2015

Democracy, utilitarianism and the ideal of liberal education in Australia

Gregory C. Melleuish
University of Wollongong, gmelleui@uow.edu.au

Publication Details
Democracy, utilitarianism and the ideal of liberal education in Australia

Abstract
This paper argues that liberal education was introduced into the Australian colonies in the nineteenth century as a corrective to what were perceived to be the deficiencies of colonial social and cultural life. In particular, liberal education had to determine its relationship to the democratic nature of Australia and to what it claimed was the utilitarian nature of colonial culture. This paper traces the relationship between liberal education, democracy and utilitarianism by examining the works of three academics who wrote on liberal education: John Woolley in the 1850s and early 1860s, Charles Badham in the 1870s and 1880s and John Anderson in the 1940s and 1950s. It argues that their work indicates the growth of a gap between liberal education and democracy over time, and a narrowing of the idea of liberal education from a belief in the harmonious development of the individual to a narrow focus on criticism.

Keywords
utilitarianism, liberal, ideal, democracy, australia, education

Publication Details
Democracy, utilitarianism and the ideal of liberal education in Australia
Greg Melleuish

Knowledge Cultures. 3.3 (May 2015): p123.
Copyright: COPYRIGHT 2015 Addleton Academic Publishers
http://www.addletonacademicpublishers.com/knowledge-cultures

Abstract:

This paper argues that liberal education was introduced into the Australian colonies in the nineteenth century as a corrective to what were perceived to be the deficiencies of colonial social and cultural life. In particular, liberal education had to determine its relationship to the democratic nature of Australia and to what it claimed was the utilitarian nature of colonial culture. This paper traces the relationship between liberal education, democracy and utilitarianism by examining the works of three academics who wrote on liberal education: John Woolley in the 1850s and early 1860s, Charles Badham in the 1870s and 1880s and John Anderson in the 1940s and 1950s. It argues that their work indicates the growth of a gap between liberal education and democracy over time, and a narrowing of the idea of liberal education from a belief in the harmonious development of the individual to a narrow focus on criticism.

Keywords: democracy; liberal education; utilitarianism; criticism

Full Text:

Introduction

Australia has been characterized as a place where utilitarianism is the public philosophy which informs the political culture. It is also expressed in the idea that Australia was "born modern" and therefore is heir to all the "newfangled" ideologies and belief systems of the nineteenth century. The attribution of utilitarianism to Australia assumes that this is a culture lacking strong roots and therefore prone to adopt Rationalist and abstract modes of thought. This assertion is demonstrably false and one has only to look at the official name of the country "Commonwealth of Australia" with its rich associations with both sixteenth and seventeenth century English history to see why this is the case.

The ideas of liberal education and utilitarianism both firmly belong to the nineteenth century and are connected to the development of the ideas of both civilization and culture as ways of describing human flourishing in what might be described as the era of modernity. Neither have a single source nor can be expressed in a single formulation. Utilitarianism is often associated with Jeremy Bentham and his idea that human beings can be best understood as creatures who seek pleasure and avoid pain, and that this should form the basis of government legislation, such that it is possible to achieve the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Seen from this perspective utilitarianism provides a very "stripped down" model of human nature, even more basic than that of Hobbes, and leads to a highly rationalistic and abstract model of human nature. As with Hobbes, it seeks to filter out all of those passionate aspects of human nature which lead to strife and conflict. It has no place for a whole range of human beliefs from any sort of religious belief to one in human rights. It is the product of a hyper-rationalist, a person who has been described as suffering from Asperger syndrome (Haidt, 2012: 137-8).

The version of utilitarianism derived from Thomas Paley is somewhat different as it is founded on the idea that God wishes "the happiness of his creatures" so that the pursuit of happiness can be viewed as the fulfillment of human nature (Paley, 1806: 79). It is an expression of an optimistic natural theology based on the idea of God as the great watchmaker and which wants human beings to make the most of what they do in the world. Both Bentham and Paley give a primary to reason as the means of understanding the world. Paley founded religious belief on the evidence which he found in nature to support the idea of the world being designed by a beneficent deity.

In this regard it was no accident that one of the primary advocates of liberal education in England, John Henry Newman, was also a fierce critic of the whole notion of "evidences" as the foundation of religious faith. "Thus faith," argued Newman (1997: 203), "is the reasoning of a religious mind ... which acts upon presumptions rather than evidence." The contrast between utilitarianism and liberal education is, in part at least, that of an austere eighteenth century rationalism and a newer Romantic sensibility which looks more inward and towards the things of the heart. Liberal education can be seen as an element of the reaction against what were perceived to be the excesses of an exaggerated faith in abstract reason and its dubious consequences; it took the side of culture as against civilization or as we might say today, that of the right side of the brain as against the left hand side (McGilchrist, 2010).

However, it is important to understand that liberal education does not seek to exact the revenge of the affective elements of human nature on the cognitive elements. Rather it seeks to bring them together, recognizing that fully developed human beings are well rounded, able to appreciate beauty as well as the rigor of logic. In a way this is symbolized by John Stuart Mill recovering his health by reading Wordsworth after suffering a nervous collapse
It can be argued that the major desire of the British colonists in the Australian colonies was to duplicate the cultures of the British Isles from whence they had largely come. They desired above all to be British, with the one major exception of the significant number of Irish Catholics who went to the colonies. Many of their ideas reflected the traditionalism of the British lower orders; if there were utilitarian elements in the mix this was because utilitarianism was part of the cultural mix that the largely lower class population brought to the country with them, including, of course, a not insubstantial population which arrived as guests of His Majesty's Government.

