

“IN DER ENGE UND IM DUNKELN”: HUMANITY AND THE HUMANITIES IN AN AGE OF GREED.

INTRODUCTION

The subject of my paper may seem irrelevant to the announced topic of this DAAD meeting, because the event has changed. Originally the paper was volunteered for a DAAD Symposium, announced last June, on the role of fundamental research in our society. “In our current Knowledge Economy,” the notice read, a utilitarian approach to knowledge means that “we are slowly abandoning the traditional value placed on knowledge for its own sake”.

However, in July the “Symposium” had metamorphosed into a “Conference” with a new subject, “The role of the university in our globalised world”. I accordingly withdrew my paper – but was then urged to give it nonetheless.

In November, another metamorphosis: the “Conference” became a “Meeting”, with yet a different subject: “Bridging the Distance – New Zealand and Germany in Dialogue”. Now the original aim had been *reversed*. What could be more utilitarian than a “Meeting” whose agenda is to discuss “bridging the distance” between New Zealand and Germany? The language is that of engineering. An invitation to argue the virtues of the unuseful had become a call to demonstrate usefulness.

I decided to give my paper nevertheless. But to meet the new time limit imposed, I have had resort to a handout, with which I shall begin.

HOFMANNSTHAL

The first passage on your handout is from an essay by the Austrian writer Hugo von Hofmannsthal on the English mediaeval morality play, *Everyman*, on which he based his own verse drama, *Jedermann*, of 1912.¹ He argues here that in his own time humanity is, as he puts it, “in der Enge und im Dunkeln”, roughly “driven into a corner and in darkness”, through its enslavement by money. He sees people’s relationship to money in terms of a reversed master-servant relationship: what people should master, they are instead mastered by, instead of possessing they are possessed. This he calls a “demonic perversion” which pervades all aspects of human existence and to a frightening degree determines them.

My paper will argue that a permeation of society by precisely such money-thinking has recently been celebrating a new and grisly triumph. What Hofmannsthal is lamenting is today summarised in the useful German term, “die Ökonomisierung der Gesellschaft”, literally “the economisation of society”. The results for universities around the world were the focus of a Humboldt Colloquium held in Amsterdam last November: “Wahrheit oder Gewinn? Über die Ökonomisierung von Universität und Wissenschaft” – “Truth or profit? On the Commodification of University and Scholarship”.

But before I go on to talk about the universities, I shall justify my assertion that we live in a new Age of Greed.

¹ Hugo von Hofmannsthal, “Das alte Spiel von Jedermann”, in: *Gesammelte Werke: Dramen III 1893-1927* (Frankfurt a.M., Fischer, 1979), pp 89-102. This quotation p 90.

AN AGE OF GREED

Of course *every* age is an age of greed, because human beings are greedy. But in certain ages greed has assumed general proportions which have had general consequences. Hofmannsthal wrote his essay shortly before the outbreak of a disastrous world war which was largely the outcome of economic competition between nations, played out in a race for overseas colonies, raw materials, and control of the seas. A direct consequence of Germany's defeat in that war was the rise of Nazism and an even greater carnage.

Today, there are different reasons for asserting that we live in an Age of Greed. You may think I am referring to those recent sensational manifestations of greed in high places: the expenses claims of British MPs, the Madoff investment scandal, or the bonuses paid to themselves by bankers in the USA and UK as their reward for wrecking the economy. Well, certainly. But these are minor in comparison with the plundering of state coffers for self-enrichment in Russia after the fall of communism.²

Of more concern should be the less noticed institutionalised manifestations of greed. In a recent article Michael Sandel, Bass Professor of Government at Harvard University and author of *Justice: What's the Right Thing To Do?*, points out that in 2007, CEOs at major US corporations were paid 344 times the pay of the average worker. On what grounds, if any, he asks, do executives deserve to earn that much more than their employees? Most of them, he concedes, work hard and bring talent to their work. "But consider this: in 1980, CEOs earned only 42 times what their workers did. Were executives less talented and hard-working than they are today?"³ This is not just an American madness. In the UK, an employee on an average salary of £24,900 would have to work for over 100 years to receive the same remuneration as an average CEO of the hundred top companies gets in just one year.⁴ The gap between rich and poor in Britain is now at its widest for forty years.⁵

