

The Idea of a University

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Killing Thinking: The Death of the Universities by Mary Evans (Continuum 2004) ISBN 0-8264- 7312-1 (hardback); 0-8264- 7313-X (paperback). Pp. 172 + x.

Where Have All the Intellectuals Gone? Confronting 21st Century Philistinism by Frank Furedi (Continuum 2004) ISBN 0-8264 - 6769-5 (hardback). Pp. 167 + viii.

Each of these books on a similar theme is written by a professor at the University of Kent at Canterbury. Each is remarkable in its way. The key to it all was given by Dr Johnson in the preface to his Dictionary (1755): 'Those who have much leisure to think, will always be enlarging the stock of ideas . . .' Another key however is the following from a speaker at an Oxford college Gaudy dinner in Oxford graduate Dorothy L Sayers' 1935 novel *Gaudy Night*-

'Oxford has been called the home of lost causes: if the love of learning for its own sake is a lost cause everywhere else in the world, let us see to it that here, at least, it finds its abiding home.'

Now, one gathers from the two books under review, it is pretty well a lost cause everywhere in Britain. I begin with Professor Evans.

The Evans thesis

Mary Evans, who is Professor of Women's Studies at the University of Kent at Canterbury, has written a brilliant book on the plight of the modern university in Britain – in particular that of its teachers. She has a considerable command of the English language, and writes well and fluently. Even today, Oxbridge emerges as separate from most of the rest, though even there while public schoolboys are unproblematic new arrivals from other destinations are thought to need compensatory socialization to render them acceptable. At one time there was little difference between universities outside Oxbridge; now to distinguish the better from the rest there are elites such as the Russell Group, the 'research-led universities', and so on. 'No one simply goes to university any longer; students go to particular universities, among which some are manifestly more equal than others'.

Professor Evans cites the philistine Dearing Report (1997), which argued that the purpose of a modern university is to be a significant force in the regional economy, support research and consultancy, attract inward investment, provide new employment, meet labour market needs, and foster entrepreneurship among students and staff. Not a word about producing scholars, or learning for its own sake. The report has led to expansion of recruitment coupled with 'the surveillance and standardization of the academy'. This has produced the translation of the universities from relative independence to integration into the values of the market economy.

Killing Thinking condemns 'the conceptual illiteracy of the culture of audit and assessment which now dominates English universities'. This has introduced so-called benchmarking, where those in charge of a subject are required to establish exactly what a graduate in that subject should know. So much for the untrammelled flow of ideas and intellectual excitement which introduction to a learned topic has hitherto been supposed to let loose. Now all are pinned down, assessed, measured, and reassessed, till the lamp of learning almost ceases to glow. 'Since God no longer exists, we have invented assessment'. As Richard Hoggart has argued, there is ever-reduced space for truly independent academic enquiry. Yet 'training in repetition' is not an adequate substitute for independent thinking and critical excursus.

Professor Evans has it in for exercises such as the Teaching Quality Assessment or TQA ('the revenge of the polytechnics') and the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which she calls landmarks in the dark advance of the new culture. 'The RAE makes circus monkeys out of academics, in that it demands performance in a certain ritual of behaviour and the organization of all behaviour towards the pattern of that ritual.' Then there is the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), an institution set upon bringing the world into line with its narrow-minded, fearful, prosaic and semi-educated expectations. Orwellian instruments all for the striking down of great trees in the once-free groves of academe.

Not only have universities committed themselves to the rule of the bureaucratic agenda, they have also allowed themselves to be bought by commerce, industry and the market. A recent Secretary of State for Education Charles Clarke openly sneered at what he called the 'medieval concept' of the university as a community of scholars. Here he showed his ignorance. The concept is not from the Middle Ages, but ancient Greece. He should read Newman's 'The Idea of a University' and learn, among many other things, of Herodes Atticus-

'A consular man, and the heir of an ample fortune, this Herod was content to devote his life to a professorship, and his fortune to the patronage of literature . . . He had two villas, one at Marathon, the place of his birth, about ten miles from Athens, the other at Cephissia, at the distance of six; and thither he drew to him the elite, and at times the whole body of the students. Long arcades, groves of trees, clear pools for the bath, delighted and recruited the summer visitor. Never was so brilliant a lecture-room as his evening banqueting-hall; highly connected students from Rome mixed with the sharp witted provincial of Greece or Asia Minor; and the flippant sciolist . . .'

Obviously, says Professor Evans, going to university to learn how to process received, bowdlerized knowledge (the hand-out culture of the QAA – that 'creature from the depths of hell') is not about learning to think or consider. It is about learning how to organize pre-packaged information. A monkey could not do it, but then a monkey would not want to. What Evans doesn't point out in so many words (though the message is there between the lines) is that this form of instruction is inevitably necessary when the intellectual quality of the intake is lowered in the way it has been under Blair. Higher education for half the age-group population has to be of poorer quality than higher education for the top twentieth of that population; otherwise it would not be understood by the pupils (or 'learners', as we are now required to call them).

