called to account

Accounting for the Humanities by Ian Hunter, Denise Meredeth, Bruce Smith and Geoff Stokes. (Institute for Cultural Policy Studies, Griffith University, 1991.) Reviewed by Simon Marginson.

Last October, after four years of brawling about the government's higher education policies, federal minister for Higher Education Peter Baldwin said that the micro-economic reforms of the Dawkins era had resulted in "a significant loosening of central controls over higher education institutions".

But the government's main critics in the humanities and the humanistic social sciences remained stony-faced. Deregulation of overseas student fees and funding in the form of block grants might have met the needs of university managers, but the humanities continued to be "the one site of implacable refusal and resistance". As Ian Hunter puts it:

To the Government's proposal to gear higher education to social and economic needs and purposes the humanities academy replies that it is the custodian of a goal whose completeness and universality identifies it with the absolute end of humanity as such—the culture of the 'whole' person and the disinterested pursuit of knowledge.

While the government pictures universities as "legitimate objects of government intervention", humanities academics are at pains to argue that liberal education cannot be reduced to vocational training or government calculation. By its nature it must remain autonomous and "ultimately accountable".

Accounting for the Humanities is concerned with the collision between these two incompatible discourses of the government and the humanities—a collision in which their "mutual incomprehension is matched only by their internal coherence". Both views, the authors argue, are seriously deficient and the opposition between them is misleading in itself.

This is by far the best Australian publication on this debate. It demonstrates that the traditional defences of the humanities are built on shifting sands—but so are the government's objectives. Ian Hunter argues that the attempt to align education with the needs of the economy faces serious technical difficulties, and the connection between "technological and production-oriented education in the universities" and national economic performance, is by no means clear.

Further, the attempt to monitor, calculate and develop the efficiency and productivity of higher education runs into a number of obstacles: "the dispersed and highly ramified character of the higher education network", with its myriad activities, programs, professions, interest groups, institutions; the statutory autonomy of universities; the internal goals of humanities disciplines (critical intellect, aesthetic sensibility, and so on) which are difficult to translate into government objectives; and the "sheer contingency" of the new administrative systems—the problems of designing successful managerial mechanisms and securing sufficient consent.

However, the main fire is directed against the traditional defences of the humanities. The authors are sceptical of all grand claims about the cultivated individual or the disinterested pursuit of truth, and locate the humanities firmly in a practical and historical context.
We find that even the forms of what is now defended as liberal education, far from being a timeless truth inherited from the ancient Greeks and the 12th century University of Bologna, are comparatively recent. The 'rounded' or the 'cultivated' individual—supposedly the object of the humanities— is "a highly specialised cultural artefact" whose purpose is itself vocational.

At different times the humanities have been implicated in a wide range of social activities: the development of social leaders, the formation of the professions, the civilisation of the masses. Following Foucault, the authors see the humanities as central to the extension of techniques of government during the last two centuries—for example, in constituting a teacher service and in shaping much of the core public service.

The polarity between government and academy conceals this complex interaction between the humanities and the objectives of government. Rounded personalities are useful personnel, and instrumental thought can be socially critical. Thus we find that even these opposing discourses can accommodate each other.

The stress on the government/academy polarity has its problems. It is often said that the most useful form of graduate is the broadly educated, well rounded individual supposedly produced by the humanities departments. Hunter mentions this claim, but does not deal with it, because his fluent article has been ordered on the basis of the polarity he condemns. But this is a very common defence of the humanities and should have been given more attention.

The chapters by Bruce Smith, Denise Meredyth and Ian Hunter which contain extensive historical material are very good indeed; there is much which cannot be adequately discussed here—for example, Smith on the foundation of the colonial universities and Meredyth on the 30-year history of the university tutorial. (Ironically, the tutorial emerged at the end of the 1950s in order to cope with teaching a broader range of students in the newly-expanding universities. Another wave of expansion, and the resulting resource strains, now appear likely to destroy it, just when it is needed the most.)

Meredyth also addresses two common and opposing characterisations of humanities faculties: that they serve to reproduce social privilege, and that they are points of democratic access to education (for example for mature age women). Not surprisingly, she finds that neither generalisation holds water and identifies "more diverse and contingent patterns of participation and calculations of equity".

