
The Abolition of Thought

Roger Scruton considers its absence from education and public life

Until two or three years ago I was spending all my working hours either in a university or reflecting on the needs of a university and trying to produce the kind of writing that university life requires. So I had many opportunities to consider what has actually been happening to our universities in the years since the war, and in particular in the last two decades. It seems to me not that thinking has ceased, but that people have cultivated and acquired the art of pretending to think.

I was educated in the days when there was a serious curriculum, which involved a considerable amount of knowledge: knowledge not only about our own society and history and culture but also about other societies, other histories and other cultures. Those of my generation who taught the humanities in the sixties and seventies were still teaching according to the old curriculum. It required us to teach not only the history of our own country but the history of ancient and medieval peoples. It required our colleagues to teach ancient languages, Latin and Greek in particular, and the culture that goes with those languages. Our colleagues had to teach religions which were no longer believed in; they had to inform their students about the intricate details of Greek and Roman mythology, about the habits, customs and values of the ancient tribes of Israel, Babylon and Egypt. These bits of information went naturally into the heads of young people throughout the last century and most of this century.

The curriculum that was being taught, in other words, was not simply confined to the culture that young people imbibe from their surroundings. It involved an education in a whole series of cultures quite unrelated to each other except through the accident of history. It in-

involved studying cultures of people who had long since disappeared from the earth, studying their languages, their gods, their ways of life, their expectations, and their history. It was indeed a multicultural curriculum.

This old curriculum has been destroyed in the last ten years by something called multi-culturalism, which tells us that our traditional education was ethnocentric. For it concentrated on the culture produced by dead, white, European males, as the American idiom has it. In place of the traditional curriculum was to be put the "multicultural" curriculum. This involves studying, or teaching at least, the products of a variety of cultures supposedly represented in the modern urban landscape. The result of this move has been that no culture in particular has been imparted to the youth of today, nor have they been given much knowledge about any culture other than their own. The multicultural curriculum typically involves studying rap music, comic strips, Rastafarianism — off-shoots of disinherited minorities in inner cities, most of whom are driven by their migrant situation into absorbing what culture they can from the television and the mass media. The result is an entirely mono-cultural curriculum, focused in an uneducative way on the trivia of day-to-day life in a modern urban environment. The 'multicultural' curriculum does not involve the acquaintance with any culture other than the commercialised mish-mash which is available to youth already. It is therefore not something that can really be put forward as a serious topic of study. This difficulty has come to the attention of those who have tried to teach according to the new multicultural programmes in American universities. On the whole they have recognised that there is noth-

ing very much that they are being asked to teach; they are required merely to rehearse the obsessions which students have when they come to university in order that they should retain them when they leave.

There is no going back, because our old curriculum, the truly multicultural curriculum, required serious knowledge before you could even begin to study it. You had to know some Latin, you had to know some basic history, and you had to have acquired these things at the age when your interest in them was still awakened. It is very difficult at the age of twenty two to begin to acquire the outline knowledge of history which is necessary to make sense of all the details. We are therefore now seeing a new generation of graduates who do not really have any structure to their thinking, because the time when structure could be acquired was passed over in attending to trivia.

It only required a little bit of thinking to recognise that our curriculum as it existed was multicultural, as multicultural as it could conceivably be without being merely confused. Under pressure from fashionable ideology and also the general laziness which confronts us in the modern world, this old curriculum was steadily abolished.

Feminism is, to my mind, another vehicle for pretended thought, in an area where thinking has been very much needed. What are men, what are women? How do they and should they stand in relation to each other? It is not as though people are not familiar with this topic, it is not as though a great deal of human thought has not been devoted to it. If you read the novels of Jane Austen you will see intense and extended meditation on what is possible between man and woman, and also what is ideal. All that

has been thrown away by the academic feminists, who regard even the novels of Jane Austen as constructed around an agenda formed by men. It is as though the whole history of mankind had been produced by one sex alone. If that were so it would say something serious about the other sex. But of course it is not so. As everybody knows, the relations between the sexes are the product of a million years of constant negotiation. The wisdom involved in that process has been encapsulated in the art and literature that has come down to us. It is this art and literature that we should be studying if we want to know about the situation of woman in the modern world. Feminism has thrown all traditional sources of social knowledge away. In universities, especially in America, it has set up branches of the curriculum devoted purely to the reading of feminist writers: *women's studies* or, in Stanford University, *feminist studies* — the assumption being that you have to be a feminist in order even to sit in the classroom. The effect is to close the mind entirely. Here is a subject which implies in its title that you have to agree with certain far from credible prejudices if you are to graduate. That too is an example of the undoing of thought.

