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IDEOLOGY AND THE UNIVERSITY

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The Traditional British University is an ideological charade, institutionally incapable of changing either itself or Society. Most English academic marxism is only a rationalisation of that incapacity.....



*Medice, cura te
ipsum.*

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Introduction

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The internal stability of the British university may be seen in a familiar example. The sixties were a period of student unrest throughout Europe, and in Britain as well. In most of Europe students achieved far-reaching reforms, including the extension of the franchise within university structures of power. In many parts of Europe today principles such as the German 'Drittelparität', in which tenured staff, non-tenured staff and students have equal representation, are an accepted norm. Bodies constituted according to this principle have full rights of decision in such matters as examination and staffing.

In England the 'student movement' has benefited nobody except the tenured staff - precisely that body against which continental unrest was principally directed. In England there have been minimal concessions to 'student representation' in university administration - but since all issues of significance are designated 'closed business' it can hardly be claimed as an adequate recognition of student interest. The most important development has been the closing of ranks among teaching staff. On the continent student demands were often supported by un-tenured assistant staff who shared common grievances against the omnipotent occupants of professorial chairs. Apparently recognising this danger, British universities have now virtually abolished the lectureship without tenure. As a result there is no longer any possibility of material conflict of interest between tenured and un-tenured teachers in a department, and they stand united against threats to their shared domination of the resources of higher education.

There is now scarcely any group which is in a position to lead a challenge to the hierarchy of power within the British universities, and to the ideology which legitimates it. Graduate students, who might have the theoretical grasp and who certainly have an interest in acquiring a voice in university control, are too isolated by the conditions of their study, the brevity of their grants, and their unrestricted dependence on individual members of the tenured staff. The undergraduates are too young

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and too constricted by the rigid timetabling of their three-year courses to indulge in serious rebellion. In both groups the ability of the tenured staff to silence individual voices by examination failure, or by the simple dictate of a research supervisor, is evident all too often.

Meanwhile tenured lecturers, defensively absorbed by the university, declaim progressive 'latitudes, comfortable in the knowledge that they at least have become part of our 'centres of excellence'. The murmurings of 'structuralism' and academic marxism blend in well with those forms of self-contemplation more traditional to British universities. The followers of Matthew Arnold and F.R. Leavis gladly yield to those who talk in stern tones of ideologies and historical determinants. The cultivation of individual creativity proceeds as before, regardless of the needs of those who came to university to learn something rather different from the liturgies of an ideology long since under revision in the world outside.

Academic activism has been safely confined to pharisaic strictures from a class too well satisfied with its own virtue. The most honest political struggle, that of self-interest, has been replaced by the cosmetic of philanthropic concern. The British university inculcates fastidious disapproval of the cruder needs and ideologies of those outside its walls, a 'good taste' cultivated to the point where genuinely engaged criticism becomes almost impossible. The academic marxist busies himself with the interests of those oppressed somewhere else, and assiduously overlooks the interests fostered by his own activities. Within the university, the myth of academic privilege is exploited to emasculate the grievances of those - the students - who scarcely share any of the privileges so lauded by their teachers. Dissatisfaction is diverted to the supposed guilt of a bourgeois society somewhere outside. The very real conflicts of interest within the academic world are quickly dealt with by the power apparatus wielded by the tenured staff, and glossed over with the aid of an individualist ideology which still exercises an almost unbroken fascination over intellectuals in this country.

This pamphlet attempts two things. First, it tries briefly to situate the university's practical enactment of its ideology - the point at which it appeals for material support to society, and the point to which all the alumni of the university are necessarily tied. That is the examination system. The British degree system is not primarily a device for the integration of education and social practice - which it should be - : it is a means of internal control, and the vehicle for a crassly

ideological ritual of stratification.

The second project attempted by this pamphlet is the theoretical discrediting of the universities' dominant ideology. On the continent it has long been recognised that the individualist tradition of humanist education was the instrument of an outdated economic and social formation. Certain English academics have taken over the disparaging use of the term 'humanist', but with virtually no understanding of the strength and historical persistence of this ideology. Any adequate grasp of the term 'humanism', in education, would be bound to include significant aspects of those movements, such as the ideological critique of consciousness, which are often hailed as decisive steps forward. English theoreticians often lack awareness of the historical antecedents of their ideas. Lacan, for example, is often believed in this country to represent the last word in the theoretical avant-garde. But there is nothing in his thought, whatever its other merits, which goes radically beyond the dialectical and phenomenological traditions which have dominated bourgeois thought and education since Hegel. This pamphlet attempts to identify some of the essential lineaments of those traditions.

1: Examinations

Nowadays the notion of the 'degree', the particular grade of academic attainment, has become inseparably associated with the idea of a university education even outside academic circles. People unfamiliar with university procedures will still speak in reverential tones of a 'degree with honours', implicitly recognising that gradation is the most important part of the test. The particular characteristic of academic examinations, either at university or in preparatory stages such as the G.C.E., is that level of achievement is more important (given a modicum of competence) than the simple issue of pass or fail. In most tests which are specific to a profession, by contrast, the determination of pass or fail is virtually the only significant function.

Even John Venn, a historian usually anxious to stress the traditional quality of university institutions, noted that the intention for 'all the candidates to be arranged in some "order of merit"' was a feature only of modern university examinations.¹ The peculiar modernity of the 'arts' degree, in particular, manifests itself in two ways. In the first place it is systematically non-vocational. The arts degree is intended to qualify the graduate for his life, but not in any particular professional field. The growth during recent years of a variety of post-graduate professional qualifications is a recognition of the 'pure' nature of the arts degree, and is at the same time an attempt by higher education to preserve this as a central ethos while making superficial concessions to public demand. The non-vocational degree remains a conclusive end in itself at least as far as the academic world is concerned. This interpretation of the old educational concept of the liberal arts is in fact entirely at variance with its original function in higher education. In medieval universities the status of Master of Arts was usually attained by the age of twenty, and served as entrance qualification for the more properly scholarly, and vocational, higher faculties of law, theology and medicine.² The original arts course was closer to a modern English 'A' level, or the French Baccalaureat, than its refined modern namesake.