It is possible to argue that utilitarianism entered into Australian culture in an essentially Burkean fashion, as part of the British inheritance which the colonists brought with them rather than as an abstract set of doctrines that the Australian colonists set about implementing to create a new and modern world (with the possible exception of South Australia). This is not to say that Australian colonists could not be inventive when it came to matters of a practical nature, after all they built a highly efficient wool industry, but when it came to moral, religious and cultural matters they did not consciously set out to create anything new or original or "modern." Certainly nineteenth century Australians were great believers in progress but in this they were no different from other British communities. But like other British communities they also possessed as parts of their inheritance both the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the appeal to the emotions characteristic of romanticism.

Why then has utilitarianism been considered to be so central to Australian culture? It can be argued that utilitarianism has come to be used in Australia in a loose sense as emblematic for all those things which Australian intellectuals see as deficiencies within their own culture. All the things which they do not like from materialism, to pragmatism to what is seen as the desire for short term gain can be summed up under the word "utilitarianism." It is a set of values which they associate with what are locally termed "bogans," (2) especially if you add in crassness, bad taste and a tendency to deprecate the place of the intellect in the world. There is a counter discourse to this--the ordinary Australian, especially members of the lower middle class as a source of virtue in a corrupt world. This can be found in the characterization of Australian culture in terms of the elites versus the rest in which the educated elites are cast in the role of the force of corruption and degeneracy and the rest, the majority, as the defenders of decency and virtue (Cater, 2013).

It can be argued that the doctrine of Australia as utilitarian reflects the insecurity of intellectuals in a world in which they often feel uncomfortable. It was not so long ago that Australians of an intellectual disposition went elsewhere to ply their trade as there was little employment for them in Australia. One thinks of Elton Mayo, V Gordon Childe and later Germaine Greer. Australian science was meant to be of the applied variety appropriate for society devoted to producing wool, wheat and other agricultural products, and only recently it was questioned if it was worthwhile for Australian scientists to engage in basic research.

Liberal education as an ideal is part of the mix which has helped to shape Australian culture. It has contributed to the culture just as much as has "utilitarianism." In this shaping, "liberal education" has not taken a fixed form or shape but rather, like utilitarianism, and a number of other terms of which at the top of the list I would place liberal and liberalism, has taken on a variety of meanings, many of which are not particularly precise. Even more importantly, discussion regarding liberal education and the role of universities has helped to frame the debate about the role of ideas more generally in Australian culture. Partly this is because Australia for a long time possessed little in the shape of a professional intellectual class. There were politicians with ideas, some clergy (and the children of clergy shaped the Australian historical profession in the twentieth century) and the occasional lawyer.

And it all goes back to the rather odd nature of the Australian colonies, or most of them. Many Australians are descended from criminals. It was a society which was building itself from the ground up. It was a society devoted to the accumulation of wealth and other material pursuits, composed of a collection of emancipists and their descendants, an official class and a growing class of free settlers. Commenting in 1853, just after the foundation of the University of Sydney, Charles St Julian and Edward Silvester (1853: 266, 267) argue that the "educational institutions in the colony are at a very low ebb" and contend that the descendants of the emancipists "have inherited the lax morality of their parents, and the children of these, if educational institutions be not provided for them, will be reared in ignorance if not in vice." Discussing the "literary institutions" of the colony they comment that "we can speak in no words of high acclaim. They are few in number, and miserably inadequate to the requirements of a large, wealthy, and increasing population, with mental energies perpetually stimulated in the pursuit of material wealth" (St Julian & Silvester, 1853: 268).
Here is encapsulated the rhetorical background against which the first university in Australia, the University of Sydney, was established, and St Julian and Silvester were not alone in their denunciations of what was often described as the quite sordid nature of colonial New South Wales society and culture. Hence W. C. Wentworth (1853: 29), the key figure in the establishment of the University of Sydney spoke of "the money making schemes of this filthy, lucre loving community" a view supported by one of his liberal political rivals who claimed that the inhabitants of the colony were only energetic when actuated by "universal scramble for Mammon" (Empire 1851). Or as the economist W S Jevons (1973: 162) put it a few years later during his sojourn in Sydney:

Let me stop any longer (say ten years) and I verily believe I should not be worth carrying back, unless I were worth a fortune. By that time I should have stuck in the mud as regards all science or any other knowledge or experience, and should have gained only 'colonial experience' and money.

The establishment of the first Australian university was planned before the gold rushes and their consequences, which included a substantial increase in the population size of the non-Indigenous population. It was an audacious move, the establishment of an institution devoted to liberal education, including the study of classics, in a former penal colony which did not even possess a proper high school.

Why did they do it?

