

# FIRST THINGS

---

## THE END OF THE UNIVERSITY

by Roger Scruton

April 2015

---

Universities exist to provide students with the knowledge, skills, and culture that will prepare them for life, while enhancing the intellectual capital upon which we all depend. Evidently the two purposes are distinct. One concerns the growth of the individual, the other our shared need for knowledge. But they are also intertwined, so that damage to the one purpose is damage to the other. That is what we are now seeing, as our universities increasingly turn against the culture that created them, withholding it from the young.

The years spent at university belong with the rites of initiation studied by the Victorian anthropologists, in which those born into the tribe assume the burden of perpetuating it. If we lose sight of this, it seems to me, then we are in danger of detaching the university from its social and moral purpose, which is that of handing on both a store of knowledge and the culture that makes sense of it.

That purpose has been central to the educational tradition that created Western civilization. Greek *paideia* regarded the cultivation of citizenship as the core of the curriculum. Religious practice and moral education remained a fundamental part of university studies throughout the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance ideal of the *virtuoso* was the inspiration for the emerging curriculum of the *studia humaniores*. The university that emerged from the Enlightenment did not relax the moral reins but regarded scholarship as a disciplined way of life, whose rules and procedures set it apart from everyday affairs. However, it provided those everyday affairs with the long-term perspective without which no human activity makes proper sense. Even the boisterous student life of the German universities during the nineteenth century, when dueling became part of the university culture, was contained within formal uniform codes of behavior and collegiate domesticity and devoted to that peculiar synthesis of moral discipline, factual knowledge, and cultural competence that the Germans know as *Bildung*.

During the course of the nineteenth century, however, the universities suffered a rapid change in their

public reception. The decline of the religious way of life, the rise of the middle classes eager for social status and political power, and the demands for the knowledge and skills required by an industrial economy all put pressure on the universities to change their curriculum, their recruitment of students and teachers, and their relation to the surrounding culture. New universities were founded in Britain and America, one of them—University College London, dating from 1826—with an explicitly secular curriculum, designed to produce scientific minds that would sweep away the theological cobwebs in which all university subjects had previously been wrapped.

**D**espite those changes, however, which forced educational institutions into a new consciousness of their mission, the university retained its status as a guardian of high culture. It was a place where speculative thinking, critical inquiry, and the study of important books and languages were all maintained in an atmosphere of studious isolation. When Cardinal Newman wrote *The Idea of a University* in 1852, it was largely to uphold the old conception of the university, as a place apart, a quasi-monastic precinct opposed to the utilitarian mindset of the new manufacturing society. For Newman, a university exists to mold the characters of those who attend it. Immersing its students in a collegiate environment, and impressing on them an ideal of the educated mind, helps to turn raw human beings into gentlemen.

This, Newman implied, is the true social function of the university. Within college walls the adolescent is granted a vision of the ends of life; and he takes from the university the one thing that the world does not provide, which is a conception of intrinsic value. And that is why the university is so important in an age of commerce and industry, when the utilitarian temptation besieges us on every side, and when we are in danger of making every purpose a material one—in other words, as Newman saw it, in danger of allowing the means to swallow the ends.

Much has changed since Newman's day. To suggest that universities are engaged in producing gentlemen is more than faintly ridiculous in an age when most students are women. Newman's ideal university was modeled on the actual universities of Oxford, Cambridge, and Trinity College, Dublin, which at the time admitted only men, did not permit their resident scholars to marry, and were maintained as quasi-religious institutions within the fold of the Anglican Church. Their undergraduates were recruited largely from the private schools, and their curriculum was solidly based in Latin, Greek,

theology, and mathematics. Their domestic life revolved around the college, where dons and undergraduates had their living quarters, and where they dined together each evening in hall, robed in their academic gowns.

Only a small proportion of those who attended the old British universities in Newman's day regarded study as the real purpose of being "up" at the alma mater. Some were there to row or play rugby; some were biding time before inheriting a title; some were on their way to commissions in the army, and were meanwhile rioting with their chums. Almost all were members of a social elite that had hit on this unique way of perpetuating itself, by coating its power with a veneer of high culture. And in this protected and beautiful environment you could also take culture seriously. With money in the bank and time on your hands, it was not so hard to turn your back on utilitarian values.

Today's university differs from Cardinal Newman's in almost every respect. It recruits from all classes of society, is open equally to men and to women, and is very often financed and provisioned by the state. Little if anything remains of the poised domestic life that shaped the soul of Newman, and the curriculum centers not on sublime and purposeless subjects like ancient Greek, in which there hovers the entrancing vision of a life beyond commerce, but on sciences, vocational disciplines, and the now ubiquitous "business studies" through which students supposedly learn the ways of the world.

