

PHILOSOPHY AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS edited by John Haldane
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Here are thirteen essays on the condition of Britain, mostly concerned with the degeneration of its institutions and the declining morals of its inhabitants. Several of the essays are largely descriptive, and key themes recur.

Bryan Appleyard observes how being a couch-potato can now be hailed as a virtue ('Let us celebrate our cerebral-free non-activity': so much for Aristotle!) and points to the espousal of pop-culture by government (Cool Britannia, the People's Princess) as an expression of a democratic, or better demotic, predilection for mediocrity. The alternative is taken to be élitism. Similarly George Walden sees collusion between the state, under the Conservatives and more vigorously under New Labour, and the purveyors of supposedly avant-garde art. We 'have reached a stage of democratic tolerance where governments subsidise 'oppositionary' art much in the way that the salaries of the opposition who abuse them in the House of Commons are paid from official funds' (p.92).

All new-fangled (British) rubbish is good, or at least as good as anything else. Gordon Graham and Melanie Phillips find that rootless toleration undermines intermediate political bodies, even nations, without replacing them. Phillips and David Alton, the latter inclines to bombast from one point to the next, treat especially of the collapse of fatherhood and an ongoing subversion of the family which makes maintenance of the welfare state the more impossible. Their target this time is demotic toleration, and again as actively promoted by the new establishment, of all forms of life-style and in combination with a wilful (or malevolent) disregard of the ensuing vast, even where indirect, damage done to the institution of marriage. Anthony O'Hear pursues the insinuation of mediocrity into the field of education, with a broad-brush attack on modern trends. Many of these he traces to the ideas of Dewey, especially those identifying the school as a locus for socialization rather than for teaching academic content. (In the next essay, Alan Ryan suggests that Dewey was less damaging than he often appears and that his views have been read out of context, though Ryan's defence of 'projects' — namely that the Ph.D. is one such — is hardly a strong argument for their use in other parts of the educational system.) Russell Keat and David Marquand worry that while the market may be the best supplier of material goods, it has a nasty habit of devaluating anything not naturally amenable to commercial docketing.

In contrast to all this, Samuel Brittan, who seemingly equates almost any state activity with a more or less official 'socialist' (i.e. authoritarian) agenda thinks things are not so bad, largely because greed (here lurks a defence of individualism) is not as bad as other vices. Some sort of individualism, he argues, when moderated by rule-utilitarianism, is the only way to avoid despotism. The questions begged here are brought into clearer view by Keat: the market is only a means to the achievement of certain goods, indeed it is liable to encroach on many others (such as marriage, friendship, etc) to the extent of rendering them 'endangered species'.

Several of the essays, especially that of Gordon Graham, point to the writings of John Rawls (*A Theory of Justice* and in particular *Political Liberalism*) with their doctrine of the value-free state, as the theoretical

underpinning of demoticism, whether Rawls be regarded as merely the dupe of American litigious competitiveness and 'free' individualism or as its enthusiastic apologist. Of the remaining essays, only Tony Skillen, whose name is oddly omitted from the Notes on Contributors, makes some intriguing remarks about the humanity of begging, and the inhumanity of New Labour's hostility to it, while John Skorupski and John Haldane offer the most philosophical pieces of the collection. The former surveys modern liberalism since Schiller and urges rejection of 'demotic-liberal ideology' — a nice name for the threats to civilised life which many of the other contributors retail and which, under the title 'the worrying hypothesis', he identifies as a concern of liberals for a couple of centuries. 'Democracy', he writes, 'just because of its equality and fraternity, threatened a spiritual if not political tyranny: the imposition of mediocrity, the stifling of great individualities and dissenting voices on which moral and intellectual progress depends' (pp.55-6). For his part, Haldane is primarily concerned to argue that reproductive cloning is the latest version of a loss of respect for the individual person which 'threatens the very possibility of a meaningful life'.

Most of the contributors to this volume are highly critical of the dominant trends pushed by the liberal establishment and our New Labour masters, not least Blair's deterministic progressivism. 'New, new, new everything is new'; so Blair cited by Marquand. The only (limited) defenders of the Brave New World are Ryan trying to save Dewey's skin, and Brittan with his rule-utilitarianism and often tendentiously phrased defence of individualism, especially in business, and a modified version of the Invisible Hand. For him the only alternative to capitalism is 'socialism' or 'collectivism'.

What should one take away from this book? Haldane attempts no general conclusions, but to this reader it shows that our chief problem — apart from a constant omission of God from the political equation, which may be seen to negate all attempts at philosophical coherence and the identification of the common good — is that we have forgotten that democracy, as Churchill held, is not an end in itself but an instrument to prevent worse forms of government. To agree that it is best to follow the principles of one-human-one-vote and that we are all equal before the law is not to concede, through fear of élitism, etc., that 'democratic' principles, now to be seen as egalitarian, should prevail in all walks of life. The family should not be democratic; learning is not democratic; artistic and intellectual skill is not democratically distributed; the church is not properly democratic. In sum, what we should be thinking about is the limits of democracy and how to avoid a philistine, anti-intellectual egalitarianism whereby individuals are reduced to sullen, envious, litigious consumers, tarted up with fake pearls (to invoke Oscar Wilde) by real swine. For we should not forget those who manipulate the mass culture, whether corporations or media bosses and celebrities, and those who aspire, like the editors of the *Sun* or the *Guardian* to be the real rulers to whom even politicians must kowtow (see Appleyard above).

There is no agreement among us, and little discussion, on the common good or on the limits of democracy, but perhaps we can at least start with the idea that mass preference is no guide to the good life, nor a good basis for all institutions. How many non-democratic structures do we require in order to preserve not mass apathy tempered by cynicism, and not just the word 'democracy', but democracy itself?

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