W. C. Wentworth, often seen as the university's founder, was also the primary supporter of the attempt to create a colonial aristocracy as part of the constitution of the colony when it was granted responsible government. Before the gold rushes, it was still possible for the colonial elite to believe that democracy was not the inevitable fate of the Australian colonies and that they could somehow reproduce traditional English society in the Antipodes. Those who supported a colonial aristocracy, especially Wentworth and his ally James McArthur, couched their arguments in terms of permanence and mixed government. For example, these arguments included a comparison between Carthage and America as exemplars of everything which was wrong with democracy and the commercial spirit (Macarthur, 1853: 138). The colonies needed to follow the model provided by Rome and England if they were to enjoy stable government.

The establishment of responsible government in the Australian colonies, however, saw the establishment of representative democracy and the rejection of the ideals of mixed government. Liberalism triumphed as the hegemonic ideology of colonial Australia but it was a liberalism which owed little to republican ideas such as checks and balances.

In Wentworth's vision of a permanent society, as opposed to one through which individuals passed as they increased their wealth, the university played a central role. Amongst other things it would educate the colonial elite so that it could take its place of leadership. In a "new world" in which there appeared to be little physical presence of the past, at least for its British inhabitants, it would be something solid and enduring. Hence the university was constructed of stone in the gothic style. Wentworth believed in the idea of an aristocracy because it would be the means through which the colony would be able to throw off its sordid past and achieve greatness. This would compensate for the colony's apparent lack of a past, or at least one worthy of remembrance. Hence Charles Nicholson (ND), a co-founder of the University of Sydney, wrote in a letter:

The only food for the imagination is the future--and the idea that the future may be moulded, and influenced, and directed, so as to produce what is great and glorious, by our individual exertions ... I am enabled to exercise that small modicum of ability that God has granted me, in a way that may to some extent be useful to those who may live centuries hence ... Here we have to lay the foundations of a social edifice.

This orientation can also be seen in the speech which Wentworth (1849: 6) made in support of the founding of the university:

The good we seek to do will fructify and increase, until on every cottage the light of Education and Civilization will shine, and the better aspirations of the patriot and philanthropist will glow in every heart.

In this way a university would help to redeem a sordid materialist society and make it a true member of civilized humanity. So the university was established, and was designed initially with liberal arts at its core. This would be Classics, logic, mathematics and natural science. It is important to appreciate in this context that a university devoted to liberal education was by no means an organic growth of colonial Australia. In such circumstances,
how could it be? In New South Wales it was largely imposed, almost, one could say, as a piece of social engineering. The other colonies followed, Victoria almost immediately, South Australia a couple of decades later. All took some time to develop and prosper.

The university as a liberal arts institution was not a massive success. It grew slowly, as one would expect, and only began to prosper as the various professional schools were attached to it. Even the faculties of Arts in a sense became a professional school for the training of high school teachers. It is a sober reality check that the Commonwealth Public Service did not employ generalist graduates until 1934 when it was agreed that up to 10% of its intake could be university graduates (Coleman, Cornish & Hagger, 2006: 162). The Australian Labor Party long remained a bastion of the working man that was uneasy in its relationship with the university educated. There were exceptions, the most famous being V Gordon Childe who worked for New South Wales Premier John Storey before writing How Labour Governs in 1922 and leaving Australia for thirty five years.

What it is also important to see is that the connection between those educated in the liberal arts and the wider community was not organic. True, many of the most significant figures in the Federation movement, from Edmund Barton to Samuel Griffiths and Alfred Deakin were the products of colonial universities, but between Deakin in 1910 and Bob Hawke in 1983 only four Australian Prime Ministers out of fourteen had attended Australian universities, although three others had gone to either Oxford or Cambridge. That someone such as Childe felt impelled to leave Australia indicates the sometimes fraught relationship between those who had received a liberal education and the wider society. Economists had an easier time, and there was a place for them at the table of the Commonwealth because of their particular skills.

To consider what liberal education has meant in Australia the rest of this article will examine three statements made about the nature of liberal education and its relationship to the wider Australian society. All come from the University of Sydney because of all the Australian universities this has been the one most devoted to the ideals of liberal education. In a way they represent acts in a three-part play beginning in the 1850s and ending in the late 1950s.

Act I Democratic Optimism

The first comes from the Rev John Woolley, the first Principal of the university, Oxford graduate, Platonist and believer in progress, especially spiritual and moral. In his speech at the opening of the University of Sydney Woolley (1862: 10) claimed that

ours are of a rank and luxuriant civilization. The refinements and comforts of life, with their attendant utilitarianism, the general diffusion of information, with its desultory superficialism, are as real impediments to the advancement of science as ignorance, insecurity, and oppression.

The university is not there to conquer a Hobbesian world of "ignorance" and "insecurity" but one in which it must combat the faults of a "rank and luxuriant civilization." The sins of such a society are comfort, utilitarianism and the superficialism that comes with the "general diffusion of information." It is not barbarism but civilization which is the enemy; the civilization of an affluent society which is democratic because it is rich, and as Matthew Arnold would say in a little over a decade, philosophic.

