

## SOME REMARKS ON TERTIARY EDUCATION TODAY

by Prof. RALF DAHRENDORF

THIS is my first opportunity to publish, in Malta, some of my views about tertiary education today, and I welcome the fact that it is the Students' Representative Council which has provided me with this chance. I have of course had other opportunities for making my views known in Malta, and I am therefore not unaware of what is expected of me at a time at which many institutions of the country, including those of tertiary education, are in a stage of dynamic development. Change is not a value in itself, but more often than not, changes are needed in order to fashion institutions in such a way that they serve the people for whom they were created. Malta is going through such a period of change, and will – so one hopes – in the process find its identity not only as a bridge between cultures, but also as a model of the democratic dynamics of an open society. To this end, the University and the other institutions of tertiary education have an important role to play.

It may be useful to look for a moment into the history of universities. Towards the end of the 18th century, most of the universities then extant followed a fairly well-defined pattern. They were the place where the learned professions educated their children, metaphorically speaking, and outside theology more often than not in a literal sense as well. Speaking of 'education' in this context may indeed be something of a euphemism; it was in fact training more than education, with a set syllabus, and the drill of learning by heart the canonized information passed on in the classical Faculties of Theology, Law, and Medicine. Traces of what we would today call academic freedom, in the sense of a freedom to teach what the scholar believes is true, and freedom to select at least to some extent courses and classes on the part of students – traces of such freedom could possibly be found in a fourth Faculty, viewed with suspicion for many centuries, and yet productive of most that was new, the Faculty of Arts. However, even here, there were but traces. I remember vividly Immanuel Kant's sad description of his lectures on physical geography, far too many every week, in which he had to read a silly text sent to him by the Prussian Ministry of Education, to bored students who applauded him whenever he

dared insert a sentence or two of his own.

In the early years of the 19th century, a great change came over the universities at least in some parts of the world, and notably in continental Europe. Universities were, one might argue, revolutionized by their Faculties of Arts (or of Philosophy, as they are called in some countries). The sciences emerged as a separate set of

In the early years of the 19th century, a great change came over the universities at least in some parts of the world, and notably in continental Europe. Universities were, one might argue, revolutionized by their Faculties of Arts (or of Philosophy, as they are called in some countries). The sciences emerged as a separate set of disciplines, oriented towards 'pure knowledge', fundamental research as we would say today. Classical scholarship turned into a critical discipline and inspired the study of non-classical languages. Gradually, and haltingly, the first social sciences emerged as such. Philosophy itself inspired the entire structure of the university with a sense of academic autonomy and scholarly values. Hegel, barely two decades after Kant, not only did not have to waste his time lecturing on physical geography, but taught, in his lectures his own most recent thoughts without ever repeating a course. The older, professional Faculties remained in existence, and of course their representatives wore the more splendid gowns, but the dynamic of universities moved to disciplines which were inspired by a sense of scientific discovery rather than professional training.

It is a significant fact that this 19th century revolution bypassed the English universities (although not those of Scotland which remained an integral part of the European tradition). It was only when University College London, and later the first 'redbrick' universities were founded that the new spirit entered the southern part of the island. In the United States, on the other hand, a remarkable and uniquely successful merger took place between the old medieval tradition which remained alive in the form of the College, and the new scientific tradition which became institutionalized in the Graduate Schools. Thus the American university has become the hybrid which makes it, at least in its most distinguished examples, one of the most successful academic institutions in history.

In fact, American universities became the starting point of a third academic development as well, a revolution which did not reach Europe before the 1950s and 1960s, that is, the revolution of mass education. The discovery of education as a human right, and as an economic asset, originally led to the great campaign for universal literacy which stimulated the introduction of general educa-

cation in Europe in the nineteenth century, and which continues in the developing world to the present day. But at some stage, quite early in the United States, much later in Europe, a second stage of the educational rocket was ignited: the discovery that it was useful, and indeed just, to enable as many people as is feasible to acquire an extended education, thus developing their capabilities fully and enabling them to live in a complex world. I shall not enter into the arguments behind and around the developments set in motion by the Robbins Report in Britain, the first Recommendations of the Science Council (*Wissenschaftsrat*) in Germany, and parallel developments elsewhere, except to say that I have always been an advocate of the notion of education as a civil right. This is not to dispute the social function of education, or the practical relevance of scientific research, but to say that in the last analysis these will flourish only if and where the individual and his development are the guiding principle of educational policy.

