Book Reviews

Bouillon (Hardy) and Radnitzky (Gerard) (Eds) *Universities in the Service of Truth and Utility*, Frankfurt, Verlag Peter Lang, 1991. 204 pp. DM. 54. ISBN 3-631-43027-2

This collection of essays originated in a workshop on the future of the European university held in 1986. The editors indicate that contributors have had the opportunity to revise their essays since that date. There are ten main chapters, but no index.

The book contains a disparate collection of writers but with a strong right-wing orientation. Readers in the United Kingdom will instantly recognize the names of Antony Flew, Roger Scruton and the Seldons, Arthur and Margerie, and also recognize the positions they represent. Many of their arguments have been presented in other contexts. Flew, for example, writing on 'Corruption in the Academy', starts with what he sees as 'a fundamental and universal fact, as notorious as is uncomfortable, that everything human will always and most naturally degenerate; save in so far as well directed efforts are continually being exerted to prevent such degeneration'. Flew then identifies three sorts of corruption: first, subjects not being taught or researched properly (a part of human inadequacy). Second, dominant groups responsible for professional education and training, notably social work and education, which result in an education 'at best useless and at worst harmful'. The final 'corruption' is the rise of 'Radical and Marxist teaching' in so far as 'it can be shown to be, and to have been from the beginning, rotted by both academic and political bad faith'. This is indeed both a familiar set of targets and a familiar rhetoric.

Arthur Seldon's chapter, for this reader, also has a familiar cast to it. Seldon seems to think that social scientists and other academics will be surprised that government's responses to their work will be governed by short-term calculations and an eye to political advantage. Surely there can be little such naivety among those researchers who do engage in what might be described as applied policy research. Perhaps Seldon is expressing his own disappointments with the failure of even the Thatcher governments to adopt every policy proposal emanating from Seldon's Institute for Economic Affairs, the Adam Smith Institute and similar right-wing 'think tanks'. It would be a bit rich though for these research units to be described as 'academic'. Seldon's chapter ranges far and wide, urging government to get out of the relationship between universities and their 'benefactors, clients and customers – the taxpayers, industry and students'. In such a direct relationship, voters 'will have less sympathy for well-heeled academics wanting money for research into the sociological aspects of Welsh in Chubut, Argentina, or into familial interrelationships among the Wakasigau in South Kenya than into spina bifida in children in England'. But does it always have to be an either/or situation? Surely the United Kingdom or most other western higher education systems can cope with and should encourage a plurality of approach and/or research areas. Are we only to undertake research and scholarship which is grimly utilitarian, somehow defined by 'the voters', and implicitly defined only by national concerns and boundaries? Not surprisingly, Seldon is firmly in support of students paying fees. Fee income could be increased without a 'damaging reduction in demand'. Moreover, the 'less impressive subjects, faculties and universities may now find queues shortening and good applicants more rare. That would itself prune the universities of their politically over-inflated, pampered elements'. Not a word, of course, about the social implications of making students pay fees. In Northern

Ireland, the relatively low cost of higher education to the individual has enabled well over a third of higher education entrants to come from working class backgrounds and provided a route, often the only route, for disadvantaged Catholics out of poverty.

The problem with the 'new right' is that, while they deplore what they see as the authoritarianism of the left resulting in a rejection of 'new right' perspectives in universities, they would like the opposite to happen, only their hands would be clean as it would, they believe, come about from the 'hidden hand' neutrality of the market. The difficulty for this reader is that the world conjured up by Flew and Seldon is not recognizable either in the mid-1980s, or now.

If, however, one was tempted to believe that it is only the British contributors who are preoccupied with fighting the ideological war, the editorial introduction sets the tone. Radnitzky's ringing denunciation of 'Delor's "Social Charter"' as socialist and centralizing could have been penned by the most virulent of English Eurosceptics. We are also told that capitalist countries have experienced the 'cancerous growth of government', that what is required for coordination is 'the Hidden hand' of the market and not bureaucracy. In education, if you want to improve human capital, 'then make the institutional frame of the education system and of research institutes as market-like as possible'. And of the recent past, 'in the name of more equality secondary and tertiary education has been severely damaged in most of the Western democracies' and 'quality has been traded off from quantity, excellence for equality, freedom of choice for regimentation'. And so on.

To read this book is to be reminded of the not too distant past. It derives from the flood tide of the ideological advance of the 'new right'. But the ideological tide has ebbed, even if some of the policies it spawned are still with us. True, if the ideology of the far right and the far left have been set aside, many in Europe are still searching for a satisfactory vision for society and education. But perhaps most of us would settle for a degree of efficiency tempered with a substantial dose of compassion and commitment to equity.

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