

## *Collini on the University*

Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?* (Penguin, 2012)

This book is a mixture of good and bad; or, more accurately, good criticisms and observations, and slightly misleading judgements. The early part of the book is patient and sometimes a bit boring, although worthy, and definitely full-bore, so to speak; the second half, composed of bits and bobs Collini wrote at particular points in the last twenty or so years, is brisker, and a lot more entertaining, although sometimes half-cocked.

The good observations are about the history of the university, especially in the last century or so, and the good criticisms concern the way the modern British government has mangled the idea—“*the Idea*”, any idea—of the university in its running after market imperatives on the one hand and commitments to medical, scientific, economic returns of a non-marketable sort on the other. (186) Since the humanities lose either way, and since Collini teaches humanities, the book is really a defence of what the humanities are about. And there is nothing wrong and a lot right about his picture of the humanities. E.g.: our collaborators are mostly dead (149); that, as Montaigne suggested, philosophy teaches us to die. (146) (This deathly theme would cause consternation if it were mentioned to a civil servant.) He suggests talk of skills “shows a failure of nerve” (144): good, but it would be better to reject the language of skills altogether. He mocks, rightly, the concept of the “real world”. (145) He suggests, as is likely, that the quality of research has dropped in the last twenty years. (133) He notes that “research” is a “misleading term”. (123) He makes the interesting observation that universities use a different, and better, language when writing to alumni (i.e. patrons of the old sort) than they do when writing to the state (i.e. a patron of the new sort). (96) He rightly says that university education is not so much about knowledge, as about initiating students into a sort of practice of thinking. (81) He observes that universities often resemble “think-tanks, performing art complexes, and apprentice-programmes, as well as . . . sports clubs, community centres, and dating agencies”. (12) But he also sees that “universities are among the very few institutions whose rationale includes selecting and shaping their own future staff.” (8) This is all well put. And there is a very good phrase about the university being “something of a palimpsest of successive social and educational ideals”. (154)

The misleading judgements come mainly in the first three chapters of the book, where Collini writes about the “multiversity”, the history of the university, and—again! and while being slightly condescending about the fact that everyone else who writes about universities writes about Newman!—Newman. The chapter on Newman is a sort of elegant evasion. Collini repeatedly comments on Newman’s “mannered and deliberately archaic treatise” (41), his “rhythmical cadences” (46), “virtuoso rhetorical performance” (48), “silky prose” (49), and “rhetorical overkill”. (52) He picks some of Newman’s worst lines, and says “Who could not thrill [to them]?” which, if ironic, is so repressed the irony cannot be enjoyed. (43) When Collini gets to the “riotous young gentlemen and dim clergymen” who came out of the universities in Newman’s time (51), we may wonder whether Collini knows his century (the nineteenth century) at all, or just some Angry Young Man (or even Bright Young Thing) caricature of it. Collini ridicules Newman’s idea that religion is a condition of knowledge, as if no one could possibly believe that now (44); whereas Stephen Clark, until recently

Professor of Philosophy at Liverpool, has been arguing this at length, and with great success, since at least his 1984 book *From Athens to Jerusalem*, and through to his most recent books. Nor does Collini note that someone as eminent as MacIntyre has made use of Newman's religious conception of the university in his 2009 book *God, Philosophy, Universities*. In fact, Collini's analysis of Newman is simply not as good as Maskell and Robinson's was in *The New Idea of the University* in 2001. In this book they showed, very effectively—so effectively that I am not sure I would have noticed it had I read Newman before reading their book—that Newman fudged the issue of “liberal” education by arguing that a “liberal” education, so far from being the opposite conception of the university to the utilitarian one, was likely to better achieve utilitarian ends than any mere utilitarian institutions could. The truth about Newman's book is that it is a clear title printed on the boards of a murky book. It has three separate ideas of the university in it: which Newman failed to distinguish. One is the confessional idea, one is the liberal idea, and one is the utilitarian idea. Collini does not avoid getting lost in Newman's tangles: so much so that he ends the chapter by judging that, despite Newman's prose, we still need Newman—or, in his own words, “we have good reason to keep the photograph on the mantelpiece.” (60) (Collini is evidently not above a bit of “mannered” or “archaic” prose himself. Indeed, his use of the demotic word “tad” does not exempt him from falling victim to stylistic vanity and prolixity in some of the early chapters. It was actually Collini's warnings about Newman's style which drew my attention to his own “virtuoso rhetorical performance”.)

