

Lenkiewicz Education Project 25th Anniversary

I am grateful to the trustees of the Lenkiewicz Foundation for inviting me to this Announcement of the 25th anniversary of Robert's dense, enigmatic, empathic, ironic, angry, sometimes sardonic and always controversial Education Project. I have never attended a formal occasion called an 'Announcement' before so I haven't a clue what might be expected of me. I have clear memories of the sittings (nine in all) in the Barbican Studio, and the conversations they engendered, so I shall say something about these; then something about the aims of the project; and finally something about how the project might influence education now and into the future.

The Sittings

I'm pleased to say that several of Robert's intentions, quietly announced in our conversations, were not carried out. He told me solemnly that he would invite many of the teachers he had painted to a wine reception, and serve them – no – not wine but *piss*, (wine become water!) because that was what he thought they were offering to their pupils. Subjects were invited to bring a book to the sittings which had most influenced them or their beliefs about education. One local political leader was to be depicted reading not the book of his choice but *The Beano*, due to Robert's assessment of his retarded mental age.

As sitting followed sitting I became rather anxious about how the portrait of me might be transmogrified into some less kindly version of my own rather positive self-image. That was a feeling many of Robert's subjects probably had! There was a small painting of a well known education leader in which the canvas was in large part empty, and the figure wild and unconvincing. What unflattering inferences were to be drawn from these symbolic cues? Were they Robert's way of telling the world that this particular subject was, in his view, vacuous and vapid? While I was eventually delighted with his painting of me, I never quite lost my anxiety about the possibility of drawing deprecatory inferences from it: did the marked shortness of my legs in the painting signify that I was going nowhere quickly? Did the angular, downward direction of my gaze suggest intellectual cowardice, or academic evasiveness? And why were four sittings necessary to complete the painting of my hands? What did Robert imagine me doing with them while he painted lustrous lines of light down my fingers, while even the dirt in my finger nails, real or imagined, was replicated on his canvas?

The Book

Our conversations were mostly about Theology and Philosophy. I was Head of Theology and Philosophy at the College of St Mark and St John and we were both eager to turn the sittings into deep conversations about the importance for human life of both academic areas. The book I had chosen, and which appears in the painting was an important catalyst for our discussions. Let me explain:

Paul Tillich was a very popular theologian in the mid-twentieth century. Exiled from Germany when Hitler came to power in 1933, Tillich placed himself 'on the boundary' (a later title of an autobiographical sketch) between philosophy and theology. His acquaintance with the philosopher (and Nazi-supporter) Martin Heidegger (they were both at the university of Marburg in the 1920s) led him to seek, not a synthesis, but a 'dialectic' (an open conversation recognizing differences) between philosophy and theology. Volume 2 of Tillich's *Systematic Theology* was the book I chose to accompany me to the sittings. It attempted to describe the existential condition of humankind in its actual sorry state – 'existential estrangement' Tillich called it - and to depict the Christian faith (in his terms, 'The New Being in Jesus as the Christ') as an offer of healing or restitution of it.

I had gone up to Oxford to read Theology, on my way into ministry in the Baptist Church. My home church was also a home to a zealous South Devon fundamentalism. As you might imagine, the discontinuities between the two environments impacted upon me, and the discovery of a liberal theologian who was familiar with philosophy and who relished the presentation of Christian faith and thought in a new vocabulary, helped me both to 'put away childish things' (as St. Paul also said he had to do) and to arrive at a version of Christianity which was on the one hand friendly to philosophy and on the other hand in the tradition of Dissent and of alternative expressions of Christian orthodoxy. Robert, it quickly became clear, was interested in both.

I was teaching a course on the philosophy of Wittgenstein at the time of our conversations. Robert, as I recall, was more interested in continental philosophy and psychoanalysis, and in exploring the more *avant garde* writers of the 1970s. I could not match his knowledge of continental philosophy, but I knew Wittgenstein's writings (in English translation) well, and he did not. So I was able to use Wittgenstein's deconstructive techniques to tease Robert about his continental flirtations. Wittgenstein would at times dismiss philosophical problems as cases of 'language gone on holiday'. He would deflate much pompous academic discussion (in any discipline) by saying its contributors were 'bewitched by language'. He would want to return philosophical language to its everyday use. His reaction to Freudians, for example, was to say they were 'charmed' or

‘mesmerised’ by his system, implying of course that much of it was to be dismissed as a sad case of ‘language gone on holiday’. Robert was genuinely interested in these techniques. I acquired my painting by purchasing books for his library. Most if not all of the books I purchased for him were by or about – you guessed it – Wittgenstein.

