Article

Australian higher education and the relevance of Newman

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In Australia in recent years there has been a period of transition and unrelenting conflict. The conflict has been between two main practical issues. One is the question of increasing the quality of higher education and the other is the question of increasing the quality of higher education. The system has been restructured into the Commonwealth University System (CUS) and similarly called upon to digest well in excess of 100,000 additional students without a concomitant increase in enabling resources. This is constrained by some as the problem of system overload with quality in higher education being the inevitable casualty. According to one of Australia’s leading educational policy makers Peter Karmel “massive increase in standards, capacity and in recognition by the universities and small probation” we appear to be replicating the British mistake of the Thatcherite era. Paul Boorh has recently expressed the problem: "One notable feature of recent British experience is the absolute absence of specification of goals for single institutions, and for the higher education system as a whole. It is a serious problem for British education that there is now no pressure for quality controls and for evaluation but no agreed statement of a system-wide or institutional objectives." As a first step in the construction of an acceptable theory of the modern Australian university, we suggest a reorientation of the traditional idea of the university and we propose a comprehensive review would have to examine such writers as Hansman, Jepson and Omega Y. Graus, but any such reorientation would have to take into account the views of John Henry Newman. For reasons that will become clear we want to focus here only on Newman. These views were elaborated in his seminal work, The Idea of a University.

Newman’s conception remains the most influential integrated vision of the University but is now widely misunderstood. We believe that Newman’s model, despite its occasional defects, still has a great deal to offer as a theory of the University. In particular, it articulates and emphasizes, as central to a university’s mission, the goal that other otherwise to receive merely great lip service. These goals include the pursuit of knowledge and understanding for its sake and for its own sake and the education of the students. These goals are only achievable when there is the cultivation of intellectual virtues such as logical thinking and the habit of careful and balanced judgment. Newman’s point here is often misunderstood. In the light of the need for a university, the goal is not the education of students as individuals, but in their community. Only in that community, and all universities are necessarily competent to determine what counts as higher education.

These conflicts within and beyond the university system are not simply practical ones. For there is an entrenched theoretical or intellectual conflict concerning the value and nature of the University as an institution. It is, we suggest, unclear what the goals of a university are and how to achieve them. To some extent, this is a self-evident view that its goals must be fundamentally economic, to others it is clear that a university should be a social institution. The answer to this question is that different universities are pursuing different goals and that universities are necessarily competent to determine what counts as higher education.

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At this point there is a tendency to claim that Newman's conception aimed at no transformative social role for universities and that universities therefore support the status quo and hence many injustices.

It may be true that Newman tends to see the social role of university education entirely in terms of the educated individual's personal responsibility to achieve the ideal of the "gentleman," an equation which both supports and enables the status quo. The point is not to argue whether he thought of universities as part of a result of education. What is lacking in Newman's thought here is the recognition that an institution has such responsibilities and that it should bear them in mind in the organisation of its teaching and research, and in its self-understanding. But such social responsibility is integral to the concept of "the University" and not necessarily "comfort to the status quo. It is no accident that universities have often been centres of social criticism, and this is a fact insufficiently stressed by many who urge the "educational value" of whatever political convictions the University of education then it is intimately related to the development and research in which it is engaged and by which it is distinguished. If one of the purposes of the academic studies is to bring about in the students of the University of education which many believe he would himself do if he were a "gentleman," one cannot conclude that he would necessarily do so now. The status of the academic studies, of course, have their benefits but they create an important intellectual association, and there is no necessity that be should suspend or hinder the central task sketched by Newman. Some argue, because of the intrinsic value of intellectual culture, philosophy, or more generally the depth of understanding which he believed University education to principally aim at, it is not intended to disguise this truth. They argue that the effects of the studies which might give rise to it. He seems to have thought that it was largely an empirical matter whether some study could allow such understanding or not. Consequently, the utility objection necessarily touches Newman's position since Newman is opposed to the utilitarian approach to education. It is well to remember that holding that education is one of these goods which is valuable in itself as well as being a means to other values or goods.