The second revealing aspect of the arts degree, or in fact any modern British degree, is that it is in a significant sense not competitive. Examiners usually stress that the apportionment of candidates to particular grades is not done by constant proportion, as it would be if the exam was competitive, but according to invariant external criteria. The fact that, for example, proportions of first-class degrees tend to

remain the same despite an undeniable shift in standards since the end of the war to some extent goes against this claim; but it is nonetheless important as a principle. Furthermore, candidates are not placed in a continuous order of merit. Results are marshalled according to the great standard levels and strenuous attempts are made to obliterate the suggestion of 'borderline cases' and to conceal the finer details of marking. Students are encouraged to think of their grading not as the consequence of some crude struggle for precedence among themselves, but as the reflection of the ascending hierarchies of angels in the heaven of intellectual excellence.

Any suggestion of a struggle between the candidate and his examiners is even more strenuously resisted. The modern don is uniquely protected against the criticism and competition of his pupils. Whereas the medieval exam took the form of a public disputation, a trial of strength between the learned doctor and his heirs presumptive in which both sides had to legitimate their status, the modern examiners is shielded by a cloak of anonymity. The student is in contest with a power which evades his scrutiny, and which claims in its collective namelessness an absolute right of assessment. Even the exam for the Ph.D., while retaining a vestige of the ancient disputation in the 'oral examination', is in most English universities a secret affair in which the examiners' views and recommendations are confidential, unseen by any except their closest colleagues, and hence unchallengeable, and where even the disputation has lost its public aspect.

All this rests on the ideological fiction of the purity of intellectual activity. The modern arts exam is presented as an initiation into the finest arts of the mind, a ceremony which rises above utilitarian considerations and notions of base competition with one's neighbours. The award of an arts degree is a divine bestowal of grace, an induction into a realm of gentlemanly perfection where the 'primus inter pares' achieves his position not through the sordid fight for a trade, but by the display of noble and disinterested virtue. The educational ideology of the bourgeoisie seeks to dress cruder class interests in fine clothes; competitive individualism is given metaphysical legitimation by the charade of a disinterested intellectual assessment. Bourgeois mythology likes to believe that top men win through innate virtue, not through gangsterish rivalry.

The classic taboo of university education, still fully applied in most academic tests, is that against 'cheating'. 'Cheating' covers a

variety of approaches to study which in most contexts might be considered entirely acceptable. One of these, cooperation between students, is in fact already becoming the norm in more elementary levels of schooling. But cooperation in the higher levels of liberal education offends against a central insistence on the isolation of study. Just as the certification of the 'degree' bestows a non-specific, general classification of the whole man, so too the pursuit of this achievement must be a pure and exclusive discipline of the self. The student receives his academic assessment in private communion with an unseen examiner; and the mark of virtue can only be attained in the hermetic mortification of individual study. Any attempt at cooperations shows a loss of faith in the self, a flight from the ultimate seclusion with the examiner.

Study for the arts degree cannot be a public or cooperative affair, for it is a contemplation of the inner faculties. To approach this task with the aid of others is to demean study to the level of a conventional goal, a mere collective utility. The only product of value to liberal study is the formed and disciplined individual mind, and the crude development of concrete skills and collective artefacts would be a serious deviation from this road.

Linked with this taboo is the injunction to originality. The intellectual isolation fostered by the interdict on cheating is supported by an ideology of considerable power and complexity which we can begin to unravel in the next section.

Briefly we can itemise objections to the present system of examinations. Examinations are inevitably important because they are the link between the university and the rest of society. The university claims support from the community by, as it were, contracting to supply products which conform to stated standards. Acceptable standards and forms of assessment will emerge from interaction and negotiation between the community and its educational supplier.

This is a reasonable state of affairs. What is less reasonable is the British system whereby, in effect, the universities have agreed to refrain from imposing their own standards on the community by abandoning the responsibility for any direct vocational or professional training. In exchange for this freedom from academic interference the community has left untouched the endowments of the older universities and acquiesced in the establishment of new universities with a corresponding degree of autonomy.

The real price of this entente has been twofold. In the first place, the British universities have sought to justify their position of social quietism by persisting in a caricatured version of 'liberal study'. Education is thereby seen not as training for competence, but for character; and character, like virtue, is not either bestowed or withheld, but comes by degrees, as a lasting gift. A first-class man is a first-class man, and always will be. British students do not attain salvation by good works, but by native brilliance. This is an unattractive and pernicious ideology.

Secondly, the universities have taken over from the community much of the burden of disciplining the critical and disaffected. In other countries the universities have sometimes been able to act as agents of reform, and have sustained this role supported by internal harmony. British universities ensure that political dissent barely gains a foothold even within their own walls. The harmonious coexistence with society which they have achieved has been paid for with internal disharmony. The British university now harbours two essentially opposed factions: the teachers, who wish to retain their position and the quietist entente with society which is its condition; and the students, who have no interest in protecting the teachers' benefices but who do need assistance in establishing a critical, considered attitude to the community they are about to enter. The result is that the one group forces the other to conform to a set of standards and values which have very little justification except in order to preserve what is asserted to be 'academic tradition'. The ruthlessness with which teachers will protect and exploit their monopoly of the examination system is an index of its importance in preserving their interest.

Reform of examinations is also reform of the university. It should be directed to two issues. On the one hand classified degrees should be abolished. Either a student can do what he claims to be able to do or he cannot; the hierarchy of degrees is a theoretical and ideological absurdity, only serving to mask the universities' failure to confront issues of real substance. The classification of individuality and character should be replaced by vocational tests with an aggressive social orientation. Nobody needs a test of character; but almost everyone needs help in the establishment and critical modification of a social role.

