

# Reviewing

The Australian 8/xi/2000

## the culture of discourse

Critical scrutiny will beat accumulated riches of the mind any time. **Dirk Moses** responds to Geoffrey Bolton's future history of the humanities.

**E**VERYONE who wants to rescue the liberal arts from the iron cage of utility and quantifiable assessment would have found much with which to agree in historian Geoffrey Bolton's assessment last week of the status of the humanities in Australian universities.

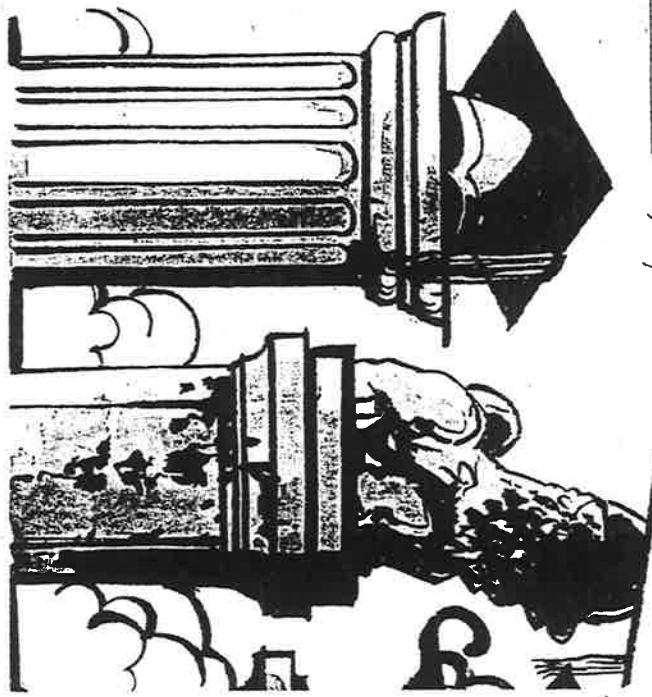
Bolton, in his John Ward lecture at the University of Sydney (HES, November 1), contended that the crisis in the humanities is the consequence of the disintegration of the intellectual culture — exposure to the classics, a knowledge of European and American history, and an Anglophone literature — that anti-phoned the constitutional settlement of Federation and inspired the social vision of prime ministers from Barton to Menzies and Whitlam.

Sterile provincialism, self-absorption and a retreat from international engagements threaten to blight the future of a nation once regarded with New Zealand as one of the world's most "promising social laboratories", Bolton said.

The technocratic gaze has also infected universities, which have been starved into seeking private support along American lines.

although "in a population of less than 20 million there can be only a limited number of potential philanthropists".

Bolton is not the only observer to voice such concern. Recently another historian, Erich Hobsbawm, wrote: "Most young men and women at the century's end grew up in a sort of permanent present, lacking any organic relation to the public past of the times they live in."



Although he does not distinguish clearly between them, Bolton is worried by two consequences of this cultural decline: that Australian elites have lost the capacity for "scholarly generalisations and informed comment on contemporary questions", and that they cannot see "there is a life of the creative imagination that cannot be reduced to economic quantification".

It would do Bolton an injustice to expect a remedy in a single lecture but it is worth examining what he does offer and seeing where it leads.

Bolton thinks the common intellectual culture of Australia's foundation moment needs to be revived and he places enormous faith in the power of education to undertake this task.

"Universities these days spend considerable time and energy on producing mission statements," he says. "It is neither self-serving nor over-idealistic to insist that these mission statements should include the responsibility of ensuring that Australia's decision-makers of the 21st century are women and men whose cultural breadth and humane values at least equal those of individuals such as Barton and Deakin who created the Australian commonwealth."

Bolton's is a salutary reminder that alternative traditions exist with which to critically analyse the present situation.

Two classics of cultural criticism reveal the lineage of Bolton's dismay with the state of Australian intellectual culture. Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) and Max Weber's *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Rise of Capitalism* (1904-05) provide the terms of Bolton's attack, consciously or unconsciously.

The two books are remarkably similar. Drawing on English critics before him, but ultimately on the German classical tradition, Arnold cast a critical eye over mid 19th-century English culture. He criticised the middle class for its narrowness of focus

on material gain, blindness to artistic and intellectual goods, exaggerated individualism and valorisation of freedom as an end in itself, bereft of higher ends. This baleful philistinism, he made plain, was the poison fruit of puritan culture.

### Puritans are specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart

Nietzsche

significantly, he looked to Germany for inspiration. A fervent admirer of Wilhelm von Humboldt, the architect of the Prussian education reforms in the early 19th century, Arnold recommended his vision of state control of education so that the governors could "give the governed a lesson and draw out in them the idea of a right reason higher than the suggestions of an ordinary man's ordinary self".

It is not difficult to see the value of these terms for Bolton's project of cultural renewal. His cosmopolitan, liberal Anglicanism looks down in despair on the damage inflicted by John Howard's austere Methodism, just as Arnold and Weber lamented the effects of puritan capitalism in their own day.

Although many would share Bolton's concern for the liberal arts, it is less clear whether they would agree with his solution.

The recommendation of the cultural values of the founding fathers implies that the regrettable things in Australian history this century happened despite them. But there is good reason to think that at least some occurred because of them; for example, the policy of forcibly removing Aboriginal children from their mothers. This culture, after all, provided the motive action, for it was thought irresponsible to permit, as Arnold wrote of working-class Londoners, "a multitude of miserable, sunken and ignorant human beings (to be left by us in their degradation and wretchedness)".

This is not to suggest that Bolton would approve of this function of European civilisation but it does mean that some reflexive self-distancing needs to be part of the equation.

If it is true that the technocratic imperatives of successive federal governments have all but disabled the traditional rationale

of the humanities, then it is also true that a new rationale will have to convince such governments and the taxpayers that they are worth generous financial support.

My intuition is that Bolton's laudable appeal to "cultural depth and spaciousness of perception" will not convince them, implying as it does that they are at best culturally shallow.

Although some may react by taking up Macaulay's invocation that "we must educate our masters", the imperative of public accountability also presents an opportunity to justify the cultural and political significance of the liberal arts. A democratic

Bolton points the way forward when he writes of their importance for political life. The national interest cannot be formed in a historical vacuum; domestic problems need to be set in international relief; political debate requires participants who not only possess some cultural capital but can reason in terms of collective social goals.

It is here that the university can play a unique role in a society in thrall to means-end rationality. For it is the site of what sociologist Alvin W. Gouldner calls the "culture of critical discourse". It makes no claim to reveal metaphysical truth, only to be an open-ended discussion about the status of knowledge of any sphere of human endeavour.

To learn this language, students must subject their formative influences to scrutiny. What better way to educate the future decision-makers than for them to learn that a proposition is valid only when it is justifiable, rather than passively to download the highly contestable "accumulated riches of the mind"?

Showing governments that our common life — politics — cannot work without the continuing institutionalisation of the culture of critical discourse will be a good start to winning back public confidence in the humanities and its mission.

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