The global scene is equally a spectacle of greed. Can we be content to live on a planet a fifth of whose population earns just two per cent of global income?⁶ A recent biography of Friedrich Engels points out that the exploitation of the working class described in his book *The Condition of the Working Class in England* has now migrated to the Third World, where the factory and living conditions of industrial Manchester in the 1840s are replicated in the sweatshops and slums of modern South-East Asia.⁷ But even this is less scandalous than the universal scramble for the world's resources, in disregard of mounting ecological damage, in order to fund a Western culture of debt-fuelled over-consumption. One feature of this culture neatly exemplifies the "daemonic reversal" which Hofmannsthal identifies, in which wealth dictates worth, instead of vice versa: the bloated market in Pop Art. Since the 1980s a glut of capital has created a loony spectacle: newly rich Medicis, anxious to acquire visible certificates that their wealth signifies something, have discovered that any image is priceless if enough belief is attached to it. Value for them is no longer a product of truth or beauty, but simply a trick of investment capital.⁸

² For a recent denunciation of its beneficiaries see Alexander Lebedev, "Sun, sea and excess on the Côte de Crime", *New Statesman*, 21 September 2009, p 6.

³ Michael Sandel, "Bankers on bail", *New Statesman*, 14 September 2009, p 36.

⁴ *New Statesman*, 21 September 2009, p 31.

⁵ John Pilger in *New Statesman*, 21 September 2009, p 16.

⁶ Tim Jackson, "I shop, therefore I harm", in the Copenhagen Climate Conference Special 32-Page Pullout of the *New Statesman*, 26 October 2009, p 18.

⁷ Miles Taylor, "Town Planner?", *London Review of Books*, 17 December 2009, p 27.

⁸ Tim Adams, "End of the Irony Age", *New Statesman*, 9 November 2009, pp 46-7.

One must ask: are ever-rising incomes for the already-rich still an appropriate goal for policy in a world constrained by ecological limits? Especially since recent research suggests that not the wealthiest, but the most equal societies, are the happiest.⁹

HUMANITY & THE HUMANITIES

Where are the universities in all this? Let me lead you out of the miasma of human greed, and offer you a glass of clean water: John Henry Newman's *The Idea of a University*, of 1852, from which you will find passages on your handout.¹⁰ This work famously enshrines the idea of a university as a place where knowledge is pursued disinterestedly for its own sake. Newman's ideas in their time had a huge influence on the development of universities in Britain. (In contrast, the Humboldt-inspired conception of the university as primarily a place of *research* influenced the development of universities in Germany and the United States.)

In the quotations from Discourse V you will see that Newman argues that knowledge is its own end. In those from Discourse VII he expands this by opposing the arguments of utilitarians with his argument that a cultivated intellect is not only an individual but also a social good. I draw your attention in particular to No 8.

It may seem quixotic to propose such principles in a world which differs so greatly from that in which Newman proposed them over 150 years ago. In reality they have never been more relevant than now, for they embody in an inspired form the antidote we most need to the current *Ökonomisierung* of our universities. The contest is real. To show the topicality of Newman's ideas, I follow him with a passage from a speech of 2003 by our former Prime Minister, Helen Clark, which is fundamentally Newmanite in its sentiments. Her rejection of the merely economic as "narrow and confining" can be read as an intelligent response to Hofmannsthal's "Wir sind in der Enge". This is followed by statements made by our present Minister of Culture, Hon Christopher Finlayson, which are also of a Newmanite cast, and must especially refresh teachers of music, languages and literatures. However, he was at the time in opposition, a condition fostering an exuberance of opinion which political office tends later to moderate.

Following these two, I give you two proponents of the opposite point of view: one made by bio-chemist Derek McCormack in his first year as Vice-Chancellor of the Auckland University of Technology, the other by a former German Ambassador to New Zealand, His Excellency Erich Riedler, whose comment made to an assembly of New Zealand secondary and tertiary teachers of German – and more especially the *laughter* with which it was greeted – reinforced my own decision to take early retirement from the university at the end of the following year.

A further reason for my early retirement was precisely the growing sense that, contrary to what I had thought, my attachment to the works of Goethe disqualified me for university employment, in that what I had supposed to be a seat of learning had become a government service utility, whose managers prized productivity over scholarship, had adopted wholesale

⁹ Richard Wilkinson & Kate Prickett, *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*. London, Allen Lane, 2009.

¹⁰ John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University, Defined and Illustrated. I: In nine discourses delivered to the Catholics of Dublin; II: In occasional lectures and essays addressed to the members of the Catholic University*. 1852. New Impression: London, Longmans, Green, 1907.

the brute jargon of the marketplace, regarded their academic staff as shelf-packers in an information supermarket and spoke, to borrow a phrase from the British Labour MP John Cruddas, “a desiccated language of targets”.¹¹

THE PBRF

Let me return now to Helen Clark’s declaration for Newman’s principle. It was made at the launch of the Tertiary Education Commission in 2003. That Commission was to be entrusted with the government’s most destructive assault to date on on the humanities, and especially on the study of languages and literatures: the PBRF, or Performance Based Research Fund. This scheme, which links the state funding of our universities to their measured research output, is New Zealand’s variation on a UK invention, the RAE, or Research Assessment Exercise, which was itself an outcome of Thatcherite economics.