On the other hand the secrecy of examination should be abolished. Modern examinations should, like medieval disputations, be tests of the examiner as well as the examined. Teachers have no automatic right to protection against educational recession and the just claims of their juniors.

2: Individualist ideology

(a) General

The philosophy of individualism begins as a revolt against 'dogma', the world seen as a divinely-ordered hierarchy of things. Its radical impulse is the emancipation of subjectivity from passive thing-ness into a freedom in which it creates its own reality.

The theoretical groundwork of philosophical individualism is exhaustively developed in the progression from Humean scepticism to the idealistic ontologies of the German Romantics, most notably Hegel. Subsequent thinkers provided shifts of emphasis rather than of matter. For the contemporary ideology of education a most significant step is the reversion to a humanistic form of 'dogma', a theory of values grounded on a philosophy inherently antipathetic to such a project.

The following section - distilled from a more detailed forthcoming work - is partly a discussion of the contradictions of this theoretical position, and partly an attempt to locate them within a defensive academic ideology.

(b) Subjectivity, spirit, language

If we look to the original radical scepticism of individualist philosophy, we can see the emergence of a new system of priorities. The world as ritual, as static form arrayed around one divine centre, has been displaced by one in which all is in flux. Human consciousness is no longer one rather inconsiderable element in an immutably ordained construction; it is identical with and dissolved into the play of events around it. The soul no longer exists, passively exposed to competing entities. Instead, the mind is a basically perspectival unity, itself empty, gazing out upon phenomena for which it is itself in some sense responsible. Through critical reflexion it can ponder the patterns which govern those phenomena as they rise up in response to its own willing. It can celebrate the incessant coagulation and dissolution of structures of significance, languages new and mysterious, poised artefacts, realizations of its own regularity in the phenomenal world. Thought and deed are alike; great thoughts and great deeds will in equal measure propel the dialectical process onwards through the eternity of becoming. All that matters is that each stage should have the power of 'Bildung' (cultivated form), and that it should constitute what Friedrich Schlegel called an 'Individuum' - in other words a coherent self-regulating system,

the moment of stasis before the creative spirit moves on further.

That is the somewhat lyrical foundation of the Romantic conception of subjectivity. In its development we can see the basis for more familiar views of the social and linguistic construction of reality.

In pre-Romantic 'dogmatic' metaphysics, the self reflects upon its situation as one entity amid a world of entities; depth of knowledge is a function simply of the quantity of representations the conscious soul is capable of obtaining. Such an accumulation of representations would be an exact mirror of the actual deployment of the world of objects. In the theory of individualism, however, the centre of consciousness is a void for consciousness. Although the mind feels an intuition that it is guided by some centre, it is only aware of the empirical phenomena which surround that centre. Whatever the mind may speculate about itself, it can never know the centre of consciousness in the way that it can, for example, know the empirical presence of the body. For individualism it is impossible to define a relationship between soul and world in the manner attempted by dogmatic thought. To the extent that the world is known, it is known in terms of epistemological structures; in as far as it is significant to us, the world has logic. But we cannot assert that the world of epistemological structures actually exists, nor infer from it the situation of the soul, since all we in fact know is the flow of experienced moments. Structures are subject to the dialectical flux of experience. The question of the nature of consciousness, and the ontology of known things, is a question about the force which determines this flux, and governs the incessant annihilation and replacement of known structures.

This force cannot be deliberate consciousness itself, because what is already consciously known is completed, spent. Nietzsche's critique in Beyond Good and Evil of the idea of a deliberating ethical consciousness is an attempt to draw attention to this. Although mental deliberation may accompany the process whereby an action is finally engendered, it is not actually identical with that process. In a very important sense decisions take themselves; the actions which produce the world of phenomena as it flashes before our mind are already happening as we decide to make them happen. In one way conscious thoughts are a reflection upon action already taken, in another way they are simultaneous manifestations of the action itself; but at all events the conscious mind is not what actually creates our experience for us. This is the sense of Hegel's famous phrase about the 'cunning of reason'; reason, which transcends mere understanding,

establishes its world of significance without consultation, and yet with perfect consistency. The conscious self, a precarious tissue of opinions and memories, is not something which could control the torrent of experience as it rushes past.

The dynamic root of life in individualist theory, the creative force which always eludes conscious grasp, may have two aspects. On the one hand it is the individual, the power which pulls phenomena into single perspectival unity, the coherence of signification. On the other hand it is the general human sensibility, as indicated in the fact that modes of signification, such as language, are also modes of communication. The progress of the dialectic is a share in the progress of culture; representative creativity by artists or thinkers is the synthesis of new cultural stages for the whole community. In Romantic thought this dual aspect of the creative is rendered in the term 'Geist', spirit. Spirit is the soul of the individual, but it is also the element which unites him with the universal human condition. The spirit moves equally in the concentrated individuation of single creators and the general movement of political events. The two are united in the concept of history, the map of all staging-posts in the spiritual voyage of culture. In Schlegel's words, 'The life of the universal spirit is a continuous chain of internal revolutions; for all individuals, the original and the eternal ones, live in it.'³