The distance between us over belief in God never once interfered with our conversations. Robert had been influenced by a well-known Christian theologian, doctor, musician and missionary – Albert Schweitzer – and Robert’s hospitality towards the homeless and solidarity with them, and with all social misfits round him (homeless, alcoholics, sex workers), equalled the best compassionate deeds that religion could match. We had common philosophical interests. Existentialism, while never popular in Britain, contained features which were germane to the Education Project. It developed themes about individual freedom, about rising above ‘everydayness’ to ‘authentic existence’; it acknowledged that within human being ‘unreason’ lurked uneasily with intellect; that mass human behaviour and the preferences of majorities were sometimes either plain stupid, violent or much manipulated (and occasionally all three). It acknowledged the creativity of the human spirit, and so sat easily within the Arts, especially painting and music. These themes could easily be incorporated into criticisms of mass education which Robert was already making.

My Contributions to the Project

A branch of existentialism developed into the philosophy of ‘personalism’. The basis of this philosophy was that the person was irreducible to scientific or objective descriptions, and was a complex entity requiring integration of body, intellect, emotion and will. I contributed two articles which I had had published in the early 1980s, to Robert’s compendious two-volume collection bearing the name of the project, *Observations on Local Education*. These were ‘Education and the Concept of a Person’ which appeared in the *Journal of Philosophy of Education* in 1980, and ‘Learning to Become Persons: A Theological Approach to Education Aims’ which appeared in the *Scottish Journal of Theology* in 1983. In the 1980s the subject called Philosophy of Education reached its point of maximum influence. In those days we used to discuss the *aims* of education. Traditionalists would insist on the initiation of learners into what was then called the ‘forms’ and some of the ‘fields’ of knowledge: pragmatists would emphasise preparation for employment. In the middle were people like me who emphasised the development of full personhood in an attempt to argue for a curricular balance which integrated intellectual excellence, creativity and employability.

How are we to view the Education Project 25 years after? Can it contribute to the practice of education in the next 25 years?

Retrospect

Let me begin with a truism: the project belongs to another time. In 1988 I drove a Citroen BX (the car that reared up underneath you when you started it, thinking itself to be a camel). Its ample boot could not accommodate Robert's painting of me when I called to collect it (I had to borrow a builder's trailer and take it away on a dry day – such was the disrespectful beginning of my custodianship of the painting). In 1988 there was no National Curriculum in the schools, though one had been announced. No-one had heard of the internet. Nowadays some young people spend six hours a day or more on-line and may be unaware of the difference between being on-line and being off it. In the eighties, the Thatcher government had slashed support for schools and universities. Would I have abandoned my belief in comprehensive education and not sent my son John to Southway School in 1984 if I had then known how the comprehensive ideal would be betrayed in that decade? It was the decade of yuppies and punk rockers, so sympathetically painted by Robert in some of his other projects, a reminder that whenever the gap grows between rich and poor, there is increasing crime, unhappiness and social tension, a situation immortalised by The Jam's angry single, *A Town Called Malice*, in 1982.

It was another time in Higher Education too. There were no universities in Plymouth. There was Plymouth Polytechnic (about to re-brand itself Polytechnic South West), and Marjon, a College of Education which had just been allowed to add the adjective 'Higher' to its title in 1977. Now there are two universities in the city, proclaiming locally the transition throughout the western world from an elitist university sector to a mass sector cramming in about 40% of the eligible population. The enormous gain of wider access is tempered by obvious worries, for example, about the quality of some of the provision; about the declining value of the awards earned just because so many more students acquire them; and even the suitability of some of the students for the courses on which they enrol.

But there are many continuities between then and now. Looking back on my two written contributions to the project I can claim to have been half right. The aims of education cannot be reduced to a few over-arching meta-statements like 'learning to become a person'. Not only does that require an essentialist view of language (the assumption that words have fixed meanings); it commits a double philosophical error. Philosophers know about the danger of 'deriving an "ought" from an "is"'. The arguments about aims attempted to derive an 'ought' from an 'ought'! The aims of education are a matter of complex social negotiation, and philosophers are unlikely to be invited to the negotiating table.