Utilitarianism is specifically identified as a principal enemy of learning and science. The Australian colonies were not full of very rich people but neither was there much in the way of the very poor. In the early 1850s, even with a property qualification most adult males would still qualify for the franchise. Like it or not it was a democratic society composed of people who largely lived in modest comfort. How then will a liberal education combat the problems of a prosperous utilitarian society? It will help to overcome the defects of a luxuriant civilization by restoring human beings to their natural condition (Woolley, 1862: 15-6):

a liberal education is one which cultivates in their due and harmonious proportion what the Romans called "humanitas", all those faculties and powers which distinguish man from the inferior creatures. This end it accomplishes in two ways; (1) by the appropriate and healthful exercise of those faculties; (2) by introducing them to those objects, in the observation of which they will hereafter be engaged; in other words, a good education must induce a habit of patient, connected, vigorous, independent thinking, and must afford a general prospect of the most important objects of thought, the world within us, and then the world without, both in our relations to our fellow-men, and the constitution of the physical creation.
In line with the establishment of the university to teach not only Classics, but also science and mathematics, Woolley also placed an emphasis on Mathematics: "We know that mathematical science is the queen and guardian of all those pursuits which investigate or apply the laws of nature." But Classics were, naturally enough, central to his vision of a liberal education (Woolley, 1862: 16-7):

We know, again, that the languages of Greece and Rome are the master-keys which unlock the noblest modern tongues of Europe, and, with the increased power of understanding our brethren's speech enlarge our sympathies and realise our fraternity; that as the disunion of the nations was the consequence of misunderstanding, so the growth of fellow-feeling, what the Greeks beautifully call [TEXT NOT REPRODUCIBLE IN ASCII.], the thinking with others, the identifying of our minds with theirs, may prepare the restoration of "concord and unity."

We know that in their rich and graceful literature, the model of all the most perfect, since they provide appropriate nutriment to the noblest faculties of our nature; poets, historians, philosophers, with their keen and delicate sense of the beautiful, their vigorous and versatile intellect, their life of intense activity and ceaseless energy of thought, not from books and theoretic rules, but fresh from nature's inspiration and the school of experience, created those masterpieces in every kind, to understand and emulate which is daily more and more the noblest exercise of taste, of moral judgment, even of scientific research. We have learnt lastly, that philology is the primary element of sciences, which, like ethnology, trace back the stream of time to its fountain head, and disclose to our view the mysterious cradle of our race and the history of our gradual alienation.

This was one of Woolley's favorite themes, the "enlargement" of sympathy and the growth of bonds amongst human beings so that they would come together and work in harmony for the common good. Liberal education had a key role to play in what he saw as not only a matter of personal development but also the growth of social bonds, together issuing in the movement of human history towards its goal. Liberal education would aid the development of human fellow feeling because it would expose the future leaders of the colony to such ideas, leaders who would, in turn, eschew self-interest for the common good because of their enlarged sympathy (Woolley, 1862: 17-8):

if we ask in what manner philology and mathematics conduce to mental vigour and self-relying thought, the reply is not more difficult. Singly powerful, but partial and one-sided, they form, united, a perfect discipline of reflexion. How, except through mathematical habit, should we attain that power of abstraction, of sustained attention, of patient reasoning long drawn out; that the slightest error invalidates and breaks the whole? Mathematics is the discipline of necessary reasoning; philology of the problematic and contingent. Speech is the vehicle and outward form of thought, as the body to the soul.

Consequently liberal education, in Woolley's optimistic vision would play a very important role in the creation of a harmonious and socially just society, a society led by these men who had been moulded by their initiation into classical languages, mathematics and sciences. They will possess a "well-cultivated and vigorous understanding; they will have formed the habit of thinking at once with modesty and independence" (Woolley, 1862: 21). From such people will come colonial leaders who have the capacity to counter the negative aspects of an affluent society devoted to selfishness and utilitarianism. Such leaders will not be driven by mere "prescription or expediency" but will seek to regulate their lives "by fixed and eternal principles" (Woolley, 1862: 22). This will occur because, for Woolley, there is a unity of truth, beauty and justice which will enable individuals to live harmonious lives.

This did not make Woolley an aristocratic elitist. He was not opposed to democracy nor did he believe democracy to be a mistake. In 1859 he referred to himself as a "conservative democrat" and appeared on an election platform with, and spoke on behalf of, the colony's leading democratic politician Henry Parkes (Empire, 24 May, 1859: 5). Woolley was a sincere democrat who believed that "all government was founded on eternal principles of
truth and justice, and those principles were plainly written on the heart and conscience of every man." (3) He continued (Empire, 23 May, 1859: 4):

A true Democracy must be ever progressive; the influence of the people must day by day be at once penetrating and extensive; until every department of civil government--every act of the administration--shall reflect the national conscience, and express the national judgment.

Nevertheless, Woolley did not believe that the combination of the moral equality of humanity and the progressive nature of democracy would lead to a political order founded on the leadership of the ordinary man. As democracy was a social and political order in accord with nature the best would rule. Woolley (Empire, 30 May, 1859: 4) went on to argue:

That all are equal in a Democracy, is the very reverse of truth. In a Democracy only are the shades of Station and power harmonized with the gradations of ability and integrity. To a prince or a nobility, superior merit is an object of alarm and hatred. To a free people it is the gift of God.

Liberal education will enrich democracy by ensuring that its leaders not only possess merit but also the moral qualities which mean that they will lead with the interests of the people in mind. For Woolley this was the natural state of things and expressed "fixed and eternal principles." Parkes, who could also be called a "conservative democrat," held similar views. Sir 'Enry, an ivory turner by trade, but also a man of real intelligence and vision, looked forward to a democracy in which university graduates would become the beneficent leaders of their community (Parkes, 1892: 297). Liberal education would be a key factor ensuring that democratic leaders ruled in the best interests of the people.