The extent to which the phenomenal world is created by the spiritual impulse is a constant source of ambiguity in individualist thought. In terms of any strict adherence to radical anti-dogmatism it is only possible to make meaningful statements about the world by employing epistemological categories which transcend the world. This is the sense of Kant's critical philosophy, conceived as an attempt to rescue from Humean scepticism the indispensable categories of truth. The question is, however, to what extent one can 'write off' the 'real' world as an unknowable abstraction. The extreme idealists among the German Romantics, with Schelling their most conspicuous representative, actually did this. Hegel's confrontation of the problem comes in his challenge to the Kantians to explain what the reality of an object is if it can only be known through instruments which stand between us and the object.⁴ In another formulation, how can we postulate the existence of real objects as the cause of our knowledge of them when causality is itself a transcendent category (as it is in Kant)? The importance of this question rests in the fact that if noumenal objects can be disregarded, it leaves that much more room for 'spirit' as the

principal determinant of the substantial world. Schlegel likens modern man to God - 'To become God, to be a man, to form oneself: these are expressions which mean the same' - and in such declarations we can see the great self-confidence of his bourgeois individualism. On the other hand 'common sense' rebels against the notion of an ideal spirit, of which their own being is in some way a part, as the determinant of all reality. The extreme idealism implied by Schlegel's worship of the inner creative force (he even speaks of the 'internal liturgy'⁵) slips with other thinkers increasingly into the realm of the metaphorical, or else is absorbed into the safer assertion that man's social practice is the determinant of reality. Hegel's Phenomenology disdains this solution, but this does not mean that it is the subjectivist assertion of absolute idealism which some believe it to be. It is an account of the way in which the structuring spirit, by constant encounter with negation in the form of external necessity, finally reaches a point at which it can understand its own freedom within a world created by its own power of signification. 'Absolute knowledge', the final stage in the phenomenological Odyssey, is not magical omnipotence: it is the point at which spirit recognises its role within the collective human body, and the instruments at its disposal for articulating itself in the world. Read carefully, this concluding chapter bears strong resemblances to two other central texts of Romantic thought in which Fichte and Schelling deduced the forms of knowledge appropriate to the highest levels of culture.⁶ It is not fortuitous that all three texts are in effect arguments for the re-organization of academic studies in line with the new secular aspirations of bourgeois individualism. In each case the central argument is that man's creative impulse should be released from the dogmatic restrictions of previous philosophies. Fanciful suggestions - such as those of Novalis - that man might at some stage exert magical control over the entire phenomenal world were extraneous to the central theoretical programme of the Romantics.

In summary it must be emphasized that within this tradition and its modern variants the focus of theoretical definition is always on the creative spirit rather than on the necessities which it may encounter. Hegel's project is to describe the path of freedom within necessity; but necessity, or negativity, is no more than a shadowy ghost of Kant's 'thing-in-itself', forever deprived of determinable characteristics. Lacan, who declares his indebtedness to the Phenomenology, and to the tradition of dialectical thinking which starts with the Theaetetus, is a modern example of this ambivalent attitude towards material realities.⁷ Language, he says, is

like a wall, the structure of conscious knowledge which at the same time separates us eternally from closer contact with whatever we know. 'Beyond this wall, there is nothing which can be more than external darkness to us.'⁸ Within our world, constituted and bounded by language, the essential force of reality is desire for recognition. Desire for the permanence of objects, and for a 'self' which will be recognised by others, leads consciousness to interrupt the evanescence of phenomena by means of the resistant systems of language. 'The concept, preserving a duration for that which passes, engenders the object.'⁹

Phenomenology is the logical structure which makes individualist science possible. For our purposes the most characteristic individualist science is history.

(c) History: relativism and cultural values

History is the sacred text of a secular bourgeois ideology. An individualist understanding of history is able to provide metaphysical legitimation of de facto power relations, overthrowing the constraints of a 'dogmatic' view of history which saw the future governed by the divine pronouncements of the past. Phenomenological scepticism displaces the authority of the past, clearing the way for synthesized traditions centring on the interests of the present.

The methodological foundations of modern historiography were supplied by cultural and literary criticism, for aesthetic creativity became to the Romantics the principal paradigm of the productive spirit. The philosophy of the poet, said Schlegel, is the assertion that 'the human spirit moulds everything according to its law, and the world is its work of art'.¹⁰ If the world is a 'work of art' analogous to a literary creation, then it can be considered according to the same genetic principles: each phenomenon is an event created by the driving force of free originality. The world is created and supported by a series of acts, and their succession is preserved in the retrospective gaze of history. At each new epoch in history the skilled commentator can read off the creativity of spirit. The task of philosophy is to divine, or 'characterise' (Schlegel) the creative impulse wherever it appears, whether in art or in history. History is in fact the real articulation of the dialectical spirit which only appears in philosophy as an ideal abstraction. 'One might say,' suggests Schlegel, 'that history was a philosophy in becoming and philosophy a completed history.'¹¹

It is central to Romantic thought that history has no dogmatic

authority. History is not to be understood as the sequential illumination of permanently existing truths according to a metaphysic of static souls and other entities. In the first place events in history are the all-embracing reality of their moment in time; and in the second place each stage is inevitably consumed by the following one so that knowledge of a precedent has no immediate bearing upon what follows. History is not a source of any laws beyond the law of history itself - which is that all reality is in flux and that we never step into the same river twice.

Nonetheless it is possible for societies to use a historical sensibility to 'divine' a kind of traditional authority for themselves. Human beings can at any one time share a general sense, if not a precise knowledge, of what their place and mission is. While they can never achieve the absolute realization of a 'completed history', they can synthesize their own version of absolute knowledge by developing a consciousness of collective identity. Such a history is constructed rather than inherited. This is Schelling's formulation: 'Knowledge in itself is as little a matter for the individual as is action in itself. Just as true action is that which could, as it were, take place in the name of the whole community, so too true knowledge is only that which is known not by the individual, but by Reason. This independence of knowledge from time is expressed in the fact that it is the affair of the community, which is itself eternal. So it is necessary that, like life and existence, so also knowledge should be passed on from individual to individual and from community to community. Tradition is the expression of their eternal life.'¹² Schelling opposes this conception of a synthesized or 'expressed' tradition to the 'historical knowledge' of the dogmatic schools, which had believed that history was an external sequence reflecting the inaccessible intervention of some remote deity. For individualist theory in general particular events are only meaningful in relation to their location within dialectical development, never in themselves. History is only comprehensible in terms of spirit; and spirit can only be grasped through our own immediate context of meaning and structure. For such a theory history is in the end always an assertion of the interests of the present against the interference of the past.