Moreover, universities have expanded to offer their services to an ever-increasing proportion of the population, and to absorb an ever-growing amount of the national budget. In the state of Massachusetts, university education has the largest revenue of any industry. There is at least one university in every major British or American city, and American state universities may have, at any one time, upward of 50,000 students. Higher education is offered as a right to all who pass the French *baccalauréat* or the German *Feststellungsprüfung*, and European politicians often speak as though the work of educational reform will not be complete until every child is able in due time to become a graduate. The university is no longer in the business of creating a social elite, but in the rival business of ensuring that elites are a thing of the past.

Under the pretense of providing a "purpose beyond purpose," its critics might say, the university extolled by Newman was designed to protect the privileges of an existing upper class and to place obstacles before the advance of its competitors. It imparted futile skills, which were esteemed

precisely for their futility, since this made them into a badge of membership that only a few could afford. And far from advancing the fund of knowledge, it existed to safeguard the sacred myths: It placed a protective wall of enchantment around the religion, the social values, and the high culture of the past, and pretended that the recondite skills required to enjoy this enchantment—Latin and Greek, for example—were the highest forms of knowledge. In short, the Newmanite university was an instrument for the perpetuation of a leisure class. The culture that it passed on was not the property of the whole community but merely an ideological tool, through which the powers and privileges of the existing order were endowed with their aura of legitimacy.

Now, by contrast, we have universities dedicated to the growth of knowledge, which are not merely non-elitist but anti-elitist in their social structure. They make no discrimination on grounds of religion, sex, race, or class. They are places of open-minded research and questioning, places without dogmatic commitments, whose purpose is to advance knowledge through a spirit of free inquiry. This spirit is imparted to their students, who have the widest possible choice of curriculum and acquire knowledge that is not merely firmly grounded but eminently useful in their future lives: business administration, for example, hotel management, or international relations. In short, the universities have evolved from socially exclusive clubs, for the study of precious futilities, to socially inclusive training centers, for the propagation of needed skills. And the culture that they impart is that not of a privileged elite but of an “inclusive culture” that anyone can acquire and enjoy.

That said, however, a visitor to the American university today is more likely to be struck by the indigenous varieties of censorship than by any atmosphere of free inquiry. It is true that Americans live in a tolerant society. But they also breed vigilant guardians, keen to detect and extirpate the first signs of “prejudice” among the young. And these guardians have an innate tendency to gravitate to the universities, where the very freedom of the curriculum, and its openness to innovation, provide them with an opportunity to exercise their censorious passions. Books are put on or struck off the syllabus on grounds of their political correctness; speech codes and counseling services police the language and thought of both students and teachers; courses are designed to impart ideological conformity, and students are often penalized for having drawn some heretical conclusion about the leading issues of the day. In sensitive areas, such as race, sex, and the mysterious thing called “gender,” censorship is overtly directed not only at students but also at any teacher, however impartial and scrupulous, who comes up

with the wrong conclusions.

Of course, the culture of the West remains the primary object of study in humanities departments. However, the purpose is not to instill that culture but to repudiate it—to examine it for all the ways in which it sins against the egalitarian worldview. The Marxist theory of ideology, or some feminist, poststructuralist, or Foucauldian descendent of it, will be summoned in proof of the view that the precious achievements of our culture owe their status to the power that speaks through them, and that they are therefore of no intrinsic worth. To put it another way: The old curriculum, which Newman saw as an end in itself, has been demoted to a means. That old curriculum existed, we are told, in order to maintain the hierarchies and distinctions, the forms of exclusion and domination that maintained a ruling elite. Studies in the humanities are now designed to prove this—to show the way in which, through its images, stories, and beliefs, through its works of art, its music, and its language, the culture of the West has no deeper meaning than the power that it served to perpetuate. In this way the whole idea of our inherited culture as an autonomous sphere of moral knowledge, and one that it requires learning, scholarship, and immersion to enhance and retain, is cast to the winds. The university, instead of transmitting culture, exists to deconstruct it, to remove its “aura,” and to leave the student, after four years of intellectual dissipation, with the view that anything goes and nothing matters.

The impression therefore arises that, outside the hard sciences, there is no received body of knowledge, and nothing to learn, save doctrinal attitudes. In *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom lamented the languid relativism that had infected the humanities—the belief, shared by students and teachers alike, that there are no universal values, and that we study merely out of curiosity the works that have come down to us. If we remain indifferent to the moral challenge with which they confront us, it is largely because we no longer believe that there is such a thing as a real moral challenge.

