). Citizens, trapped or not in the iron cage of bureaucracy, lost the sense of meaning in their lives: culture as participation had been replaced by knowledge as construction. This diagnosis of the triumph of modern technocracy is quite perceptive, but one major actor is missing: capitalism. It is tangentially introduced later under the guise of "commercial society" (p. 120); one misses however the correlation between technocracy and capitalism that has been discussed by authors such as Mumford or Ellul. From their perspective, technique has not lost its telos: a capitalistic telos has been substituted for the humanistic telos.

Anyway, in the absence of culture understood as harmonious perfection, we obtain the domination of bookish learning, i.e., a detachment and disengagement from the real world and even a rancour towards the world. Education does not aim at transfiguring the individual and transforming the society but simply at shaping productive citizens and devoted consumers.

Is education a matter of instruction in citizenship or in individualism? This anthology constitutes an excellent introduction to the current state of university education and to most historical facets of its crisis. Converging themes include the correlation between, on the one hand, liberal arts, Humboldtian university, culture, progressive civilization and robust democracy and, on the other, skill training, corporate university, nihilism, consumerism and friendly fascism. Unfortunately, no contributor produces a sharp judgement on the nature of technique (and on its technoscientific heir) and on its link with capitalism, a double conundrum that is at the core of the debated issue.

Precisely, it remains unclear how far higher education could actually be reformed since its aristocratic ideal is now stretched between two poles: liberal education, that involves the highest cultural goals, and mass education, that apparently allows only the lowest ones. A solution would not be difficult to engineer, if only nation-states were able to invest huge sums on money in what is called "human resources"—instead of trying to cope, thanks to sparse private funds, with the buying of the most recent IT. In

other words, “liberal education” (sometimes called “paideia,” “cultura animi,” or “Bildung,” ...) is a first-order necessity in the context of education but also in the broader one of politics. The creation of a vibrant community of teachers and students is the only goal that should matter. Humboldt argued that the teacher and the student should both exist for the sake of learning. Whitehead has clarified this relativity in his own way: the art of education—which is religious in nature (a concept that he redefines)—involves imaginative teachers who are also first-rate researchers and creative students. This means that both teachers and students benefit from each other’s strengths: creativity and efficacy work hand in hand to implement the common good. “Youth—he argues—is not defined by age but by the creative impulse to make something. The aged are those who, before all things, desire not to make a mistake.” (*Aims of Education*, p. 119)