Another instance, politically much more relevant in England, is the lobby in favour of animal rights. The slightest bit of thinking would here have prevented a great deal of confusion and brought much emotion to a sensible quietus. Anybody who thinks about the concept of a right will know that animals cannot have rights without also having duties; it would then be possible to blame them, punish them, reward them and also hold them guilty for their violations of others' rights. In which case whole species, like the eagle and the lion, would have to be condemned as inexorable violators of the rights of others. The confusion that would enter into our dealing with animals, if we really thought that they had rights, is so great that it would be impossible to relate to them coherently at all. It needs only a very small amount of thought to recognise that animals do not have rights and cannot have rights. Yet there is a movement in Britain, involving the lobbying of Parliament

and mass advertising, based on the assumption that animals do have rights and that terrible crimes are being committed every day when calves are rattled off in their cattle trucks for slaughter. Of course we cannot treat animals in any way we want. Nevertheless, a movement for animal rights cannot lead to anything but confusion. If we are to think seriously about the problem of how we deal with animals, we must begin from seeing animals as they are; namely creatures which can suffer, and which can also feel joy and pleasure, but which do not have rights and duties because they are not moral beings. This is another instance of the undoing of thought where thought is very much required.

The European process shows a similar deficit of thinking. Most of us are in favour of free and open relations with our European neighbours. Being by nature trading people, we are not protectionists. We should like there to be peaceful co-existence in Europe: we should like to exchange as much as possible with other countries. But why does this have to be embodied in a so-called union, and why are we given such strange descriptions of this union? We are told that it has a single legal system, and a court set up to adjudicate the obedience to the Treaty. At the same time, we are told, national sovereignty is in no way threatened. When you ask questions as to what that means you are referred to the concept of subsidiarity, invented by the papal court before the war in order to try and explain the relationship of the See of Rome to the dioceses of the Church of Rome. That is a weird thing to be offered in answer to the question whether Britain is or is not a sovereign power. In answer to the question "Are we sovereign or not?" there is no frank reply. Nobody has seriously thought about it. There is not such a thing as a sovereignty that can be over-ridden when it is in conflict with some other demand; yet the Treaty of Maastricht at every point implies that our Parliament can be over-ridden where its decisions conflict with those of the Commission in Brussels. Indeed, this Commission can issue directives which are automatically laws, binding on us

despite the fact that our Parliament has not even discussed them. We are told that this is no real compromise of sovereignty and that subsidiarity guarantees all that the British people ever had.

This absence of thinking displays also a lack of knowledge of history and a failure to reflect on what our history means. We have not gone through the two centuries of revolution, war, occupation and defeat that have characterised all the other countries in the Union. We have not gone through this because we have had an independent legal system, based on the common law, and outside the control of the state. Through that legal system our national sovereignty has grown as a property of the British people and not of Parliament. It is a sovereignty vested in the common law and also in the Crown as representative of that law. This means that we have always enjoyed a freedom and a stability which have been the exception and not the rule on the continent. It is perfectly reasonable for us to object to being brought under a system of law which not only dictates to us but is derived from the Napoleonic jurisdiction against which half of Europe once spent fifty years in rebellion. It is perfectly reasonable to say not only that there has been a loss of sovereignty, but that it will be a disaster for this country, whose political and national character is founded in an assumption of sovereignty of a very peculiar kind.

I will give one final example of the way in which thinking has been driven from our public life. Many of us were brought up on the Third Programme, that wonderful invention of the old Reith-type BBC which enabled you to sit for a whole evening being instructed, listening to highly educated people giving prepared discourses on things that you really wanted to know — on anything from Hegel's metaphysics to the fishing of the oceans. Fifteen minute talks, beautifully delivered and with the maximum information, obedient to the highest standards of English syntax and style, were the stuff of life to us. They would be interrupted by concerts, themselves carefully put together for the entertainment of listeners who were serious music lovers. The Third Programme was a