(d) Elitism

It is sometimes claimed that Newman's conception is elitist because on his conceptions universities are accessible only to a few. The glowing account that Newman gives of the value of university education should sufficiently prove the social role of making sure that as many people as possible gain access to such a cultural goods. Furthermore, the fact that this conceptions is often praised by those who conceive of the good as merely instrumental (for getting a better share of wealth and power, or for correcting social wrongs) should not obscure the fact that the elite conception is an instrument for, and not a demand on, the availability of such a good from those who do not view it in any instrumental terms. The claim that Newman's idea of a university is not necessarily "elitist". Nonetheless, his caricature of the value inherent in university education raises fundamental questions about the legitimacy of this good being universally or even extensively distributed. This difficulty is very relevant to present American circumstances. Government is no longer the only agent for the reproduction of the next generation, and hence the question of how these young people who are not merely handing on of established fact but who are participants in the intellectual debate, exploration (and to use a term of Government) the education system. Newman was correct in pointing out some of the problems of the combinative intellectual society. It is not just that universities are unable to produce original research and that some researchers to teach effectively. It may be that graduate schools are part of the problem. It is not just that there are many complications that would need to be addressed in a fuller treatment of these issues, but what we are chiefly concerned to do here is to point out that a research function for universities, far from being an obstacle to their vision of higher education and complementarily

(b) Ascertainment

It is generally claimed that Newman's conception of the University while possibly acceptable for his own times is now quite out of date. But the fact that Newman was writing in a difficult period it simply does not follow that he has nothing to tell us about universities in our day. It would indeed be highly unlikely that he would have been wrong were we to claim that his conception of the University as an ascertainment of the particular intellectual disciplines of his day. What is true is that when Newman wrote in the 1830s the modern university, with its complex structure, was in the process of evolution. Newman himself, though noteworthy sympathy to the plight of women, certainly shared none of the social assumptions of his age. But this nothing follows about the adequacy or incoherence of his conception of the University as the incoherence of the intellectual virtues.

Firstly, the intellectual virtues are to be distanced from the moral virtues. "The virtues are the arts," (Virtues in this context simply means desirable character traits.) Indeed, one of Newman's most concrete achievements in The Idea of a University is to delineate a conception of the intellectual life which distinguishes it from both the moral and the religious (or at least the Christian) life while showing areas of overlap. It is not entirely foreign to the ideals of the philosophical life since there is a certain character and accompanying code which the inquirer will tend to develop. But the intellectual virtues are not the same as the moral virtues. Newman in his conception, does not prohibit intellectual virtues and as the same time, it is absolutely distinct from (p.108).

Objectives

(a) Research

As we have seen, Newman believes that research has no place within the University. He believes that universities are primarily devoted to the education and training of appropriately trained teachers. However, once acquired they enable an individual to think clearly and logically, and to communicate effectively and precisely. The possession of such intellectual attributes would, indeed, be a formidable task to reflect carefully, to try to make objective judgments, and especially to talk together about the views in the face of external pressure and fashion. Thus: "To open the mind, to correct it, to refine it, to enable it to know, and to digest, master, rule and use its knowledge, give it power over its own faculties, application, flexibility, method, critical exactitude, sagacity, resource, eloquent expression, is an object as intelligible as the development of [mental] virtue, while at the same time, it is absolutely distinct from (p.106).

Notes

1. Professor Peter Karmel "Quality in Higher Education," for Robert Monsey On higher Education (Athlone Press 26th October 1994) p.7 of "What is education?"
2. Don Aitken "the access versus the "old school" in "Higher Education Supplement" (Journal of Higher Education), 11/1/1982.
4. Simon Margan "How Doxinky reduced academic freedom? in "The University" 1992 "Can universities have free speech?"
10. For comments on this, see Tony Cony "Huntington and the University: A contribution to the discussion on the University " in "The University Supplement" No. 1, 1993, and also his "Cultural Suicide and the New Universities" in Eureka Street, Vol. 3, No. 5, 1993.
11. Anna Cuthbertson Higher Education Supplement (Journal of Higher Education Supplement) 14/10/92.
Pastoral shades: Sidney Orr and the eroticisation of teaching

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Gross Moral Turpitude: The Orr Case Reconsidered by Cassandra Pybus
(Melbourne, William Heinemann, 1993, 236 pp)

Australia's Dreyfus or a leering but?
Not so long ago it might have seemed rather absurd and tasteless to imagine Sydney Orr's misadventures becoming the subject of a film by Peter Weir: the tertiary sector's answer to Dead Poet's Society. Picture the early scenes: Orr at Melbourne University, seduced by his Head of Department for his 'emotional' reading of Plato: hated as a teacher by most of his students for his tendency to digress from the 'set text', but loved by a select cohort, who fell under the spell of his 'glittering eyes' and his libertarian philosophy of love, surrounded by scandal on account of the mixture of tropes in which he sought exceptionally to live out this philosophy (the 'writing up' of which in a series of small confessional articles for a non-academic magazine comprised virtually his only published work).