In the case of the German Romantics the abandonment of authoritative history was a necessary revolutionary enterprise. The reactionary notions of precedent supporting the ancient institutions of Europe had to be discredited, and a fresh historical identity established. This would then enshrine the intellectual and political programmes of the bourgeoisie. The

past was to be forgotten wherever it failed to accord with the needs of the future. The intellectual might contemplate the past for the help it gave him in projecting the future - Schlegel called the historian a 'prophet turned backwards' - but the reality to come remained firmly in the hands of the individual's initiative and enterprise. In the words of another bourgeois innovator, 'History is bunk!'

But an ideology which is an instrument of change in one period can become an instrument of reaction in another. In the twentieth century the manipulation of 'history' for the creation of mythologies of progress to legitimate the present relations of power means that it is no longer a road of emancipation. The ideology of revolt in the early nineteenth century has become an ideology of retrenchment in the twentieth. The myths deliberately constructed by National Socialism are one example of this. The universities supply another.

The most important aspect of this is the institution of cultural history, whose most prominent aspect is the study of the history of literature. Although Friedrich Schlegel was in fact one of the first exponents of an individualist theory of literary criticism, and his influence could be seen in the fact that Berlin University (founded 1810) had the first chair of German literature anywhere, it was not until the last years of the nineteenth century that the necessary conditions for a successfully institutionalized study of literature arose. Putting it crudely, those conditions were established by a general distrust of the capacity of competitive capitalism to generate an effective code of social values. The belief that literature could offer a source of norms and cultural guidance, rather than remaining a mere object of philological curiosity, led to an enormous growth in its status as an academic discipline. The emergence of the Cambridge English School after the disasters of the first war is paradigmatic for the swing towards literary study, and the nostalgic embrace of its supposedly secure and timeless civilizing values.

The object of this study was briskly erected as the canon of 'great literature', the preserve of unquestioned genius. Its methodology was that of the Romantics - creative characterisation or, in Schelling's words, 'Only learn so that you may yourself create'.¹³ In England the institutionalized study of literature is still founded on these two things, the belief in literary genius as a self-justifying concept, and a reactionary methodology which Walter Benjamin characterised as 'the Hydra of academic aesthetics with its seven heads: creativity, empathy, timelessness, creative response, sympathy, illusion and artistic pleasure'.¹⁴ The conservative

orientation of this form of study is plain. The student is encouraged to make his obeisances to a tradition which is beyond real criticism, suspended in the realms of the aesthetic at a safe distance from the vulgarity of practical existence. Various approaches are branded as unacceptable. An 'ad hominem' appeal to the author or his intentions is outlawed, ostensibly because it does not make epistemological sense, but in fact because it would soon make clear that authors do not in fact write in an ideological and political vacuum. The 'positivist' concern with historical circumstances or influences is also banned, on similar grounds and with similar intent. Some modern 'structuralist' criticism is only a re-formulation of the old bourgeois claim of the timelessness of 'literature'. To 'de-centre' a text is to remove it from its context of political interest into the world of pure disinterested form. For all their supposed interest in materialism and the role of ideology it is not fortuitous that the most celebrated texts of many progressive critics are those of the most introverted bourgeois formalism - Joyce and the nouveau roman.

It is clear to many people that institutions of cultural history in England, particularly literature departments, are often very conservative in their outlook. What they do not commonly realize is that the reform of such institutions and the views they enact requires more than the refurbishing of their methodologies with the aid of importations from France. We shall consider this further in the next section.

(d) Academic quietism and French dialectical theory

The scepticism of individualist theory was originally part of a revolt led by intellectuals. In the twentieth century it has made possible the construction of a new dogmatism. On the other hand, however, there are also those who exploit a 'dialectical' relativism to justify their own acquiescence in a practice which, theoretically, they might reject. The current vehicle of this cynicism, which is a peculiarly English affliction and goes hand in hand with such things as donnish whimsy, is the theory borrowed from Louis Althusser and Jacques Lacan.

Althusser's more recent work tends towards the assertion that all discourse is ideological, in the sense that discourse which does not imply an ideological subject is almost inconceivable.¹⁵ This may also be understood as a consequential development of his earlier view, in the essay on the materialist dialectic, that the 'practices' of knowledge are more immediately real than the 'objects' they work on.¹⁶ It is not always entirely plain whether the web of ideology is for Althusser an oppression

or an inescapable epistemological condition. His overall position may be made clearer, however, if on considers his theory in the light of its treatment of history. One of the more puzzling contentions he offers about ideology is that it is, like Freud's unconscious, 'eternal'.¹⁷ To decipher this remark it is necessary to turn to what Lacan, a decisive influence on the later Althusser, has to say about history and the subject under psychoanalysis.

Lacan believes that 'reality', at least in the context of psychoanalysis, is only accessible if the transcendental status of speech is accepted. 'Psychoanalysis has only one medium; the patient's speech.'¹⁸ Lacan relies on a formal-dialectical relation between speech and language, in that speech is the means of spiritual emancipation while language, by implication, forms a fixed structure. The 'truth' of the individual's existence is, with Lacan, dissolved into something which is opposed to the conscious self, namely the fluid irony of de-centred speech. In this respect Lacan is close to the impulse of the young German Romantics: revolt against the dogmatic is at the centre of his thinking.

At the same time, Lacan is notably fastidious, ascetic, world-weary. His work does not open on to vistas of grand reform, but only into glimpses of a world where mankind will accept more willingly its own symbolical and poetical capabilities. He bemoans 'the rarefaction of the effects of speech in the present social context'¹⁹, and says that only through symbolic interpretation can the patient begin 'the realization of a full speech'.²⁰ Like the Romantics, again, Lacan turns to the historical not as a source of authoritative precedent but as an articulation of the present. The spirit which moves the subject at this instant expresses itself in terms of a history, what Lacan calls the 'epic' of its antecedents. This 'history' has two important qualities. In the first place it is not primarily a relation of real facts. It is not ultimately relevant whether the recollections of the patient are true or not; Lacan compares them to the myths of the foundation of Rome which the modern recipient learns to read as the 'symbols of a destiny in progress'.²¹ He emphasizes that in psychoanalysis truth ('verite') overrides 'reality'; the history constructed by the subject is the locus of that truth.