I think person-centred theories of education enjoyed real influence, but their contribution to the actual education of pupils was probably negligible. There was Personal and Social Education (PSE), Personal, Social and Moral Education (PSME), and following the 1988 Education Act, there was to be Spiritual Development. These innovations were well-intentioned (and remain in revised form), but Moral Education easily became 'values clarification' (if you are a racist bigot you don't need your values merely clarified; you need them changed). No-one knew what spiritual development ever was (and whatever passed for it, even if it was sanctified by OFSTED, wilfully bypassed longstanding philosophical and religious traditions of thought and practice). Religious Education was underfunded in the 1980s, and now, at a time when the steep decline of institutional Christianity is matched by a resurgence of Islam, much of it militant, it remains underfunded; it lacks the specialists required to teach it well; and it is needed more than ever.

Robert, like Kierkegaard (the Danish founder of existentialism in the 1830s and 1840s), was quietly contemptuous towards populisms of which general or mass education was but one. One might begin an assessment of 'Observations on Local Education' by suggesting the title itself contains more than a hint of irony. Here is another truism: an observation is never objective, a truism witnessed in all Robert's work. Even a simple observation-statement such as 'The grass is green' requires a judgement based on our fallible senses, the varying impact of our world upon them, and (crucially) membership of a longstanding linguistic community which has developed the language of colour and the skill of applying it to coloured objects. His 'observations' of his subjects and his collection of their written 'observations' about education remain tantalisingly 'factual' - 'there' (or *Dasein* as Heidegger would say) yet strangely elusive. What purports to be straightforwardly descriptive turns out to be explosively value-laden. The written contributions to the project, it could be fairly said, are mainly ephemeral, sometimes trivial, occasionally trite (I include my own in this assessment!). Perhaps the quotidian nature of many of Robert's 'observations', provides the enduring social commentary, while the painter's compassion inhibited his anger about the quality, content, management and practice of education which surfaced in private conversation?

Prospect

How might the Project be read now? The global population will be on its way to doubling again by 2050. Competition for jobs will be greater. Unemployment, without a revolution in the distribution of work, will generate more desperation and militancy. The world will be hotter: immigration from imploding dictatorships and the newly-uninhabitable parts of the world will be

unstoppable. Resources will be scarcer (including oil, food and water). Who knows what dubious technological goods will announce themselves as indispensable?

There are striking continuities between the thought-worlds of 1988 and 2013 (and with these I close). It is hardly radical to assert that much of the developed world remains in the grip of a fourfold ideology: first, *scientific materialism* which reduces the full reality of what is to its empirical manifestation; second, a *calculative, instrumental rationality* which reduces persons to units of work, and things to their economic value; third, a *social Darwinism* which extends ruthless competition into every area of life as an inevitable *fact* of life; and fourth *global capitalism*, which imposes an economic order on us requiring unsustainable economic growth, the unfair distribution of economic gain, and a burden of debt which will inevitably bring the system down. Ideologies work best, of course, when they are completely unnoticed, and pass themselves off as entirely natural and inevitable. Together these ideologies form an all-enveloping system which is capable of ‘colonising’ (as another philosopher, Jurgen Habermas, put it) body, mind and soul. The New Testament calls ideologies ‘principalities and powers’. They are invisible. They are everywhere. And they are strong.

Education, sadly, is likely to continue to serve this ideology in the next quarter of the century. That is a profoundly disappointing and pessimistic assessment. Education is one of the ways the system gets transmitted. But hope (along with faith and love) remains a cardinal Christian virtue, and everyone here today hopes that the Education Project will contribute in its own small way, to a rekindling of hope in, and for, education. The hope is that citizens who pay for education, the people who run it, and the people teaching and learning within it, will keep alive principled opposition to these dominant ideologies, expose their falsehoods, and offer alternatives. In place of scientific materialism let us work for an *ethical naturalism*, which honours the planet and all its resources. In place of instrumental rationality, let us work for a understanding of the world where *beauty, virtue, excellence, the arts*, and public libraries are valued for themselves and their irreplaceable contribution to the common good. In place of social Darwinism, let us work for *social and global co-operation*, knowing that as the gap between rich and poor decreases, societies become more harmonious and peaceful. And as global capitalism falters under the sheer weight of debt on which it has relied, let us *praise new economic forms*, honouring credit unions and a resurgence of building societies, and their equivalents, whose time may have returned.

Like the prophets of the Hebrew Bible whose writings were canonized even as they directed ruthless criticisms of their canonizers in the name of their God, late modern democracies also need prophets who can expose the ideologies that surround us even as we are immersed within them. It is certain that alternative ways of seeing the world will be needed more than ever in the next 25 years.

Robert understood this better than anyone. Let us hope that his legacy and the re-opening of his Education Project will contribute to them. That is why I am delighted to announce today the beginning of a new chapter in the project's life.

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