

AMIDST THE CULTURE OF EFFICIENCY

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Ours is a culture of efficiency. We might trace its recent roots to the period of Britain's 'modernisation' under the Thatcher government. Though sporadic, I distinctly remember my art classes at the time and, in particular, the empty art cupboard. One day a consignment of art materials appeared as if by magic. A small band of us hung in the near vicinity, ready to pounce the moment our teacher turned the key. And the terrible thing: we weren't grabbing at things to use in class, but eyeing what we could pilfer for the most basic of uses at home. It was pathetic: coveting nothing more than a few pencils and cartridge paper. Mine was an education less furnished with resources, more *about* resources. The economic backdrop was the endemic internalisation of the market, with its invention of departmental cost codes and an entire fantasy of exchange (*all that was air* made distinguishable in the virtual cells of the spreadsheet).

Zoom forward and the concise policy of the Blair years, 'Education, education, education', sadly proved to be only more efficient as policy turned to league tables and set in train the empty prospect of 'choice' in schools (as if *all that is solid melts...*). Of course the higher education system benefited from an expansionist policy, albeit amidst the murmurings of devaluation. But if questions were raised over value for money (both by the state and the individuals embarking upon study), the planned severance of all public funding for the arts, humanities and social sciences puts an end to any further speculation. History has ended: this time based not upon the 'democratic' lures of wealth and plenty, but upon a spectacle of austerity.

The 'progress' of education, whether in its golden years or dark times, has never acknowledged the true expenditures of learning. In reality education is predicated upon *precious inefficiency*. Watch any child learning to read, sounding out the same word repeated on a page as if it were a first encounter on each occasion. We learn not by

rote but by failures, by inching our way out of the unknown. Education is almost entirely based upon dialogue, whether with the living (in a classroom or anywhere), or the dead (in books, paintings and artefacts). Dialogue will always fill whatever time is made available, and so will always be out of time too. As the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard writes: 'thought takes time and there's nothing you can do about it ... [T]he true streams are subterranean, they stream slowly beneath the ground, they make headwaters and springs. You can't know where they'll surface' (1997: 5). The academy was at the avant-garde of the 'postmodern condition', in understanding a completely new time-space continuum of culture, information, knowledge and power. Crucially, however, little if any gains have been made in articulating how the slow, subterranean stream of the arts and humanities is the very essence of their offering. Intellectual life is seemingly so adept at deconstructing (education's) time, yet so bereft of confidence, that such an endeavour lies at the heart of our culture, our lives.

Lyotard's remarks come from his rueful collection of postmodern fables, in which he reminds us how the 'system' has even increased the efficiencies of all inherent inefficiencies. One of Lyotard's academic characters ruminates: 'I'm not the owner ... nor the manager. Just a little cultural labour force they can exploit. But correctly, under contract, let me add, and with my signature. ... Half wage earner, half craftsperson' (1997: 3). Intellectuals, Lyotard points out, are actually compelled to 'sign petitions, write texts, organize conferences, stand on committees, take part in electoral consultations, publish books. ... these practices are authorized and even encouraged by legislation or, at least, by the formal and informal rules that regulate that status. Society permits us to contribute, in that order that is our own, to the development of the global system'. *Culture Machine*, through which I am publishing these words, is only another 'sign' of such activity. Sadly, too, the London march on Wednesday 10 November 2010 was all too likely only the 'staging' of an opening up of a wider debate.

The battle is hardly to be about matters of resources, access and intellectual compass. The university is potentially at the mercy of a far greater force: a generation versed only in today's culture of efficiency. And there is something distinctly English about the problem. As Couldry and McRobbie suggest, what hope is there for 'a country that lacks the USA's century-old system of university endowments'? Dear England, this sceptical isle; this battered old fort, inured to the arts of the jumble-sale; this happy-hour breed; this

'Little Britain'. Whatever happened to its blessed lot, its weightiness, its cultural resonance? It isn't simply the flattened ideology of our present coalition politics that poses a challenge to the future of the university. There are quieter concerns too that are conveniently ignored. Whilst one explanation for the lack of debate might indeed be an 'old-fashioned divide-and-rule', wherein it might not be in the best (short-term) interests of the Russell Group universities to mount any real challenge to current proposals, it strikes me as a rather conspiratorial view. There are more generic threats at stake. The ubiquity of the internet, for example, seriously brings into question why anyone would pay vast sums of money when some of the best educational materials are freely accessible online. And rather than waste energy looking inwardly at the potential winners and losers, the academic profession as a whole must justify relatively high salaries (especially so in the context of flexible working conditions), as well as explain the rich alchemy and rewards of research pursuits. In addition, there is a need to articulate what makes university education distinctive vis-à-vis the demands of 'employability' and a general appetite for 'practical knowledge'. One might question the fate of 'reading a subject' at the university when the trend in many spheres is towards more practical and accessible knowledge generated through workshop style engagement.

These concerns, and others besides, can be answered in numerous ways, but they must be sufficiently aired. Now is definitely not the time for a 'cold war' within the sector (though the pressure of the unknown makes such a state of affairs likely). The university has long been one of the most unpredictable sites of education and, as such, ought to remain one of the most highly prized resources in and against a culture of efficiency. Yet, in securing this role, in articulating its significance, the university can afford not a moment longer of inefficiency in sharing its philosophy.

Thinkers of the world, unite!

References

Lyotard, J-F. (1997) *Postmodern Fables*, trans. G. van den Abeele. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

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