In the second place Lacan identifies this process of historicisation with the intersubjective basis of discourse. The structured clarity of language itself, the self-explanatory quality of superficial consciousness, these are not the true basis of communication because they lack the essential quality of the dialectic, the moment of ironic distance. The

imaginary relations of the ego are the subject's response to an ill-conceived reality principle; the psychoanalyst who remains on this level will fail to free the psyche from its self-imposed burden. The only access to 'truth' which is open to the analyst and to his patient is through speech. It is speech which is the basic constitutive element in the intersubjective world; for even when it communicates nothing, the very occurrence of speech testifies to the possibility of communication.²²

Lacan's view of speech may be illuminated if one compares it with the Romantics' view of art. Artistic creation was for them the model of human activity in its creative aspect - the point where one could see most clearly the way in which the subjective deed produced the objective world. The essence of this artistic creation was its freedom, a freedom which was secured by the art-work's absolute abandonment of any pre-existing norms and standards. For the Romantics, the novelty and originality of a work of art was the central index of its validity as a creative deed. Because of this irony was a central mode of its functioning, since only irony could achieve the distance from all previous conditions. Furthermore only a completely open-minded, non-corrective response was appropriate in the art critic; the ideal response was a 'characterisation' which itself continued the process of creative originality.

This underlies Lacan's exposition of psychoanalysis. The world does not consist of fixed structures, whether psychic or historical; any attempt to treat them as fixed is a capitulation to an illusory 'reality'. The only true intersubjective world is that maintained as process by the repeated irruption of the speech act. Speech is the ontic deed, the activity which ensures that the world is, in Romantic terminology, the work of art of the subject. Linguistic functionalism, an understanding of speech which reduces it only to a procedure for efficient communication, is ultimately the destruction of any communication at all.²³ By contrast the 'gratuitous creativity' of the subjective spirit expresses a truth even when the 'ego' is not aware of it. It is the role of the analyst to liberate the ego into a fuller comprehension of subjective truth.

This form of analysis, like Schlegel's literary 'characterisation', refrains from imposing itself upon the subject's speech. The analyst merely assists in what Lacan calls the 'scansion' of the subject's creativity; his consulting hours provide a framework around which the subject can mould its cadences and conclusions.²⁴ In addition, and here we revert to our own point of interest, it is necessary for the analyst to be able to place the subject's speech into a wider perspective. Speech constitutes the

intersubjective. But how is one to identify, or even to allude to, this domain? Lacan answers that it sites itself in the process of historicisation. The 'epic' which the spirit produces to substantiate itself involves the construction of a domain in which intersubjectivity emerges in mythic history. As we have seen, Lacan disregards the question of whether the 'events' recounted in this history are real or not; its importance lies in its indication of the present state of the subject, preparing to go on into the future.²⁵ The task of the analyst is to induce the subject to recognise his explanatory account of himself as in truth the epic of his essential existence, the authentic basis of his relations with the world. In Lacan's eyes this 'assumption by the subject of his history' is the goal of analysis.²⁶ This history is identical with what is also called the 'unconscious'; the recognition of either as fundamental to the speech acts which constitute the subject is the beginning of psychic emancipation. 'That which we teach the subject to recognise as his unconscious is in fact his history.'²⁷ Again we remember the role of history in Romantic theory; history, or the construction of a 'tradition', is the mythology by which we understand our own acts as the originators of our own world.

We are now in a position to assess what Althusser means when he says that ideology is eternal, 'just like the unconscious' ('tout comme l'inconscient'). The shift of emphasis in Althusser's later work is here clear. Whereas previously he worked with the conception of a transition from ideology to science, with dialectical materialism the science which could resist bourgeois ideological mystification, he now moves towards a different epistemology. The comparison between ideology and the unconscious, and his implied appeal to Lacan, shows that the later Althusser does not regard ideology as a pejorative term. Ideology, now, becomes the conceptual identity which any economic formation has to work out for itself, and which is an indispensable part of the life of that formation. The 'ideological subject', the subject of all conceivable discourse, does not correspond to the insidious stasis of Lacan's 'ego'; rather, it corresponds to the fundamental unconscious root of true intersubjectivity. When Althusser says that this ideology is eternal, he does not mean that it is without history. What he means is that like Lacan's unconscious the history that it creates is first and foremost an expression of its present, and of the future implicit in its present. The interest of the 'ideological subject' in creating its own tradition overrides any determination by a notionally objective historical sequence. It also overrides any direct determination by the material base: 'Thus

ideology does not represent the system of real relation which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of these individuals to the real relations under which they live.'²⁸ Quite what the connection between the material and the ideological now is is not entirely plain; but for guidance we may recall Althusser's earlier theory that society is a collection of relatively autonomous 'practices' in which the more cerebral ones have an equal share in the determination of reality.

The important conclusion, in our context, is the suggestion that the activities of radical intellectuals may be confined to ideology, in the sense that ideological revolt is as 'practical' and effective as any other sort. The instrument of this intellectual revolution appears to be a modification of the familiar notion of irony, in this instance under the guise of 'criticism and autocriticism'. On his theory of the universality of ideology depends, according to Althusser, 'the whole theory of criticism and autocriticism, golden rule of the practice of the marxist-leninist class struggle'.²⁹ But it seems eccentric to suggest that 'class struggle' of any very productive kind can depend on the critical contemplation of theoretical statements, and especially of one's own theoretical statements. If all discourse relates primarily to 'ideology', a structure which pre-determines all statements, projects, and intentions, then perhaps the only possibility of progress does indeed reside in the persistent study of what has already been articulated within it. But at the same time one must object that intellectual institutions such as universities are situated in a very distinct nexus of material interests; and Althusser seems dangerously close to a legitimation of the indulgent irony of academic wits, sceptical of the whole notion of purposeful reform, and aware that their own interests would probably not be furthered by it anyway. Whatever Althusser's position in his own country, he is not always an appropriate guide for 'ideological' reform in Britain.