Then, in 1992, comes Orr's appointment to a professorship in philosophy at the struffy, provincial University of Tasmania. A courageous open letter, complaining about conditions at the university (which precipitated an official government enquiry) is shortly followed by his 'political' dismissal. This is justified on the basis of trumped-up charges that he had seduced a student, Suzanne Kempt, known (in a non-sexual context) as a mature-aged, male student, and administered a less senior colleague. The final scene of the film would be taken up with his fight for reappointment: notably, his unsuccessful appeal to the Tasmanian Supreme Court in 1996 and to the High Court in 1997; the successful international campaign on his behalf/ to boycott all new positions at the University of Tasmania; and his widespread condemnation in Australia's 'Dreyfus'.

Once upon a time... meaning prior to the publication of Cassandra Pybus' persuasive work of historical revisionism. Today, it is not a romantic film-made but that unemotionally harassed student and gifted painter, Edwin Tarnow, to whom we turn for our picture of Sidney Orr. In Gross Moral Turpitude's cover illustration Orr is portrayed by Tanner, in Pybus' words, as a 'leering but', hovering over a blackboard with a heart drawn on it; next to it, a girl, seated apart from the rest of the student audience, the object of Orr's attention. 

Now it is he: the protagonist in the affair to be given the lie in the light of Pybus' research. Both here and abroad, a great number of his supporters, including eminent intellectuals and top university officials, are exposed as knaves or fools, while the majority academic view that Orr had been unjustly dismissed has been shown to be simply mistaken.

If Gross Moral Turpitude has attracted so much attention, this is not only because of the notorious place of the Orr case in Australian intellectual-political history but also on account of its resonance in contemporary 'political polarities'. Pybus herself foreshadows this way of reading her book, linking it (unashly in my view) to the issue of sexual harassment (p.212). Here it is not sexual harassment but recent debate over consensual sexual relations between staff and students in tertiary educational institutions which provides the focus for the ensuing discussion of the contemporary notions of the Orr case. I intend to approach this problem by first opening up an aspect of the case itself which has received less attention than it warrants: namely, Orr's pedagogical and intellectual style.

What sort of teacher did Orr fail to be? If the results of Pybus' research simply imply the University of Tasmania's decision to dismiss Orr (if not the way it went about it), its implications are that the shame which for so long hung over the University in connection with Orr's dismissal is only transferred unmodified to the matter of his appointment in the first place. How could such a conspicuous character (without a serious publication to his name, attracting only the most laconist references, etc.) have ever secured a professorship? Pybus also leaves us in little doubt as to the way in which the University's 'God-Chancellor', Sir John Morris, blatantly fixed his appointment (pp.203-7). It seems that he did so in the belief that the University's 'fledgling philosophy department needed someone to propagate a Christian view of moral issues and to stand up against communist and the linguistic philosophy then dominating Australian philosophy departments (Pybus, pp.203-7).

Does this last detail not suggest that to give in to indignation over Orr's lack of professional qualifications is to pass too quickly over the question of what can count as qualifying one to teach philosophy? The point is not whether, to the contrary, Orr's approach to teaching has been unjustly maligned but rather what type of pedagogical approach it was.

In other words, what was it that allowed Orr's whole approach to teaching, including his sexual and other predations, to pass even the appearance of a valid pedagogy? The answer, I suggest, lies in the resemblances between aspects of his teaching aligned to in the 'glorious' version of the case with which this article began and certain pastoral techniques of character-formation which have as their aim the shaping of a dialectical, whole self. It is in terms of such techniques that we can at least make sense of Orr's attempts to bring philosophical texts into the field in a more formal, rationalist way into the service of a spiritual transformation of the reader. In this case it's the students' sexual ambiguity that is to be freed up and yet spiritualised through an 'emotional' reading of Plato. Pybus' outstandingly brief comments allow us to glimpse the outlines of a 'confessional' approach to teaching which rests upon blurring distinctions between the status and personal comportment of the teacher (and head of department) and those appropriate to relations of friendship or psychological counselling.

In short, whilst there is no getting away from the facts of Orr's unadulterated moralism, or from many other personal failings which were reflected in his teaching, his sexual hunting ground was in some ways the product of an institutional pastoral pedagogy. In the course of the twentieth century such aesthetic and therapeutic techniques of personal formation have established their...