Basic to the scheme is the neoliberal New Right theory (associated with the Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek) that human nature is calculating, and society not an organic, living whole in which essentially social beings are bound by ties of custom and tradition, but an aggregate of self-interested economic actors. In the late 1980s, when such free-market ideas carried all before them, universities were turned into performative institutions, operating in an environment of marketplace contestability. Since the PBRF makes staff members’ individual research scores a key factor in determining how much funding their institution receives, individual staff must therefore be constantly reviewed, assessed and audited to ensure maximum financial benefit to their institution. This presupposes that their work can be measured and quantified numerically, thus turned into cash – a notion dear to accountants, but regarded with incredulity by anyone teaching literature. It also presupposes the silly belief that *productivity equals value*.

In the first application of the PBRF in 2003 my own School, that of Asian and European Languages and Cultures at Victoria University of Wellington, whose thirty academics had all been appointed in international competition and included scholars of outstanding merit, the results brought the dismaying revelation to those whose educational careers hitherto had consistently identified them as A-level minds, that they were C-level. Although, as Acting Head at the time, I was privy to these results, I am not permitted to divulge them here. However, a colleague in French has given me permission to tell her personal story. In the period under review, together with a colleague at Canterbury, she had researched, edited and published a dictionary enabling its user to translate between New Zealand English and French, and vice versa. It was published in Paris by a leading publisher, and has 781 pages. Her PBRF score was the lowest possible: R, “Research Inactive”. Six years previously, for his New Zealand dictionary, Victoria’s own linguist Harry Orsman had been awarded an honorary doctorate.

To speak more widely: more serious than the PBRF’s perpetration of such egregious follies is the unforeseen way in which the scheme has skewed universities as a whole in the direction of money-making. It has promoted precisely that “daemoniac perversion” which Hofmannsthal deplored. Money now possesses the minds of managements. Money dictates policy, not least appointments policy. Appointments are made of academics whose A-level record in previous PBRF rounds is guaranteed to bring in money – even if their qualifications don’t match the post. Academics are favoured who attract money in the form of research grants, or can

¹¹ John Cruddas, “Thinking the Future”, *New Statesman*, 7 September 2009, p 23.

commercialise their discoveries. And everyone, *everyone* must publish. It doesn't matter *what* they publish, *provided* they publish – and in time for the next PBRF round. At my own university, this imperative has created in the humanities a crudely materialistic, alienating and dehumanising environment, in which staff are endlessly monitored, mentored, harassed and, ultimately, hounded. It has nothing whatever to do with fostering scholarship.

And this at a university whose founders gave it a Latin motto which, translated, reads: “Wisdom is more to be desired than gold”. Shortly before my retirement, this motto was stealthily removed from the University’s calendar, its website, and its headed paper. I surmise that it was sent to the Dunbar Sloane auction rooms to see what it would fetch.

CONCLUSION

To conclude: I have argued that, because we live in an Age of Greed, the humanities are disadvantaged and downgraded. I invite you to consider also the reverse: that it is because the humanities are disadvantaged and downgraded that we live in an Age of Greed. For to neglect the modern literatures of Europe alone – not to mention other literatures – is to ignore a powerfully challenging repository of wisdom about values which transcend the “narrow and confining” orthodoxies of economics. Works of literature also tell us a lot about greed and its effects, and the ambiguous role money plays in our lives, its ethical and psychological implications. Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, Goethe’s *Faust*, Balzac’s *Le Père Goriot*, Hofmannsthal’s *Jedermann*: what about these for a start? As religious certainties decline, all the more must the values on which we base our society be sought in the civilising power of books written by the great minds of the generations before us – as three of these, Goethe, Cicero and Proust, remind us in those final quotations on your handout.

Of course one does need *time* to read. A fashionable delusion of the present generation is that everyone is too busy for this. “With our busy life-styles these days...”: a mantra one reads almost daily. So I will end by reminding you of some famous words of the seventeenth-century French philosopher and scientist, Blaise Pascal: “All of humanity’s problems,” he wrote, “stem from man’s inability to sit quietly in a room alone.” One thing you can do when sitting quietly in a room alone is read books. Another is to research and write books. On successive research leaves in Germany I did a lot of that. I want to end by thanking the DAAD *from the heart* for four times so generously providing the financial means for those leaves, and above all for trusting me, and never demanding proof that my labours would benefit either the New Zealand or the German nation or, for that matter, help to “bridge the distance” between them. But I hope they have.