Collini is a liberal of some sort, and anti-conservative, and, certainly, anti-Conservative. So he makes the usual complaints about the Thatcher changes, which were “savage”. (33) His history of the universities in the second chapter is effective, although he is perhaps too hasty in dismissing the history of the university before the nineteenth century. If he seriously thinks that the university effectively begins with Humboldt—“the modern university is essentially a nineteenth-century creation” (23)—then it is no wonder he cannot understand Newman. The fact is, of course, that just as our universities look back to Humboldt for a sense of what a university should be and for a suggestion of why this “modern” thing should be called a university, so Humboldt, Newman etc looked back to the medieval university for their sense of what a university should be and for justification for calling their institutions universities. The prestige of the prestigious term “university” is not nineteenth-century. (Boswell records Johnson saying professors in universities should be paid more, so they can get on with great work.) Collini cites Maskell and Robinson's book as an instance of the sort of criticism which uses a “yardstick” of a definite “idea” of the university to chastise the “new idea”: he thinks this is “vitiating by a conservative or nostalgic desire to ‘restore’ some version of the university that pre-dates the era of mass higher education.” (21) I don't know if this is fair about Maskell and Robinson, although I doubt it, but what it indicates is that Collini is very eager to have it both ways. (Earlier he refers to an “unintelligent form of conservatism” which is “doomed to irrelevance”. (15)) There is a menace Collini does not seem to be aware of in some of his anti-conservative utterances. “A properly democratic system of higher education is surely something we should welcome, and anyway it is here to stay.” (42) The last clause is worthy of Willetts. But even the first part of the sentence is somewhat alarming: and Collini does not ask whether it is compatible with all the minuscule Leavism latent in his “polemic” in the second half of his book, which certainly does depend on the idea that expansion has gone too far, and that there is something, something, something to be said for elitism. He does not want to seem conservative, although he *is*: but he isn't. He is on the side of the modern, democratic university; and yet he is also

on the side of an arcane idea of dons initiating students into the practice of thinking. He calls this indeterminacy “realistic”, which it surely is; but we have already seen how Collini himself mocks the real world; and one would have thought that someone with his sort of “close-reading” eye would have seen that there is something suspicious about this use of the term “realism”. Collini’s line in the end is just a modern secular *via media*. He himself is concessionary: which makes it hard to see exactly how he can maintain a firm line against the assaults of the government. (It is hard to see the fence, but we know he is sitting on it.) In case there is any doubt about this, it is worth pointing out that although the book begins rather progressively, it ends conservatively. Here are the last lines: “Attending to these values may help us remember, amid difficult and distracting circumstances, that we are merely custodians for the present generation of a complex intellectual inheritance which we did not create—and which is not ours to destroy.” (199)

I have a minor cavil about his claim that everyone has misunderstood the Browne Report by assuming it is only about funding and fees. His own view is that it signals “a redefinition of higher education” (179); but although it may be true that the rhetoric associated with “consumers” and “service-providers” is novel, it is nonetheless the case that utility has been a criterion used to measure universities since at least the Robbins Report, and, if Newman’s concerns were justified, since a century before that. The consumption model of education is not a “redefinition” of higher education, but a shifting of rhetoric (and perhaps practice) within a well-established idea of the university as something useful to the state.

Collini rather sweetly suggests that his book is “polemic”. (xiii) The book as a whole is not polemical but eirenical; although some of his shorter *jeux d’esprit* are polemic. He is brave enough to use good and robust words like “fatuous” (177), he mocks the claim that the Research Assessment Exercise has increased the quality of research when in fact it has increased the ability of academics to satisfy its standards (160), and he laments the subsumption of education within the Department for Business. (174) It in such small details that Collini is at his best. He is not brave enough, or conservative enough, to do more than be reasonable. But he does try to remind everyone that the humanities matter, and that they matter in terms which are their own, and will not necessarily make sense to scientists, social scientists, or bureaucrats. And it is for this that his book deserves praise.

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