True though Bloom’s observation is, it is not the whole truth. Moral relativism clears the ground for a new kind of absolutism. The emerging curriculum in the humanities is in fact far more censorious, in crucial matters, than the one that it strives to replace. It is no longer permitted to believe that there are real and inherent distinctions between people. All distinctions are “culturally constructed” and therefore changeable. And the business of the curriculum is to deconstruct them, to replace distinction

with equality in every sphere where distinction has been part of the inherited culture. Students must believe that in crucial respects, in particular in those matters that touch on race, sex, class, role, and cultural refinement, Western civilization is just an arbitrary ideological device, and certainly not (as its self-image suggests) a repository of real moral knowledge. Moreover, they must accept that the purpose of their education is not to inherit that culture but to question it and, if possible, to replace it with a new “multicultural” approach that makes no distinctions between the many forms of life by which the students find themselves surrounded.

To doubt those doctrines is to commit deepest heresy, and to pose a threat to the community that the modern university needs. For the modern university tries to cater to students regardless of religion, sex, race, or cultural background, even regardless of ability. It is to a great extent a creation of the state and is fully signed up to the statist idea of what a society should be—namely, a society without distinction. It is therefore as dependent on the belief in equality as Cardinal Newman’s university was dependent on the belief in God. Its purpose is to create a microcosm of the future society, just as Cardinal Newman’s college was a microcosm of the gentleman’s world. And since our inherited culture is a system of distinctions, standing opposed to equality in all the spheres where taste, judgment, and discrimination make their claims, the modern university has no choice but to stand opposed to Western culture.

Hence, despite their innate aspiration to membership, young people are told at university that they come from nowhere and belong to nothing: that all preexisting forms of membership are null and void. They are offered a rite of passage into cultural nothingness, since this is the only way to achieve the egalitarian goal. They are given, in place of the old beliefs of a civilization based on godliness, judgment, and distinction, the new beliefs of a society based in equality and inclusion; they are told that the judgment of other lifestyles is a crime. If the purpose were merely to substitute one belief system for another, it would be open to rational debate. But the purpose is to substitute one *community* for another.

But what is the alternative? If the universities do not propagate the culture that was once entrusted to them, where else can young people go in search of it? Some thoughts in answer to that question were suggested by experiences that began for me in 1979. The writings of Foucault, Deleuze, and Bourdieu were then beginning to make waves at the University of London, where I taught. My students were

being told on every side that there is no such thing as knowledge in the humanities and that universities exist not to justify culture as a form of knowledge but to unmask it as a form of power.

In response I asked myself what exactly I was trying to teach, and why. By introducing students to the great works of philosophy, literature, and criticism that I had absorbed at school and university, I felt that I was offering them the frame of reference, the store of speculations, the paradigms of insight and allusion, through which to understand their world. I was offering them membership in a culture, not as a body of doctrine but as an ongoing conversation. And this, I felt, was a form of real knowledge: not knowledge of facts and theories, but knowledge of what to feel, how to relate, and with whom to belong. Yet this body of knowledge, as I assumed it to be, was now dismissed as bourgeois ideology, or—in Foucault's idiom—as the *episteme*, the accumulated *savoir*, of a dominating class.

One day an invitation came to me, by word of mouth, to address an underground seminar in Prague. I accepted; as a result, I was brought into contact with people for whom the pursuit of knowledge and culture was not a dispensable luxury but a necessity. Nothing else could provide them with what they sought, which was an escape route from the world of lies by which they were surrounded. And by discussing the Western cultural heritage among themselves, they were marked out as heretics, who risked arrest and imprisonment merely for meeting as they did. Ironically, perhaps the greatest intellectual achievement of the Communist party was to convince people that Plato's distinction between knowledge and opinion is a valid one, and that ideological opinion is not merely distinct from knowledge but the *enemy* of knowledge, the disease implanted in the human brain that makes it impossible to distinguish true ideas from false ones. That was the disease spread by the Party. And it was spread by Foucault, too. For it was Foucault who taught my colleagues to evaluate every idea, every argument, every institution, convention, or tradition in terms of the "domination" that it masks. Truth and falsehood had no real significance in Foucault's world; all that mattered was power.

These issues had been brought into sharp relief for the Czechs and Slovaks by Václav Havel's essay "The Power of the Powerless" (1978), enjoining his compatriots to "live in truth." How could they do that, if they were unable to distinguish the true from the false? And how could they distinguish the true from the false without the benefit of real culture and real knowledge? Hence the search for those things had become urgent. And the price of that search was high—harassment, arrest, deprivation of ordinary

rights and privileges, and a life on the margins of society. When something has a high moral price, only committed people will pursue it. I therefore found, in the underground seminars, a unique student body—people dedicated to knowledge, as I understood it, and aware of the ease and the danger of replacing knowledge with mere opinion. Moreover, they were looking for knowledge in the place where it is most necessary and also hardest to find—in philosophy, history, art, and literature, in the places where critical understanding, rather than scientific method, is our only guide. And what was most interesting to me was the urgent desire among all my new students to *inherit* what had been handed down to them. They had been raised in a world where all forms of belonging, other than submission to the ruling Party, had been marginalized or denounced as crimes. They understood instinctively that a cultural heritage is precious, precisely because it offers a rite of passage into the thing that you truly are and the community of feeling that is yours.