Act II Liberal education as the antidote for democratic excesses

Woolley, alas, died when the SS London sank in 1866. His replacement was another Oxford man, Charles Badham, but where Woolley had been a logician and a liberal democrat, Badham was much more a conservative and a genuine textual scholar with closer links to the continent than to England, a man with a photographic memory who entranced and enchanted his students.

Badham also looked to principles of permanence in a society which was democratic. In a world of flux and change the university would teach those things which had permanent value. Hence in his first Commemoration speech delivered in Sydney in 1867 Badham (1890: 1) claimed that "to give civil society its dignity and its permanence is the peculiar function of a university. "This could be read as meaning that there were problems with the nature of civil society in Australia. That this was the case for Badham is confirmed by what he wrote in an article entitled "University Studies" in 1882. Australia, he contended (Badham, 1890: 105-6)

Presents what, to European eyes, are strange phenomena--(1) an enormous amount of wealth in the hands of men utterly illiterate; (2) the learned professions, including the Church, with very little learning to divide amongst them; (3) the mercantile classes of all grades very much below the standard of their congers in Western Europe in literary and intellectual tastes.

This is not all that different from the assessment made by St Julian and Silvester almost thirty years earlier. This was a world which, in Badham's eyes, was both crude and uneducated and quite wealthy. He may not have used the word, but it is a world imbued with utilitarian values. Above all Australia was a democracy, perhaps a democracy of men who were simultaneously wealthy and uncultured, but a democracy nevertheless and one had to live in this democratic world and make the most of it. Hence Badham (1890: 106) argued:

we are to all intents and purposes a democracy, and whether we like it or not, we shall become more emphatically and unavoidably democratic as time advances. We cannot alter the logic of history or arrest the course of natural development.

Democracy was the dominant reality of life in Australia and the greatest need was both to come to terms with it and to ensure that its effects were not destructive (Badham, 1890: 106):

if we desire to make that which is good in a democracy as operative as we can, if we would have our people at once proud of their
equality of rights and yet submissive to fixed principles and laws, we must offer them, along with the liberty which they cherish, some other object which shall claim their reverence, and so habituate them to self-control.

Note the more reserved, almost resigned, tone. There is none of the enthusiasm of Woolley, none of the hope that had been so characteristic of the mid-nineteenth century regarding the possibilities offered by democracy as fulfillment of history. The possibilities opened up by democracy seemed to relate to vulgarity, ignorance and mammon worship. Hence, like Woolley, he saw that democracy needing "fixed principles and laws" which would restrain all of its negative aspects. The people needed something which would discipline them. To achieve this goal they also needed a class to lead them, an aristocracy of some description. Badham recognized that there could not be an aristocracy of title or birth in Australia, and he exclaimed "heaven forbid that it should be money." For Badham, as for Woolley, a democracy begs to be led by its best people, a genuine aristocracy which enabled a genuine "natural aristocracy" to take the place to which it was entitled. It is intellect that should be the source of the "fixed principles and laws" of a democracy. But such a natural aristocracy needed to be formed and moulded. Badham, the Plato scholar, sought the creation of a guardian class and it would be liberal education which ensured their adherence to "fixed principles" (Badham, 1890: 106):

the trained and tried intellect of a whole class, not an exclusive class, but one to which anybody may belong (if nature has endowed him for the purpose, and the opportunities of mental discipline have been open to him).

Moreover this educated class will protect the larger society from the faults of a democratic society, including its inability to sort out the true from the false. "A highly educated class," claimed Badham (1890: 106), "is a check upon charlatans by simply withholding its belief in them, and so setting to others an example of the like caution."

In the 1880s there were a number of concerns expressed about the nature of democracy in the Australian colonies. For example, Bruce Smith (2005: 224) in Liberty and Liberalism published in 1887 argued that a great fault of democracy was the inability of democratic politicians and the populace generally to abide by the laws of political science. There needed to be a counter to the foolishness of the populace, who, according to Smith, were somewhat like children who had caught the political equivalent of measles. One answer to this problem would be the role which the university educated, having gone through a superior liberal education, could play. This class of people would be able to counter the faults and failings of democracy by ensuring that reason and principle triumphed over passion and charlatanism. Consider what Badham (1890: 108) says on this issue:

The study of language is the study of thought; the study of history is the study of political truth; the study of great authors is the study of the development of mind through the different phases of civilization. When we see the same feelings, aims, affections, anxious doubts, and topics of consolation in the literature of bygone times, the thought of our permanent humanity and of the ineffaceable identity between the soul of the past and the soul of the present, makes us thoughtful, reverent, social, patriotic ... but the word culture corresponds to such a real thing, and fits it with such exactness, that I will venture to use it . and to declare that the larger the class which partakes of this culture and the more deeply they are penetrated with it, the better for the country of which they are citizens. And, furthermore, that the more steadily the University adheres to the traditional functions of a University, by making classical study the instrument of culture, the more fully will it answer the purpose for which the people has instituted and endowed it. I know of no other object of education, whether primary or secondary, except to teach men and women to think.

