

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Ian Angus, *Love the Questions: University Education and Enlightenment*. Semaphore Series, Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2009, 102 pp. \$14.95 paper (978-18940337-40-2)

What is the role of the university in contemporary society? What is the purpose of a university education? What are the implications for citizenship and social awareness if their cultivation is no longer safeguarded against the market-oriented functions of the university? In keeping with the spirit of inquiry espoused throughout *Love the Questions: University Education and Enlightenment*, Ian Angus does not claim to have definitive answers; rather, his aim is to ensure that such questions continue being posed. Angus seeks to avoid another lament for the decline of the university, choosing instead “to balance a realistic assessment of the state of the contemporary university and the forces that would undermine it with a sense of what can be saved, reinvented, or discovered of its potential” (p. 10).

Two themes threaded throughout the book are “enlightenment” and “techno-science.” Historically, the university has been “the only institution that is constitutively committed to enlightenment,” that is, to bringing the heritage of critical thought to bear on issues of public concern. This commitment, however, is increasingly threatened by the dominative logic of “techno-science,” in which the utility of knowledge is seen primarily in its technical application. This fundamentally undermines the university as the repository of a “unity of knowledge,” a role it should hold in regardless of any particular instantiation of the practical application of knowledge.

Grounded in this manner, Angus explores several important issues facing the university today, including: a corporate model of education, a consumerist approach to teaching and learning, threats to academic freedom, and the transformation of knowledge relations between the university and society. The burgeoning discrepancy between those involved in the production of knowledge and those solely involved in its transmission, for instance, has become a conspicuous feature of the contemporary university. The proletarianization of university teaching, conducted by an increasing number of contract and sessional faculty (recently surpassing 70% in the US), and the concomitant pursuit of “world class”

research by the institutional elite, is a disturbing trajectory. According to Angus, the usurpation of the “public university” by the “corporate university” has taken place incrementally, “without dismantling procedures and practices directly but by simply voiding them of real content” (p. 15). What remains resembles a veritable simulacrum of what the university once was, or could be, and embodies an increasingly impoverished encapsulation of its mission of teaching, research, and service.

Whilst the modern university has stood precariously balanced between the nation-state and the capitalist economy, “between the ideal of citizenship and marketable applications,” the balance has tipped for the contemporary university, claims Angus, because of a transformed funding environment. In the past government funding to the university allowed considerable autonomy in its expenditure; now the predominance of corporate funding demands ever more accountability, and government funding has begun to mimic the corporate model. This amounts to a loss of the critical and reflexive role of the university. Contesting this, Angus suggests that the economic and political functions of the university need to be “pervaded by a practice whose distinctiveness consists in its attempt to transcend those functions by inquiring into their justification and their place in the wider social order” (p. 19). The value of the university, he argues, lies in its critical capacity, which can grasp the significance of the whole irrespective of its constituent parts. Unless current trends are challenged, the university risks abandoning its humanistic tradition, becoming in the process an institution composed of “a jumble of remnants of traditions and ad-hoc improvisations” rendered increasing servile to the dictates of society. While Angus acknowledges that the struggle for enlightenment (a concept he by no means uses uncritically) has not been limited to the institutional confines of the university, jettisoning such a project endangers the crucial critical function of the university in society.

Although based upon his experience in Canada (Angus is a humanities professor at Simon Fraser University and has written extensively on critical theory and political thought), the text is pitched at a broader level of generality and should be of great interest to anyone concerned with the role and purpose of the university in Canada and beyond. As it avoids either overly romanticizing the university’s past or pathologizing its potential future, one would hope that Angus’s slender volume finds its way on to the night-table of university administrators, who are too often caricatured in similar literature as cutback-eager bureaucrats.

A criticism of the text is that it is guided by philosophical rather than practical concerns. Although Angus claims that “a lot depends on whether the public, or publics, comes to recognize the role that a real university culture can play in society and demands the political will and

financial resources for it to do so" (p. 125), there is little in the way of concrete recommendation for action. Whilst disillusionment infused with a dose of despair occasionally permeates its pages, Angus is careful not to posit a impossible standard for the contemporary university, but rather one which retains a normative judgment for what it could be. If he occasionally veers toward an idealization of the idea of the university, it is a bias borne from a love of critical inquiry. The university may no longer inhabit the space of relative privilege it has occupied historically, but that does not invalidate the crucial role it has to play in fostering a socially aware and critically informed citizenry.

Written in an erudite and eloquent manner throughout, the text concludes with a useful guide for further reading on the key themes dealt with throughout the volume.

York University

Alan Bourke

Alan Bourke is a doctoral candidate in sociology at York University.
abourke@yorku.ca