constant companion, both educative and witty. All that was suddenly destroyed and very recently. You could always rely on hearing something improving when you turned on the Third Programme. But it is at your own risk that you turn on Radio 3. It might be pop music that is being played, or a conversation between two half-educated people about a matter which they dimly understand, calling each other by their first names, easy-going and ill-prepared. The implication is that there is nothing very much to learn, but if you want to overhear this conversation, why not, this is just as good a way of wasting your time as any other. A channel through which thought entered the public life of our country has been silted up with all too familiar rubbish. We are not to provide programmes which cater to élites, because élites are no longer acceptable. It is part of the BBC's ethos to be democratic, where democracy is understood as giving no special value to any one section of the community over any other. The uneducated and the educated, the cultured and the uncultured, the intelligent and the unintelligent: all these have to be treated equally. They must have an equal voice on the wavelengths; if there is a programme that seems to have been designed for those people who think of themselves as part of an educated élite, then it must be brought down to the level of everything else, lest people should acquire the idea that there is a real distinction between that which is worth listening to and that which is not.

Thought automatically makes a distinction between truth and falsehood, between good and evil, and between thinking and unthinking. Thought threatens the idea of equality. There is a real distinction between those people who can do it and those people who cannot. The best way of undoing its subversive effect is to invent pseudo-thought: a commodity which looks like thought but which is available to anyone. If you look at the writings of literary critics today, especially those who are looking for jobs in English departments, you will find pseudo-thought very much in the ascendant. Deconstruction, radical feminism and so on produce concepts which can be used to create an

impression of thinking in people who are not thinking at all. These concepts make something look extremely difficult which is in fact rather easy. The net effect is always that no judgement can be made as to whether anything is good or bad. Anything goes. You can apply this pseudo-thought to anything and call it literature. Thinking is driven out of the university precisely in order that what remains should be available to anyone. However stupid you are you can write an essay in the idiom of Jacques Derrida. It will look like a piece of serious theory about literature but will in fact say nothing. The art of saying nothing has been cultivated to such an extent that whole branches of the academic curriculum are now devoted to it, my own subject, philosophy, being by no means innocent.

I have painted a rather depressing picture of what has been happening in the intellectual world. But all is not lost. There are two things that people with our background, culture and education should do by way of maintaining the vigilant presence of thinking in public life. The first thing which I would recommend is to make a great effort to hide the fact that you are thinking. In the Persia of the sixteenth century the Shi'ites, who had to conceal the fact that they were Shi'ites, invented a wonderful concept, the concept of *ketman*, which means 'hiding' in Persian. You hide your deepest beliefs in order to conserve them, and study to simulate the beliefs of your surrounding culture. You affect to agree with everything. You look smilingly on beliefs which to you are absolute anathema, and your own beliefs you conceal deep within your heart. This practice the Druze call *taqiyya*, meaning holiness. For them it is the only real holiness, to conceal that which you really believe in order to please your neighbours. This is the situation of the educated person in the modern world. You must hide your education so as not to give offence, and so as to arrive in the place where you can make a difference. If you reveal the fact that you are educated you will never be given a job teaching in a school; and it is increasingly unlikely that you would be considered for promotion in a university. But

when you have found the opportunity, you must act on your education and try your hardest to pass it on. That is the other piece of advice that I would give.

In the end rubbish has a very small survival value. It can survive only when produced in large enough quantities, so as not to be immediately swept away by the natural habit of looking for the truth. Rubbish requires mass production if it is to maintain any hold on public life; that is why universities are working full time to produce it. For the moment they are succeeding, and therefore producing a wholly uneducated ruling class. Nevertheless there are young people who are able to perceive the difference between rubbish and the real thing. All they need is to encounter the one educated person who believes in education and is able to communicate it. If that encounter can occur between those two people, then the light of education will not be extinguished. It only needs a few people to pass it on. Those people, once they have acquired it, and as long as they have also acquired the habit of *ketman* will be able to ascend to the highest positions in society and use their influence for the good. For it is true that there is the greatest difference in the world between the educated and the uneducated person and that, unless the uneducated are able to conspire to prevent them, the educated will advance. Educated people will end up controlling things and that is what must happen. But it can only happen if the educated acquire the habit of concealing this fact from the public eye.

Nietzsche was perhaps the first to perceive this clearly. He perceived that in the epoch of the democratic man there will be a vast conspiracy of the underclass to prevent any kind of human distinction. But this conspiracy will require such effort to keep it going that it will only be the fault of the intelligent if they do not finally emerge from it, to reassert their natural right of domination.

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