Badham had redefined liberal education from the original vision given by Woolley thirty years earlier. He had dumped mathematics and made liberal education almost exclusively philological in nature. Moreover he has his own particular take on what that philological training should look like. It is not the English model of a classical education but rather the much more austere and thorough continental European model (Badham, 1890: 111):

in teaching my students the value of textual criticism, I am supported by the sympathy of every great Continental University; and even if it were not so I should be supported by the conviction
that I am developing the intellects of our youth, and imparting to them the habit of weighing words in themselves and in their contexts, instead of being satisfied with the loose flummery which now passes current for elegant rendering.

Such training, he continued, was necessary for the educated class to be able to appreciate literature in English because of the way in which immersion in the study of classical languages moulded the mind (Badham, 1890: 112):

Men who have not had their tastes cultivated in the austerer forms of the ancient languages will either have no taste at all for reading good English works or they will have a vicious taste and exercise a vicious preference. Even Shakespeare, with his wonderful power of charming all sorts and conditions of men, is very little read amongst us; and for the simple reason that very few amongst us have a genuine taste for reading, and if a genuine taste for reading is worth implanting, it can only be implanted by the gentle compulsion of academical discipline; and of all the books in the world which academical discipline can employ for these purposes, there are no works like those written by the ancient masters to impart relish to the masterpieces in our own language.

Philological training creates men possessing fixed principles who are able to counter charlatanism and superficiality because it is rigorous and austere. For Badham, liberal education is a serious business requiring application; the young men who pass through it will be imbued with a cast of mind which will enable them not only to lead but also to correct the deficiencies of a democratic social order.

Badham's vision of what liberal education could contribute to Australian democracy did indeed mould a few key minds in Australian political and legal life, including Edmund Barton, the first Prime Minister of Australia and Joseph Carruthers, Premier of New South Wales in the first decade of the twentieth century and a key figure in the development of Australian liberalism. But its effects were largely confined to the generation which he personally taught. He had no real successor he failed to establish a tradition of liberal education based on his rigorous principles. One reason for this failure is that it was Badham's personal charisma, not his ideals, which entranced his students; he entranced them and they adored him.

Act III Disillusionment, Classicism and Pessimism

By the late 1950s, as espoused by philosopher John Anderson, Liberal education has lost any sort of connection with the democratic state and its various ideals. Liberal education is no longer seen as the means to perfect or correct the democratic state but sits somewhere on the sidelines existing, like Art, primarily for its own sake, seeking to survive only to perpetuate itself. Liberal education is redefined as criticism but it is not clear what the purpose of this criticism is.

Anderson was a Scot who arrived in Sydney in 1927 as Professor of Philosophy where he remained until he retired in that late 1950s. He is the only intellectual in Australia to have created a "school" and to have had an intellectual movement named after him. Writing in 1960, Anderson (1980: 43), at the end of his career, was very pessimistic regarding the prospects of liberal education and saw it as being generally under attack:

nowadays it is rare to find any greater concession made to liberal study, either in the narrower sense of concentration on the "classical tongues" or in the broader sense of attention to the major productions of humane letters, than that it is a harmless eccentricity which may still for a time occupy its small corner. What is of special educational importance, it is widely maintained, is study of the sciences.

Anderson believed that liberal education has been rejected by the democratic state. It has become divorced from the state and has no role to play in buttressing that state. Liberal education stands not on support of, but in opposition to the state, an enunciation of a tradition of criticism which the state may attempt to co-opt but can only do so if the purposes of liberal education are subordinated to those of the state. When such subordination occurs this can only mean a corruption of the purposes of liberal education by the state; it must now serve the interests of the state rather than pursuing its true path, thereby becoming subject to principles which do not belong to it, including utilitarianism, progress and a belief in a supposed common good.
Again the meaning of liberal education has shifted. Although Anderson connects "liberal study" with something which he calls "classicism" he places much more emphasis on philosophy, his own area of expertise, than on philology as a means of training the mind. Classicism does not so much involve a study of the classical world and the analysis of Greek texts as pursuing a particular way or mode of thinking that goes back to Socrates and Plato. For Anderson, both Woolley and Badham would have fallen within the utilitarian category because they saw liberal education as having a purpose outside of itself, shaping an elite that would provide leadership for a democratic society founded on "fixed principles." For Anderson such linkages are inadmissible. His fundamental approach is pluralistic; the world is composed of a variety of social movements, none of which can be reduced to, or made dependent on, another movement. The purpose of liberal education is the pursuit of learning, not subordinating itself to what he considered to be an illusionary "common good." Hence universities should engage in those activities which define their "good," which are learning and criticism. Ultimately there is no common good, only the endless struggle between competing social forces. Hence Anderson (1980: 46) argues:

Nothing short of a rejection of this imaginary "common good" (something that satisfies every interest and every person) can maintain at their proper intellectual level institutions whose work is criticism or the examination of all assumptions. The carrying out of this work requires them to recognize that they are one of a number of competing social forces and that what, for example, is industry's gain is quite commonly education's loss.

The purpose of a university is to engage in criticism. That is the end of story. Liberal education does not even produce a "saving remnant," because the very idea of a "saving remnant" implies that it will eventually regenerate the wider society in the name of the "common good." Nevertheless, as the following passage indicates, there is still a residual sense of the "wider society" in Anderson (1980: 47):

The "practical end" of taking one's place in the community, of securing more or less useful and remunerative occupation, overshadows critical thinking; and, to draw more fully on Arnold's terminology, the function of education at the present time is substantially that of turning the populace into Philistines.