(e) Ideology and activism

The main thing that educational institutions try to inculcate is a belief in themselves - a process which is not easily reducible to single ideologies. But in order to understand what this commitment to their own continuation implies we must be able to identify particular reasons for the acceptance of education. On the other hand universalistic theories such as Althusser's conception of the 'ideological state apparatus' embed education, and any possibility of practical action, in a mire of theoretical determination. We are not trying to extract some sinister

concealed purpose; we are trying to establish the - morally neutral - conceptual and organisational patterns of British higher education so that coherent alternatives may be produced.

The critical programmes of many supposedly progressive thinkers are much foreshortened by their inability to see theory as historically and materially relative. This essay has attempted to show a common ethical interest running through various aspects of bourgeois theory: the assertion of the primacy of individual creativity. Everything which is imposed from outside is, by this theory, bad; everything which grows from the untrammelled freedom of the productive point is good. Once bourgeois theories are seen in this light, as I believe they can be, apparently rival philosophies can be seen to have much in common. Specifically, there is nothing in modern French dialectical thought which cannot be aligned with this programme. To that extent, in Britain at least such importations must be understood as the refinement of existing individualist theory, and their sophistication as the baroque embellishment of an old edifice.

The dialectic in its proper application - and this is true of all genuinely revolutionary thought - is profoundly sceptical towards abstract theory. The revolution of Kant was his insistence that metaphysical concepts be presented in terms of an accessible intellectual programme. Hegel, in continuation, challenged the validity of any intellectual programme which transcended the phenomenal world of sign and speech. Our own emancipation today must be grounded on Marx's contention that all philosophical theory, in its actual application, is propaganda for a material interest. Truly dialectical thinking is never completed by the demonstration of theoretical inconsistencies, or by the attempt to revise incoherent conceptual positions. The motto of a genuine dialectical critique is 'cui bono?' - 'who benefits by this?'; any argument which is unwilling or unable to tie its opponent to the assertion of a simple material interest must be regarded as itself supportive of that interest. This is why the so-called theoretical revolutions of recent years are no more than a breeze in the academic teacup; any 'revolution' which, as in Britain, leaves the entire institutional structure of the university world almost untouched is no different, in the last resort, from acclamation and encouragement.

The pernicious side of the theoretical fads now flourishing in Britain is their relativism. Althusser's notion of the universality of ideology is an example of this. If all discourse is the discourse of an ideologically constituted subject, then there can be no way of assessing the value

of one statement relative to another. There can be no precise guide to political action, because any formulation of aims is open to the reservation that it is a basically ideological viewpoint. In Althusser's theory there is not even any direct correlation between ideology and the relations of production; ideology, and the conceptuality which depends on it, is played out on a hermetically 'imaginary' level. Presumably the revolutionary has to wait for the rumblings of the ideological unconscious before he can take action. 'Cui bono?' we may ask. The answer is at hand; any theory which denies the possibility of simple and binding criteria of action, which is sceptical even towards the possibility of its own existence, makes life very peaceful for the person who holds it. The attraction of such a theory in the universities lies in the fact that beyond supplying a vehicle for the elegant analysis of cultural idiosyncrasies it does nothing whatever to confront the institutions upon which the academics themselves depend. Althusser's apparent assumption that his own academic apparatus is undeserving of the strictures he directs at the school system is symptomatic of this complacency. The quasi-French jargon which obscures the deliberations of British 'radicals' achieves the same ends as donnish irony has done for a long time. While the academic is protected from any practical issue by a deep moat of theoretical obfuscation, if his political commitment is held at bay by the belief that every statement has limitless ideological resonances, if reform is eternally crushed by foppish wit and whimsy, it is not surprising that the British universities are as they are.

A consequential materialism does not doubt the possibility of its own existence; it only doubts the motives of those who claim to have none. Materialist relativism does not claim that all statements are 'false' or 'ideological', merely that people naturally arrange their existence, and their opinions, around their source of livelihood. On a social level the theory of bourgeois individualism is not false, it is merely a refined response to the needs of capitalism. It is no less true because it is possible to identify a specific purpose behind it. Probably it is the case that there cannot be a philosophy without a purpose - not because 'ideology' is a transcendental epistemological determinant, but simply because a philosophy without a practical purpose would be transcendently boring. The fact that when a man speaks he has some aim in mind does not invalidate what he says. Nor does it make it impossible to modify his argument, or resist his aim, by equally purposeful criticism. It may be that both parties to a disagreement still share some higher consensus - but again that does not mean that all action and truth should be seen

as conditioned by an epistemic absolute forever beyond our reach.

The function of the dialectic is the clarification of purpose, both constructively and destructively. But this does not exhaust the process of argument and philosophical deliberation. The further element is criticism. Criticism is not the same as Althusser's 'autocritique' - a person only changes direction if he wishes to throw someone off his track, in this case the track towards academic inertia. Criticism which remains internal to ideology is a meaningless logical formalism, an intellectual conjuring trick which can justify everything and nothing. Material and purposeful criticism is the assessment of precedent. Individualist theory resists the notion of precedent, of an authority in the past, because for it all truth is primarily the product of present subjective creation. If the subject has a history, it is a synthetic creation directed towards its own immediate ends; it does not bear any demonstrable relation to an objective truth. Materialism must overcome this notion, not because history is necessarily on the side of truth or goodness, but because it is only in the interest of the reigning hegemony to claim that history is all its own. The dominant class creates a tradition for itself, and presents history as a continuum leading inescapably to its own victory.

