

POLITICAL ECONOMY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

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As your President has said, way back in the dark ages about twelve years ago, I edited a book called Higher Education in Australia, and your invitation to speak on any aspect of higher education, and I stress any aspect, caused me to go back to that book to see if I had any reflections on it or on what has happened since. I noted that your speaker of yesterday, Peter Karmel, had a small place in the book - it was before he became so exalted a personage. His main point then was that he was against part-time education on the grounds that it was inefficient and uneconomic both for the student and for society. I can remember disagreeing with him then and wonder if his views have changed.

My favourite contributor to that collection of essays was Hugh Stretton of Adelaide, who has since published a very great deal, and I remember very well his remark that education was a rat-race and that there are two things one must remember about the rat-race. One is that the right rats do not necessarily get the right prizes and the other thing is that if you win it you are still a bloody rat. Now unfortunately that remark did not get into the book, but when I retailed it afterwards to a school-boy he said: "Yes, he's absolutely right, and school is a mouse-race to prepare youngsters for the adult rat-race." Hugh Stretton foreshadowed a later work of his when he drew attention to the growth of quantitative methods for measuring all sorts of aspects of education. And he feared that efficient statistical work was so improving our educational planning that it was in fact introducing a new kind of bias: a bias in favour of the so-called objective bases for decisions and against any other bases. In short, the things that cannot be measured may well be more important but they get less attention precisely because they can not be measured:

You can count failures but not the quality of those who pass. You can count departments and measure their sizes, but seldom the efficiency of communication between and within them. You can express exactly the apparent cash economies of big universities but not their diseconomies of efficiency. You can index staff-student ratios but not staff-student frustrations. You can count appointments, but not disappointment; degrees, years of service and pages of publication, but not merit.

Hugh Stretton was saying similar things to those said many many years ago by another scholar who made only a brief appearance in that book via a quotation placed in the frontispiece. I refer to the famous American political economist Thorstein Veblen, probably my favourite political economist, who wrote a book back in the even more dark ages of 1918 called The Higher Learning in America. Originally he subtitled that book "A Study in Total Depravity", but when he was told that this was too harsh he changed it to "A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Businessmen". He was, of course, writing in the American context of privately endowed universities and he was inveighing against the way that American universities had become modelled on the big corporation, competing in the marketing of a vendible commodity, namely, knowledge. In his day, of course, the dominance of the pecuniary culture of capitalism lay heavily on the institutions of higher learning, something not nearly so felt in less developed capitalisms until more recent times, shall we say our own day?

Veblen had an acid tongue. He has been called a "masterful phrase-maker whose constructions were a whiplash across the skin", and he has been described as a man who practised vivisection on his contemporaries without benefit of anaesthesia. He described university Presidents, the equivalent of our Chancellors, as "Captains of Erudition-Itinerant Dispensers of Salutory Verbiage." And he said that when an academic becomes an administrator he takes on the characteristics of an administrator, that is, ambiguity and evasiveness. Consider also this as a description of our activities:

The modern practitioners of higher education are the logical descendants of the ancient medicine men who, with their sacred apparatus, symbols and inscrutable realities, attempted spectacular effects to convince the community of their relation with the divinity. These institutions of the priestly life have been, at least until recently, conservative, reactionary and given to devout observances. A hierarchy of ranks, an apostolic succession, prevails and there is much shamanistic ceremonial, ritual, and practice.

Few people read Veblen nowadays. His books contain little hard information. Certainly no one in this hallowed institution, least of all its benefactor, Mr. Bassar, after whom I am told this college was named, could have read my favourite political economist on Schools of Commerce, Business Administration, Management Schools and the like.

He felt that whilst there was some benefit, although this was debatable, to the community in the training of doctors, dentists and engineers and such like, this was not so with businessmen. Indeed, on the contrary, there are already too many in existence for the common good. Thus he said this:

The greater the number and the higher the proficiency of the community's businessmen the worse must the rest of the community come off in that game of skilled bargaining and shrewd management by which businessmen get their gains. The outcome of such schools would be that the resulting body of businessmen would be able to secure between them a larger proportion of the aggregate wealth of the community.

He felt also that their expansion would help to ruin the universities because few of them would be able to afford really good schools of business training as they could not possibly attract the top men who really knew about business, and neither would they appeal to top scholars, hence they would fall between stools: they would attract mediocre scholars and mediocre businessmen. The result he said in 1918 would be: "A cross between a secondary school for bank clerks and travelling salesmen, and a subsidiary department of economics". How close to the truth that man was without the benefit of any quantitative laying on of hands!