If Anderson is serious, it should not matter if the populace is composed of "Philistines" so long as the tradition of critical thinking is maintained. The capacities of the wider populace should not matter. Those involved in critical thinking should only be concerned with such issues in a theoretical, not a practical, sense.

As with Woolley and Badham, Anderson looked back to the Greeks, but they are Greeks refashioned in the image of the relentless critic. Greek philosophy is characterized by its criticism, its classicism and its capacity for disinterestedness. Socrates and Plato, Anderson (1980: 51) claimed

...together set up the model of philosophical Hellenism, and even though the other contributors to the thought of the period did not reach the same level, these would suffice to make it a classical period--a period in which disinterestedness stands out from the wrangle of special interests as it does in culturally lower times.

Greek philosophy is the model for what Anderson admires which can be summed up in the terms classicism, realism and disinterestedness. Liberal education produces an elite which is able to stand back from the world, analyze it and see it as it really is. As critics, they are not able to participate in the practicalities of that world. Such practicality and involvement is what Anderson condemns as modernism. For Anderson, the corrupting spirit of modernism began with Bacon and Descartes. The problem with both philosophers is their "practicalism and progressivism." "Both thinkers," claimed Anderson (1980: 52), "were animated by the spirit of reformation in science, and both emphasize the practical end of all speculation." Anderson characterized Descartes as "anti-Classical," as opposed to the tradition of liberal education, because his approach denies the concreteness of culture and learning, replacing the concreteness of tradition with what he calls an "abstract rationality" (Anderson, 1980: 53):

The anti-Classicism of Descartes comes out not merely in his antipathy to history and tradition, but in his proposing, as the ground of the distinction of men from animals, an abstract rationality in place of the concrete and many-sided culture (language and literature, law, investigation etcetera) which really does distinguish them. This lack of concreteness is characteristic of the whole modernist position; it is bound up with that
opposition to quality or distinction which is a recurrent feature of modern thought (in the social as in other spheres), and one expression of which is proof by identities and not by concrete facts.

True criticism operates within a concrete tradition which engages with ideas as they relate to the real world. However, it is difficult to see how a tradition of criticism can be in touch with any form of reality other than the ideas which constitute it. If concreteness has no relation to practicality, and hence the interaction between ideas and the real world, it can only be the concreteness associated with the intellectual life. Anderson would seem to want to condemn liberal education to being a form of scholasticism which maintains its purity because it eschews any real engagement with the wider world.

To combat what Anderson saw as the debilitating features of modernism "utilitarianism and progressivism," both of which he characterizes as abstract and rationalist, the only solution is to withdraw from the practical world, pursue vigorous criticism and to look backwards rather than forwards. Consequently Anderson saw himself as living in an age of decline not one of progress. Progress, for him, was meaningless, "the going on of what goes on" (Anderson 1980: 55). The only hope for liberal education is to hold on to the concrete traditions of classicism which are its foundations. Unlike Woolley and Badham, Anderson (1980: 55) was a rather gloomy pessimist who cared for liberal education for its own sake.

It is in this way that pessimism or the sense of a steady cultural decline has greater affinity to learning than the optimistic belief in continual advance; it points to concrete models and to the great difficulty of maintaining standards, as against the facile belief that they will automatically rise. All these considerations bring out the emptiness of the modernist outlook, as contrasted with the fullness of the historical and classical.

The answer to cultural decline is to re-emphasize the classical tradition as an antidote to all the evils of modern progressivism. Classicism stands for a tough minded, disinterested approach towards the world, to ensuring that all is not dissolved into "woolly-minded cosmopolitanism and humanitarianism" (Anderson, 1980: 59):

The classicist recognizes the natural opposition between disinterestedness and interestedness, between concern with the ways of working of things themselves and concern with what we can get out of them. He will certainly note the special weakness of the objective outlook at the present time; he may even decide that our modern intellectual age, dating from the Renaissance, is on the verge of collapse and that a new barbarism is imminent; he can hardly fail to note the resemblance between current conditions and the decline of classical Greece, with the replacement of the solid thinking of the preceding time by a woolly-minded cosmopolitanism and humanitarianism. Whatever his conclusion on this point, he will continue, as a classicist, to work "against the stream," as culture in all ages has had to work.

The Andersonian position on culture, and hence liberal education, is classical, pessimistic, and ultimately self-defeating. Liberal education simply fights for its survival in a world which is hostile and threatens to overwhelm it. The only course of action is to resist and to protect the purity of one's position against a hostile world. Liberal education, understood as criticism, becomes an end in itself. It is a tradition but one which seeks its justification in its own activity, a type of "criticism for criticism's sake." It cannot contribute to the "common good" because there is no such thing. It is almost as if the world has been reduced to the war of all against all, except that the combatants are not individuals but social movements. Hence Andersonians, as embodied in the Sydney Push, sought to create their own world of free critical enquiry but it was a world unto itself. (4)

The third act takes liberal education outside the realm of the wider society, and consummates the cleavage between the world of liberal education and that of the ordinary citizen. Liberal education is no longer for the elite who will benefit the wider society through their adherence to "fixed principles," but rather it is the practice of a sect which is scorned by the wider society and seeks only to preserve the tradition of criticism "a harmless eccentricity which may still for a time occupy its small corner" (Anderson, 1980: 43). It is an unsettling vision of liberal education, one which almost renders it irrelevant to the wider world.