The oppressed must destroy the continuity of the oppressor's tradition by destroying its credibility. The claimed regularities of the past can never legitimate the emancipatory break. The proletariat will not enter history by dreaming of 'laws' which ensure victory while it sleeps, but only by critically invalidating the claims and titles of its oppressors. As Walter Benjamin wrote in the manuscripts for the Theses on the Philosophy of History, 'The consciousness of historical discontinuity is the peculiar property of revolutionary classes in the moment of action.'³⁰ A revolutionary historiography does not claim that history is only known as the synthetic extension of subjectivity; it recalls that there is a real history which never justifies the arrogance of the victors in their present supremacy. Again, in Benjamin's words, the revolutionary class is the avenger of the crimes of the oppressor; it has no truck with the supposed inevitability of a false historical continuum. The instrument of critical examination is intended to establish the character of turning points in the past, the discontinuous nodes of oppression in the ascendant. The facts of oppression are real facts, points where power was assumed by those who now abuse it, assumptions without precedent or legitimacy. It suits the purposes of bourgeois historians to be sceptical about the authority of events which disrupt the smooth continuum of the tradition

which legitimates them; it is a task of the materialist historian to establish the validity of such events.

The most insidious continuum which faces any materialist intellectual at the moment is the persistence of bourgeois individualism and its institutionalisation in the universities. This essay has tried to indicate areas where the ostentatious 'tradition' of the British universities conceals discontinuities and a quite specific political role. There are good historical reasons, subsequently absorbed by theoretical propaganda, why the British universities were able to achieve autonomy and independence from vocational ties. Their immense acquisition of wealth in the seventeenth century, and the ideology of liberal education which was subsequently imported from Germany in the nineteenth, have made possible the fastidiously cloistered environment we know today. But there is no compelling need for this form. Precedent, if anything, shows us that universities are in every sense more productive if they play a direct role in social affairs. As Zöckler has pointed out in his book on Dilthey, the vocational link between theoretical disciplines and the teaching profession played a significant role in the development of revolutionary awareness among German students in the late 'sixties. In a curriculum which is vocationally guided it is much less easy for intellectual attitudes to survive when their only support is inertia and self-interest. 'Cui bono?' is a question the student undergoing vocational training will ask automatically. In the rarefied air of an English arts course, however, such crude directness is much more easy to parry.

3: Materialist essentials

Individualism is a theology of the creative self.

Theoretically, it starts with the disqualification of the immediate as an element of logical discourse. The intuitions of the present are incessantly and instantaneously dissolved into the artificial conceptuality of remembered past. As such they fall victim to the transcendent categories of knowledge, and can no longer appear as evidence of anything outside the formed and created entities that they have become. As Gadamer says, it is useless to 'brandish immediacy' ('auf das Unmittelbare pochen') as an argument for materiality, the reduction of philosophy to politics, or anything else.³¹

The second step in this argument is the enthronement of dialectical reason as itself the only accountable form of immediacy. The move from a nominalistic scepticism to an individualistic theology rests on the contention that since 'external realities' can never be preserved as direct data, they might as well be treated as ultimately irrelevant. They are thus quietly replaced by an ontology of the acting reason; the realm of materiality and external contingency is invaded by the mind and taken prisoner.

On this basis the mythology of individualism can be built up. Most conspicuous is the myth of technological science, the belief in the ultimate controllability of all natural phenomena. Positivism, despite its apparent naivete, is a legitimate child of individualist theology. One of the proudest possessions of conceptuality is the argument from cause to effect; therefore the world of (created) experience must also be reducible to this process; and its assertion in the world of machines and constructions is the finest vindication of the primacy of conceptuality and creativity.

We also find the myth of the abolition of contingency. History becomes a sequence of human intentions and creations, movements of the spirit, ideological revolutions. Things no longer happen by chance in individualist historiography. For the individualist all the world is a text, and the mythic forces which propel it are to be divined in the undulations of dialectical form. The man who understands this text with its metaphors, its ironies, its dialectical self-annihilation, is closest to the seat of the godhead and the mysterious languages of his incarnation.

The mythic quality of individualism is matched by its role as an ideology - as an instrument of material interests, that is to say. The

myth of historical continuum is the legitimation of present domination. The belief that the most sophisticated control of conceptuality - in technology and in the word - is also domination of reality justifies the authority of those who can control techne and logos. Hence our respect for science, for innovation, for the media - and our failure to discern the very mundane interest of those who finance and control such enterprises.

Materialism can only assert itself by shattering this belief in the continuous flow of history, and the semantic wholeness of reality. The theology of individual creativity must be replaced by a theology of matter. Conceptuality may well be alienated from 'external reality' - but this does not mean that 'external reality' does not exist, and still less does it justify the worship of ideological and technical control, and the usurpation of legitimacy by those who achieve it. In materialist terms conceptual application is always isolated. The coherence of the concept is part of its quality as an instrument; it should not be attributed to the things upon which it works, things which must always be considered as ultimately contingent. The myth of total predictability and control is no more than a myth.

A materialist fragmentation of the world into noumenal contingency opens radical possibilities of revolution and the assertion of interest. No adequate power for change or emancipation can arise from a belief in determination and abstract necessity.

The common ideology of British universities is constructed to contain all practical movements for change. By means of the secret, non-vocational exam and by means of the ideology of individualism, all movements within the academic world are reduced to the one containable level of dialectical interplay. Differences of opinion are explained as conceptual activity, the stirring of irony and metaphor in the realm of the spirit.

It is time that those who are restrained behind the barriers of the British exam system should recognise the purpose and mechanism of this control. In altering it, they can alter the entire tenor of higher education. The British universities should be reconstituted as socially active institutions, not as the arenas for ideological spectacle which they are now. Forcing examination procedures into the open is the best place to start.

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