Evans reminds us, as the historian Michael Burleigh has pointed out, that there was no resistance to the introduction of these Stalinist measures in England 'least of all from the Vice Chancellors, all eager for their CBEs and knighthoods, their reward for presiding over the destruction of a once universally admired university system'. The new right of others to monitor, assess and above all *order* the work of academics was never debated. It crept in by stealth, and suddenly became a *fait accompli*. Almost overnight the 'right' process was established, the rules of the game set, and the academic players required to cooperate. There is a sinister issue of how academics have allowed the process of external regulation to go so far, since it is a radical challenge to the very nature of critical enquiry.

Paradoxically the regimentation noted above has backfired when it comes to cooperation with industry. Professor Evans quotes the American academic Steven Shapin on the dire consequences of the REA. He says that British business has expressed concern that the REA is now acting as an obstacle. Faculty are incentivised to publish academic research tailored to REA panels rather than undertake joint research with industry. This is because, over a five-year period, every academic is now required to compose and publish at least four items of written work. I think of my distinguished Balliol tutor Sir Theodore Tylor who served from 1924 to 1967 and published no books and very few articles. He excelled as a college tutor and lecturer, as well as being a bridge champion and chess grand master.

Professor Evans makes the important, perhaps saving, point that, with all the recent expansion of access to universities and erosion of secure elitist judgments, students who belong to the elite culture still find access easier and participation more fruitful-

‘Hence what appears to be a more inclusive academic subject matter is only that in the most trivial way; the actual framework of analysis, appreciation and the authority of argument remains embedded firmly within the complexity, the ambiguity and the often inaccessible world of elite culture. Above all else, this world depends upon literacy and an ability to use and understand language . . . It is a great paradox . . . that the democratization of culture has been accompanied by the greater social power . . . of an elite culture . . . The government of Britain might well achieve its aim of persuading fifty per cent of the age cohort on to the playing field of higher education, but those who are going to score on that playing field are likely to remain a select number.’

The new Chief Inquisitor on campus

Professor Furedi advances a similar theme. In a recent article¹ he suggests that an examination of the current workings of higher education in the west shows that academic freedom is not only in danger from external forces but from academics within the university-

‘There is a mood of intolerance towards those who hold unconventional, unpopular opinions, especially in the area of politics. Some academics do not simply challenge views that they dislike; they often seek to ban them and to prevent individuals who advocate them from working or speaking on their campus.’

In his article Furedi cites examples of this: (1) the campaign to ban Tom Paulin from speaking at Harvard for being anti-semitic, (2) the censoring of Israeli academics by the editor of an academic journal in Manchester just because they are Israeli, (3) a memorandum issued to faculty members in arts and humanities at Durham University requiring lecturers to obtain approval from an ethics committee for lectures on subjects where students might be offended, such as abortion and euthanasia, (4) the University of Derby’s *Code of Practice for Use of Language*, which requires lecturers to be sensitive to the feelings of students and bids them bear in mind the University’s mission statement and the need to support relationships of mutual respect. A sinister, Orwellian, element is that the last-mentioned document expects line managers to ‘help’ academic staff carry out the terms of the policy.

How have we got to this pass? Having been a university student and lecturer on and off for nearly sixty years, I have from the inside watched the changes take place. When I started the university was in the hands of an elite corps which was culturally uniform. Values such as academic freedom were instilled in them almost at birth by the family and social background, and did not need to be taught. The huge expansion of university numbers has swept away this uniform background and core culture. The values are not imbibed with mother’s milk, and so do now need to be taught. But it is far from agreed that they should be taught. Many would think them elitist and outmoded. Why is this?

In his book under review Furedi covers a wide field. His final chapter, entitled ‘Treating People as Children’ suggests an answer to my question. In it he quotes Dorothy Rabinowitz as saying that today’s first-year law students at Harvard ‘can hardly fail to notice the pall of official disapproval now settled over everything smacking of conflict and argument’.² I myself was trained in the 1930s to be robust in dispute, and have gained unpopularity from that approach. I acquired it at an impressionable age, the impression has endured, and I continue to act in that way. But such impressions are not stamped on youngsters in today’s culture. Instead, as Furedi puts it, university students are ‘infantilized’.³

¹ Frank Furedi, ‘The new Chief Inquisitor on campus’. *Spiked on Line*, 16 February 2005.

² Dorothy Rabinowitz, ‘Difficult Conversations’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 November 2002.

³ Frank Furedi, *Where Have All the Intellectuals Gone?*, p. 138.

This matches a ‘dumbing-down’ of students’ workload. Concentration on the jejune circumstances of individual students’ lives, says Furedi, contrasts unfavourably with the old standard of acquiring objective knowledge-

‘Acquiring objective knowledge cannot be confined to the process of reflecting on an individual’s life story. It also requires a form of education that distances the student from the immediate and everyday, so as to stimulate the mind to imagine other possibilities. There is no direct route from personal emotions to objective knowledge, and students need to be confronted with worlds that are “irrelevant” to their lives.’

That is putting it mildly. When I first went up to Oxford as an undergraduate in 1946 I expected to put my personal circumstances firmly behind me and embark on an exciting journey across a vast ocean of objective knowledge gathered over many centuries from mankind’s experiences. I would have been satisfied with nothing less.

These two excellent books raise the hope that there are a number of scholars today who will, in such ways as this, remind their fellows before it is too late of what true scholarship entails, and how easily it can be lost – perhaps for ever.