What it does do is to dig a ditch between a democratic society which the advocates of liberal education can portray as being addicted to the false and vulgar principles of utilitarianism and the intellectual elite who are
devoted to the pure traditions of classicism and criticism. Whereas both Badham and Woolley believed in an aristocracy formed by liberal education which would combat and tame the excesses of a democratic world, the Andersonians simply believed in themselves as aristocrats of the spirit who would pursue criticism in the face of a world which could not comprehend their superiority. It was the most extreme expression of a world in which elite and mass, and the ideals of liberal education and utilitarianism stare at each other across a ditch with little in the way of mutual understanding.

Conclusion

Much contemporary cultural debate in Australia, as exemplified by the recent Cater (2013) book, revolves around the conflict between the elites and the rest. In intellectual terms this is often framed as the conflict between utilitarianism and the values of the humanities as exemplified by the ideals of liberal education. This article has attempted to demonstrate that this "conflict" has deep roots in Australian history and reflects the circumstances in which liberal education and the humanities made their entry onto the Australian stage. The ideals of liberal education have always been invoked as a cure for what an educated elite saw as the faults of an affluent, materialist society too much attached to "getting and spending." Liberal education has always been about the aspirations of a would-be aristocracy in a country which is, as Badham correctly recognized, naturally democratic.

The consequence is that the advocates of liberal education and the humanities created an intellectual discourse which pitted the aristocratic values of the humanities against the utilitarian values of the democratic masses. That is how the life of the mind came to be understood in Australia. At first it was thought by men such as Woolley and Badham that liberal education would ameliorate what they saw as the faults of a commercial and democratic society. However, by the mid-twentieth century, as exemplified by the figure of John Anderson, liberal education sought only to protect itself from what it saw as the worst excesses of utilitarianism and democracy. The educated would retreat into their enclaves where they could ignore what they considered to be the ugliness of the world.

The three acts of "liberal education" set out in this article indicate how the notion of "liberal education" has been transformed over the last one hundred and fifty years from a generous notion which sought to ameliorate what were seen as the excesses of modern civilization to a much more narrow one which simply saw itself in perpetual opposition. According to this view, the left and the right hand sides of the brain could not be brought together to produce a harmonious world, a world marked by the unity of truth, justice and beauty, but would remain forever at war with each other. There are two fundamental reasons why an apparently unbridgeable gap grew up between liberal education and the worldly values of the society of which it is part. The first has to do with democracy. Initially, as exemplified by Woolley, there was the great hope that liberal education would smooth out the rough edges of a commercial and progressive society, thereby creating a better world which was both cultivated and democratic. Over time "democracy," as symbolized by the values of the ordinary person, came to be seen as incapable of being improved, even though more and more individuals undertook a university education. The second has to do with the narrowing down of what liberal education meant. Woolley, trained as a classicist and a logician, had a broad concept of liberal education encompassing humanities, mathematics and the sciences. Badham was not interested in the sciences and mathematics and reduced liberal education to philology. Anderson simply identified liberal education with what he termed "classicism" by which he meant his own peculiar understanding of philosophy. There was a retreat from the ideal of the harmony of the arts and sciences to a restricted understanding of the humanities which placed a great emphasis on the ideal of "criticism." Anderson was before his time in many ways: in the contemporary university liberal education, as exemplified by the humanities and the social sciences, focused obsessively on criticism and standing in perpetual opposition to the world around it.

The great irony of placing such an emphasis on "criticism" is that it makes liberal education an essentially philistine enterprise, just as narrow and limiting as its opponent utilitarianism. It no long seeks the harmony of beauty, truth and justice. Instead it relies exclusively on the starkly austere intellect.

It has become the mirror image of what it seeks to oppose. It has become just another aspect of the materialist world which it initially believed it could redeem. The cause of truth, beauty and justice, of the restoration of the left and the right hand sides of the brain, awaits a new champion.

GREG MELLEUISH

gmelleuui@uow.edu.au

School of Humanities and Social Inquiry, University of Wollongong

NOTES

(1.) I should like to thank Peter Murphy for his useful comments on this essay which helped me to re-think the significance of the article.

(2.) Bogan is an Australian term which roughly means the same as "redneck" in America.

(3.) These two articles were not signed by Woolley but it is clear from the style that they come from his pen. Nobody else in Sydney in 1859 wrote like him.

(4.) The Sydney Push was an intellectual movement which met in Sydney hotels in the 1950s and 1960s and developed some of Anderson's libertarian ideas. See Franklin 2003: Chapter 8.

REFERENCES


Badham, Charles (1890), Speeches and Lectures Delivered in Australia. Sydney: William Dymock.


Empire (1851), 15 February.

Empire (1859), "Mr Parkes for West Sydney," Empire, 24 May: 5.


Wentworth, W. C. (1849), Speech on the Second Reading of the Sydney University Bill. Sydney.


Melleuish, Greg

**Source Citation** (MLA 7th Edition)

**URL**
http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.lib.monash.edu.au/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA421323519&v=2.1&u=monash&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w&asid=bfa617a1de48bc747c204ba6c1b3f9f

**Gale Document Number**: GALE|A421323519