The authors are interested in "exchanges" between government and university rather than markets and university. I would have liked to see more discussion of the effects of market economic systems in the "porous shell" of the university, alluded to only briefly at the end of Hunter's chapter. The debate between government and humanities is an old one but the market influences are new and dynamic. For example, in the period of Dawkins' Education Ministry the number of fee-paying overseas students in higher education increased from 622 to 20,219.

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government, plus parties and elections (the authors are not altogether clear on the point) then our political options are relatively narrow.

Hunter says that just as there is no single point of sovereign will or universal state, so there is no single point of resistance and “a general oppositional politics is uninteresting”. That is right, and it is necessary to establish multiple points of political intervention based on working out how things mesh together. But politics, including radical politics, is more fluid and informal than Accounting for the Humanities suggests. These linkages are conducted through the medium of political discourses which—while often rightly dismissed as essentialist—are nonetheless implicated in real activity and material effects.

Scepticism is very valuable, but more generally so in intellectual life than in politics. There comes a time in political life when it is necessary to put aside doubt and uncertainty to pursue a particular course of action. In the end you are faced with the question about positive action: ‘well what would you do, then? What would you put in its place?’

Perhaps this shows that some separation of ethics and technologies can be useful. But it also highlights the need to subject the ‘technologies’ of government, those means of classifying and controlling us, to the closest ethical scrutiny, so that the machinery of government does not dictate all of our political choices.

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**The Last Decadent**


The situationists were an odd lot; in revolt against both art and politics, they refused to compromise with either. Guy Debord ruthlessly expelled anyone who showed signs of compromise, and in the end expelled himself as well. Yet for all that he will be remembered for some time to come for his incendiary tract The Society of the Spectacle, a crystal clear hegelian-marxist analysis of the spectacular form of capitalist society. Everyone from Baudrillard to the Sex Pistols have dipped into it, yet few have fathomed this strange and hermetic book. It is the last great classic of western marxism.

What always made Debord’s writings so powerful was that, like classical marxist tracts, they came right out of left field. Debord was not an academic, not an artist, not a political functionary. None of the compromises each of these careers entails mar his writing. His errors, so to speak, are all his.

Debord imagines Panegyric as the first volume of his autobiography. It is a strange book, owing more to De Quincey’s Confessions than to anything else. It is at once learned and arrogant, revealing and obscure. Like De Quincey, Debord writes with absolute self-assurance. In a discussion of the various statements under oath he has made in various police stations, he concludes “So then I here declare that my answers to the police should not be included later in my collected works, because of scruples about the form and even though I signed the veracious content without embarrassment.”

Without the solidity of an institution like a party or a university to lean on, Debord has only himself. “There is nothing more natural than to consider everything as starting from oneself, chosen as the centre of the world; one finds oneself thus capable of condemning the world without even wanting to hear its deceitful chatter.”

Which is exactly what Debord in life, as much as in his writing, does: “I am the only one who’s (sic) life is true to his works.”

Debord is the last of the great French decadents. The spirit of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Lautremont, Cravan is still alive in him. Baudelaire and De Quincey make the city the great theme, Rimbaud gives writing its desire to change life, while Lautremont gives it its extremism of style. Cravan is the spirit of pure provocation, and this Debord gives a political twist. He picked up and played with the rhetoric of revolution like a child playing with fire. He and the situationists discovered what becomes of the language of revolution in a spectacular or, as we would say today postmodern, society. Debord knew, long before it was fashionable, what betrayals of revolutionary language were being carried out under its banner. His was always a revolt against the betrayal of the formerly powerful rhetoric of revolution as much as anything else.

Debord was ahead of his time in grasping the spectacular or, as one might say today simulated, nature of public discourse. Yet he is also a relic of the past, a great poet of the streets from a time when the streets were still the place of insurrection. “One cannot go into exile in a unified world,” he mourns. The Paris of the 1960s has been ‘Hausmannised’ again, its spaces rearranged to preserve it from revolution, and this time by a socialist government. Yet as Debord mutters darkly to himself, “All revolutions go down in history, yet history does not fill up; the rivers of revolution return from whence they came, to flow again.”

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