I was pleased to note in looking back at this book that one of the two threads of the analysis of higher education was the quality of the teaching and learning process which I know you are all engaged in most fervently. The other was the importance of the relationship between higher education and society and I will come to this in a moment. First let me say a very little about the question of the quality of the teaching and the learning process and here I must warn you that I am going to say something which will seem hurtful and snobbish to many of you and I want to say it is not meant to be; I spring from the English working class myself and this person from whom I am about to quote came from the lower middle class in America, which is only one step up from the working class as you know. It used to be said that in a rapid expansion of education more means worse. That aphorism was applied to students by the well known English author Kingsley Amis who did, of course, turn into a snob after he wrote Lucky Jim - some of you may have read that novel about the upwardly mobile working class boy and his extraordinary adventures as a lecturer in an English provincial university. Now I think that more has not meant worse in relation to students but I suspect it has in relation to staff - not so much in respect of the young ones coming in now, but especially in

respect of those who were able to climb up the ladder into the large number of top positions which were then created and have now become, to use the vernacular, "boils on the arse of progress".

There is a famous passage on this kind of thing called simply "The Professors" in the best book that my favourite sociologist wrote, and I refer to White Collar written by C. Wright Mills back in 1951. Of him it has been written: "In his blazing condemnation of academic pomp and ceremony he carried forward the honourable tradition of American men of letters like Emerson, James and Thorstein Veblen. Like these he never confused the art of intellect with the enterprise of making money or getting promoted." Of how few can we say that! Of the professors he said the following, and I dedicate it to them:

The type of man who is recruited for college teaching is very likely to have a strong plebian strain; his culture is typically narrow, his imagination often limited. Men can achieve position in this field although they are recruited from the lower middle class, a milieu not remarkable for grace of mind, flexibility or breadth of culture, or scope of imagination. Men of brilliant energy and imagination are not often attracted to college teaching.

There is more, not related to social origins but to what happens in the higher institutions of learning:

The specialisation that is required for successful operation as a college professor is often deadening to the mind that would grasp for higher culture in the modern world. There now is a celibacy of the intellect. The professionalisation of knowledge has narrowed the grasp of the individual professor. The means of his success furthers this trend and in the social studies and humanities the attempt to imitate exact science narrows the mind to microscopic fields of enquiry rather than expanding it to embrace man and society as a whole.

Finally, as I read the last quotation from C. Wright Mills I would like you to think of your own favourite Jack-in-office who is a first class mediocrity. He said:

He is a member of a petty hierarchy almost completely closed in by its middle class environment and its segregation of intellectual from social life. In such a hierarchy mediocrity makes its own rules and sets its own image of success, and the path of ascent itself is as likely to be administrative duty as creative work.

Now that seems to me to be a reasonable description of what most Australian universities have become, stultified and constipated by hierarchy, specialisation and careerism. I have come to believe that far from offering an incentive to good teaching and learning, careerism is a cancer destroying the academy. I myself have known so many good minds in the social sciences who have told me over many years: "When I get tenure as a lecturer I will really speak my mind. When I get my senior lecturership I will come out into the open - really I will. When I become a professor and have my own department I will....."etc., etc., etc.. Obviously there is no end to this progression nowadays, until you get to become Governor General.

Let me now turn to the second theme of that hoary old book of twelve years ago, to the relationship between higher education and society. I said at the time that this was a dialectical relationship in which there is action, reaction and interaction, that the educational process was an important force changing society and that those engaged in it have a duty to indicate what they think our societies need and why. In the intervening period I do not really think they have tried very hard or been very successful - maybe your organisation will and I wish it well. In that book Sol Encel told us that the instrumental approach to education has dominated Australia, an approach which of course holds that the function of education is to serve the needs of society - the so-called service station concept with which I am sure you are all familiar. I would suspect that this approach is even more dominant now than it was twelve years ago and I always regarded dear old Sir Phillip Baxter as the chief service station attendant in the whole of Australia. Hugh Stretton saw the universities as the only possible countervailing force against the pressures of a conformist society, fulfilling the vital function of social criticism and investigation and, with honourable exceptions, I have to admit that I see today very little evidence of this, although when I look around the university presses I think Queensland is doing the best job and is being the most radical university press. It probably shows that you have to be reactionary to be radical! Certainly on the part of the university staffs it is very hard to see any radicalism: maybe that is because of the subject I am supposed to profess - economists are notorious as the Cossacks of the social sciences. As for Australian Vice-Chancellors they are really a pathetic lot and they carry very little weight in the community. I can

remember remarking on the low calibre of academic leadership in Australia to the Murray Committee twenty years ago this month when I was president of our staff association. The situation has not changed one iota. During that period of our greatest educational expansion in the whole of Australian history, only one Vice-Chancellor has written a book about the problems of Australian universities. As they say, publish or perish, and they are all perishing. And that fellow was a Pom, like me, although I am a New South Yorkshireman now. He resigned from the University of Adelaide in 1957 and published If the Gown Fits in 1960 and there was a great uproar about that. It must have taken him a very great effort because he quotes Psalm 39 on the Frontispiece and as you all well know Psalm 39 says this: "I held my tongue and spake nothing, I kept silent, yea even from good words, but it was pain and grief to me, my heart was hot within me, and whilst I was thus musing, the fire kindled: and at the last I spake with my tongue." Incidentally, Sir Keith Murray was good on biblical quotations. Some years after his Report he returned to Australia and gave a talk to those who had given him advice and he began it with the words: "I was a stranger and ye took me in".