**T**here was another winsome feature of the underground seminars, which is that their intellectual resources were so sparse. Academics in the West are obliged to publish articles and books if they are to advance in their careers, and in the years since the Second World War this had led to a proliferation of literature that, if not always second-rate from the intellectual point of view, has almost invariably been without literary merit—stodgy, cluttered with footnotes, without telling imagery or turns of phrase, and both ephemeral in content and impossible to ignore. The weight of this pseudo-literature oppresses both teachers and students in the humanities, and it is now all but impossible to unearth the classics that lie buried beneath it.

I sometimes think that the greatest service to our culture was done by the person who set fire to the library at Alexandria, thereby ensuring that nothing survived of that mass of literature, other than those works considered so precious that each educated person would have a copy of his own. The communists had performed a similar service to intellectual life in Czechoslovakia, by preventing the publication of anything save those works deemed so precious that people were prepared to produce them in laborious *samizdat* editions. These would be passed from hand to hand and read with eager interest by people for whom knowledge, rather than career advancement, was the goal. How refreshing this was, after the life among academic journals and footling footnotes!

Of course, the circumstances of the underground seminars were unusual and nobody would want to



reproduce them. Nevertheless, during the ten years that I worked with others to turn these private reading groups into a structured (if clandestine) university, I learned two very important truths. The first is that a cultural inheritance really is a body of knowledge and not a collection of opinions—knowledge of the human heart, and of the long-term vision of a human community. The second is that this knowledge can be taught, and that it does not require a vast investment of money to do this, certainly not the \$50,000 per student per year that is demanded by an Ivy League university. It requires a handful of books that have passed the test of time and are treasured by all who truly study them. It requires teachers with knowledge and students eager to acquire it. And it requires the continuing attempt to express what one has learned, either in essays or in the face-to-face encounter with a critic. All the rest—administration, information technology, lecture halls, libraries, extracurricular resources—is, by comparison, an insignificant luxury.

**W**hen institutions are incurably corrupted, as the universities were corrupted under communism, we must begin again, even if the cost is as high as it was in Soviet-occupied Europe. For us the cost is not so high. The most precious gift of our civilization, and the one that was most under threat during the twentieth century, is the freedom to associate. Because this freedom still exists, and nowhere more than in America, the fact that we can no longer entrust our high culture to the universities matters less. The fate of Harvard and Yale is inevitably of general concern; but there are also places like St. John's College in Annapolis, or Hillsdale College in Michigan, where people who believe in the old curriculum are prepared to teach it. There are private reading groups, online courses, associations of scholars, think tanks, and public-lecture series. There are institutions like the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, which offers a rescue service for students beaten down by political correctness. There are journals like this one, which serve as a focal point for discussions that, after all, do not need a university in order to take place. It seems to me that we have allowed ourselves to be intimidated into the belief that, because universities have libraries, laboratories, learned professors, and substantial endowments, they are also indispensable repositories of knowledge. In the sciences this is true. But it is no longer true in the humanities.

However, the way forward is not as clear as the defenders of the old curriculum would like it be. Great Books programs, surveys of our cultural heritage, the comparative study of Western art, music, and architecture—all these are obvious choices. But why? What is it that distinguishes those programs from

the courses in pop music, strip cartoons, and gender studies that so easily step in to replace them? To say that the traditional curriculum contained real knowledge as opposed to ephemeral distractions is to beg the question. For we don't know what knowledge really consists in. We *feel* it, of course, as my Czech students felt it. We feel the call of the culture that is ours, and we want to say that, in responding to this call, we are leaving the world of opinion and entering the world of knowledge. But why?

Answers to date are either trivial—as when Matthew Arnold tells us, in *Culture and Anarchy*, that a high culture consists of the “best that has been thought and said”—or else some version of the Enlightenment view that cultural knowledge involves transcending the particular into the universal, replacing our constricted loyalties and imagined communities with some cosmopolitan ideal. And it is a small step from this Enlightenment position to the multicultural and egalitarian curriculum that espouses the human universal only because everything distinctive of a real cultural inheritance has been removed from it. Until we come up with something better than those two approaches, we will not, I suspect, escape the grip of the universities, or feel confident enough to start again without them.

*Roger Scruton* is author of *Notes from Underground* and *The Soul of the World*.