Turning from argument to fact, it is clear that the revolution of mass education has changed universities out of recognition. There has been growing pressure on admission to universities, while in the end one-third of each age group demand some tertiary education. New subjects have emerged, both practical and theoretical, which were unheard of in earlier phases of academic development, accounting and linguistics, industrial relations and microbiology, labour law and comparative religion, and many others. At the margin of universities, and sometimes outside them, new competing institutions came into being, colleges for the training of teachers, of nurses, of interpreters, and above all of engineers in the widest sense of the term. One of the greatest merits of the most distinguished American universities consists, in my view, in the manner in which they have managed to draw into the generous cloak of one institution a variety of disparate parts without destroying the uniqueness of any one of them. They have become department stores of knowledge – undoubtedly a distasteful idea to some, and certainly a controversial way of describing a fact –, and have thereby been able to offer the widest possible choice to the greatest possible number. When I am talking about the ‘comprehensive university’, I am in fact thinking of places like Columbia University, or the University of Chicago, or the University of California.

Times are moving fast nowadays, and it sometimes appears to us in Europe, and in the United States, that quite soon after the revolution of mass education another academic change is under way. The extension of periods of initial education for a growing

number of young people has led to a kind of vested interest, an educational class with its own culture and politics. It has also led to a growing disillusionment of the general public with education. Elections are certainly no longer won on a platform of educational expansion. These seemingly contradictory trends might usefully be turned into the beginning of a reconsideration of the place of tertiary education in society and in people's lives. I for one would like to think that we are moving in a direction which makes education 'lifelong', 'permanent', 'recurrent' in the true sense, and thus interweaves our universities and other institutions of tertiary education much more intimately with the other dimensions of people's lives. If the institution for which I am responsible, the London School of Economics and Political Science, became a model of such new departures, it would give me even more pride than LSE warrants in any case.

But I must stop a train of argument, the relevance of which for Malta is perhaps not immediately evident. There are many obvious reasons why the University of Malta is not going to be another Columbia University nor another London School of Economics; nor should it be. The specific tradition of the University of Malta, the cultural significance of its location, the role it can play in the development of the country all make for a unique combination of factors. Yet there are a few general points which follow from the analysis which I have presented here, and which I would like to offer as conclusions:

1. The University of Malta has remained, longer than even the English universities, primarily a place for the training of future members of the great professions. In any case, the tone of the university was set by this function, and by the specific relations with the wider community which it entails. This has meant a certain insulation of the University, for it has led to underemphasis on at least three other academic functions: training and research relevant to sectors of the community other than the learned professions; scientific research, that is, the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake; a contribution to mass education. Taking a university out of the mainstream of modern academic developments was bound to weaken its position and impact; there was a need for change.

2. Partly in line with developments in other countries and notably Britain, but partly as a consequence of a certain insulation, there emerged separate institutions of tertiary education for training teachers and engineers. An uneasy relationship developed between them and the University, with the latter appearing to defend privi-

lege and the former torn between their desire for higher status and the advantages of easier access to the funds of government. This rivalry was both wasteful and detrimental to the development of the notion of a modern university which is necessarily multi-functional, not to repeat the term department store.

3. In terms of organization, the university had preserved for itself the autonomy of medieval guilds, whereas the two other colleges came directly under government control. The former is nice; yet it is not only difficult to justify at a time at which there is no economic autonomy of academic institutions, but also unsatisfactory in so far as effective communication between academic developments and the general needs of the community is concerned. The latter on the other hand, that is direct dependence on government, is at all times a mistake. Even governments which make it their principle to control all autonomous institutions tightly (which the government of Malta does not), have found that this impairs academic quality and initiative. In the light of such considerations, it seemed right to create a Commission which acts as a meeting place of interests, and at the same time a buffer zone for pressures of whatever origin. Responsible autonomy can well be maintained by a combination of block grants and mixed academic-governmental-independent commissions.

4. The next steps in the development of tertiary education in Malta might well be changes in the internal organization of the various institutions and their interrelations. Here, a maximum of flexibility seems indicated. A Faculty of Social Science will respond to an evident need, both in academic and in practical terms. There is no reason why the University should not incorporate one or two research institutes. The federation (if that is the word) with MCAST and the Teachers' Training College can be developed on many levels. Initiatives by the institutions of tertiary education to promote adult education and offer shorter or longer refresher courses would probably be welcomed and would indicate that these institutions play an active part in the life of the community. A deliberate policy of developing academic links with institutions outside Malta might help solve staff problems and would benefit students and staff alike. If in this process the University of Malta became a kind of comprehensive university, it would, I am sure, serve as a model for many others.

There are, I know, other problems of tertiary education. Students would perhaps have liked to hear more about student participation. May I confine myself to one remark in this respect and say that

open government seems to me essential in universities, and it requires the free flow of information to and from all groups; but making universities miniature political communities has turned out to be disruptive for all their functions. But I must stop appearing to give advice to people in a country about which I know little after all, and who are themselves best able to judge where they want to go. One of the prime purposes which my colleagues and I in the old University of Malta Commission pursued, was to make sure that ways would be found to have Maltese citizens run their own institutions in this field as well. We all need communications across boundaries, and the academic community has always been an international community, but communications within this community are a two-way process, in which the University of Malta should and will play its full part.