As far as some of our new institutions are concerned, the colleges of advanced education, I have not personally visited any of them but the few I do know about do not seem to me to be doing much to fulfil Hugh Stretton's vital function of social criticism, and being some sort of countervailing force against conformity. It seems to me they are veiling more conformity than they are countering. On the contrary, most of the ones I know seem to be preoccupied with status and aping the universities and being, shall we say, more royalist than the king. My conclusion in that book was that the blood transfusion recommended by the Murray Report had prevented a total collapse of the system but that it had done little to improve the quality of education in universities in particular and in higher education generally. But I felt that the tremendous expansion and the greater variety of the demands that were being made, had created the conditions that might just make it possible to change the structures which were inhibiting further development. And I felt that we could be standing on the threshold of a transformation of higher education in terms of quality and variety and flexibility, if sufficient pressures could be generated.

One such pressure I saw, naively perhaps, as informed public opinion, informed by some of those engaged in the profession of higher education. And again I have to confess to disappointment: there has not, I think, been really much of a transformation; mostly there has been more of the same with a little tokenism perhaps, with student consultation here and there, and some dilution of the power of the bourgeois reactionary academic despots, as the Chinese would call them. The teaching profession at large has, I feel, been more effective at maintaining wages and conditions than attacking the crucial question of what shall be taught, to whom and by whom. Maybe the expectations I had in that dim and distant past were too high. The Vietnam war and what history will record as the bloodless revolution of 1975, have taught me what I should have known before - that Australia is a very conservative society indeed, and if you want in one hyphenated word to describe its value system that word would be "petty - bourgeois".

Let me conclude by mentioning some of the things in this area that have caught my attention since the mid-sixties. There was at that time, as you might expect at the beginning of the educational explosion, a lot of literature on the economics of education, on its costs and benefits and the measurement of those benefits to the individuals concerned and to the society at large. These exercises became quite fashionable and I must admit to succumbing to the fashion myself by giving a paper back in 1962, filling in for Peter Karmel on the topic of costs, returns and investment in education. There was also a certain euphoria around at that time with the belief that a big expansion of educational facilities would eliminate poverty and would even change the society. Not long afterwards John Kenneth Galbraith wrote his famous book The New Industrial State in 1967, telling us that capitalism required so many more highly educated people to run the system, that a new educational and scientific estate, as he called it, would thus arise and would see the system for what it was, that is to say, intellectually corrupt and consisting of what he called organised bamboozlement, and would revolt against it. They did to some extent, but it fizzled out, both in the United States and especially in France in 1968 when the students wrote on the walls of the Sorbonne: "Commodities are the Opium of the People: Consume, Be Silent, and Die." Then came the

realisation that expanding educational facilities did not eliminate poverty, but benefitted the middle classes more than anybody else and that education was very much class-structured and class-related.

This realisation has just reached Australia in the form of Ronald Fitzgerald's recent report on poverty and education in Australia for the Commission of Enquiry into Poverty. And we have had over recent years Ivan Illich's De-schooling and Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed. These voices come from the third world, especially Latin America, where the class barriers are so sharp and edged with steel - the steel of the bayonet. From the United States we have those radical political economists Sam Bowles and Herb Gintis and their work on schooling in capitalist America, which shows that in capitalist society the education system does not provide equality of opportunity, either for human development or economic reward. It mirrors the unequal structure of the capitalist economy. We are also now getting very important works in the area of political economy which relate to education such as the new book by Fred Hirsch called The Social Limits to Growth which came out last year. He argues that education has become a device for sorting and screening people, a device for controlling social scarcity. What each of us can achieve everyone cannot because an important part of what we achieve is relative superiority over others in knowledge, in income and in status. And this he calls a "positional good", a benefit due to our relative position close to the top of the social heap. These positions, however, do not expand with economic growth. So, to the extent that education is a screening device, the possibility of general advance is seen to be an illusion, and the distributional struggle, the struggle over the distribution of the national income, is made worse, not better, by growth. Society, he tells us, operates as a sort of frustration machine. It cannot really work any longer within the framework of competitive individualism: what it needs is a new collective ethic. A meritocracy on which most education is based is inadequate. Michael Young saw this nearly twenty years ago and some of you may be familiar with that classic parody by Michael Young entitled The Rise of the Meritocracy 1870 to 2033 in which he set himself in the 21st century looking back on educational developments.

He subtitled it: "An Essay on Education and Equality". In that book he told us that:

Schools and industries were progressively thrown open to merit so that the clever children of each generation had opportunity for ascent. The proportion of people with IQ's over 130 could not be raised, but the proportion of such people in work which called upon their full capacity was steadily raised. The ranks of the scientists and the technologists, the artists and the teachers have been swelled. Their education has been shaped to their high genetic destiny and yet every selection of one is a rejection of many. We have failed to assess the mental state of the rejected; the clamouring throng who find the gates of higher education barred against them may turn against the social order by which they feel themselves condemned.

With which sobering thoughts I will leave you. It may possibly, just possibly, be a useful hypothesis to consider, whether the revolt of the masses is likely to occur in a steady state which is, I understand, the subject of your deliberations.