SPECIAL THEME

HIGHER EDUCATION AND CULTURE

Editorial

Few indeed are those who, on hearing the word 'culture' will not reach for their *Encyclopedia of Sociological Thought* or *History of Anthropology*. Naturally, the definitions to be found therein will be limpid, informative, even edifying. However, they will be very far from expressing agreement as to what constitutes culture and still less about its interpretation. This, to say the least, is not a happy state of affairs. The University is commonly held to have three prime missions: the preservation of 'culture', the transmission of knowledge and the advancement of research. It is not the lack of a definition of 'culture' which poses the problem. It is rather to know which among the myriad ranges of belief, value-forming and attitude-shaping formal agencies the university may with confidence and without hesitation *exclude*.

He who raises the issue of higher education's cultural role usually does so because he has one of two points on his agenda. Either, he is convinced that outside society does not pay sufficient attention to a particular form of cultural expression and would have the university preserve it, virtually as a museum piece in the intellectual equivalent of a zoological garden; or there is the other possibility, that of the university paying insufficient attention to a group, sect or a current of thought whose sudden appearance, manifestation or emergence in society is not immediately embraced by higher learning. One can find variations on both themes — the university fulfilling a species of mission civilisatrice, of upholding and guarding values of 'civility', of the inner development of the individual or, as a counterweight to this, the university standing as a forum or a non-elected parliament for collective values which, pressing in from outside, see their presence in the university as conferring a final legitimacy to the place they claim in society beyond academe's gates.

Beneath the apparently anodyne term 'culture' are raised a whole host of issues central to the relationship between higher education and what is now fashionably termed 'civil society'. The way 'culture' is defined sets the limits not simply of public debate about that relationship between the two. It also delimits the general context within which legislation is elaborated. How far this is so can be ascertained by referring to events of 15 and 20 years ago in Western Europe. Here, one has only to dwell for a moment on the various arguments — Marxist, Neo-Marxist, Trotskyist and consumerist — amongst the student bodies of France and Germany in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which sought to redefine the 'internal culture' of the university. They called for increased student participation in decision making. Subsequently such demands were in part at least, incorporated into the *Loi d'Orientation* of 1968 and into the *Hochschulrahmengesetz* of 1976. Cultural change — though in this particular instance 'political culture' would perhaps be a more accurate term — influences legislation that in turn is applied to higher education. For this reason, the relationship between higher education and culture also summons forth equally fundamental questions about the social model the university endorses and, when that comes under challenge, calls into question the underlying mechanisms and practices which themselves underpin that social model. Today, in many parts of the industrialized world (and for that matter, beyond) one of the major issues turns around the development of a so-called 'enterprise culture' in higher education.

One can, of course, argue the point of whether the current insistence on university-industry links, the emphasis on technology and the barely disguised contempt for the 'Humanities' are matters coherent or enduring enough to merit being called a 'culture'. But the fact remains that by presenting such items in this light, the impression is conveyed that the university has a moral obligation to assimilate lock, stock and barrel all those sub-dimensions — curricular, organizational, relationships between individuals and ethical outlook, or lack of it — contained in the total concept. From this one may say that what is often defined as a 'culture' amounts to little more than a presentational device by which a particular interest or alliance of interests seeks to insert itself into academe.

That the term 'culture' can be used as a cover term for a particular agenda or programme raises the question: What constitutes the essential difference between a programme or policy publicly advanced as such, and a programme put forward under the guise of a 'culture'? The distinction is an important one and gives us some clues about the nature of negotiating change in higher education. The essential difference between those programmes claiming a 'cultural' status and those presented as exemplars of technical, organizational or economic change resides in the fact that the latter may be said to rest on a rational basis, in the form of a particular series of techniques, procedures, forms of knowledge or capacities endowed with the property of universal application, transmission and, hopefully, universal relevance. Being rational, their rationality may

be discussed, evaluated and thus negotiated by higher education and those parties advancing them. It is, in effect, the universal and the rational dimensions which may be said to be decisive of whether they are suited to be part of universal knowledge of which the university is the prime vehicle and instance. The basis of rationality and universality cannot be said to exist in the same degree, if indeed they exist at all, when the cultural domain is invoked. Being about identity, the expression of that identity through values and beliefs, as well as its transmission from one generation to the next, culture cannot be subject to rational negotiation since by nature it goes beyond rationality. What passes for resistance to change in the context of policies dealing with new spheres of knowledge, or new forms of organization, very swiftly becomes equated with the entrenched defence of 'elitist culture' and with the obdurate and intentional commitment by higher education to the perpetuation and propagation of a species of cultural hegemony.

Indeed, the notion of cultural hegemony is a convenient if often anachronistic one, and comes under various forms. Where the particular system of higher education has been long established and founded under national auspices, hegemony is equated with the values of the ruling élite, though what is often overlooked is that those who exercise power constitute a series of élites whose attitudes and values are very far from being homogeneous. In instances where higher education has taken its model from abroad, established by European settlers, the notion of hegemony acquires an additional dimension and a further layer of transparency by dint of being set against indigenous cultures. Often seen as a species of 'cultural import', the university is looked upon as insensitive to and unassociated with the particular educational needs of cultures other than the dominant European one. Finally, there is what might be termed the university as symbol of colonial culture, created not by settlers so much as by expatriate administrators and based on, where not directly controlled by, metropolitan authorities.

The emergence of such 'theoretical' models during the course of the 1960s and early 1970s constituted an explicit attack on the established university as upholding values which were construed as anti-democratic, as alien and irrelevant to the majority of citizens, or as perpetrators of an earlier and inglorious subordination. From being what Rothblatt has termed 'the guardians of civilization', the university, under the impulse of student radicals on the one hand and dependency theorists on the other, rapidly assumed the dimension of being a prime instrument in upholding cultural imperialism. Changes in ideological context had, then, brought about equally remarkable changes in the way the university was viewed.

Convenient though theories of cultural imperialism were, in that they appeared to bring together in common cause both the industrial working classes of northern countries with their counterparts elsewhere, they suffered nevertheless from one weakness: namely, that European universities were themselves expressions of a certain degree of 'cultural imperialism'. The European version of this was the cultural imperialism of Greece and Rome, the classical languages and the humanities which derived from them. Seen from this perspective, the very classical learning which radical critique held as quintessential of an alienated and alienating culture was also an example of the very phenomenon they condemned. The European mind had long been 'colonized' by Greece and Rome!

The other assumption that underlay the critique of the élite university rested on the notion that, as constituted, it acted both as an obstacle to and a brake upon social and industrial development. Central to this conviction was the assumption that social change had gone beyond the point at which the élite university on its own was able to catch up. It was then the mission of external society to oblige the university to cease its laggardliness; in short, that social change had bypassed the élite university and that external society should act to bring it in line with broader social progress. However, it does not always follow that society's values evolve faster than those of the university, as Al Nouri's article points out.

Perhaps it is safe to say that the cultural role of the university has myriad dimensions and facets. Important though these are, they are neither monolithic nor constant — above all at the present time. In presenting these four articles, we are conscious that they represent only part of the issues posed, for by its very nature the issue is not one that is 'solvable'. Like the university itself, it reflects a particular point in time and the views held at that moment. Times will change, as will social priorities and our appreciation of cultural imperatives also. Any examination of the interrelationship of culture and higher education is by definition an interim balance sheet, since both evolve. For matters to be otherwise would be too horrid to contemplate.

Guy Neave