

## THE ASSAULT ON HISTORY - BB.621 ECONOMIC RATIONALISM, COMPETENCIES AND COMPASSION

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In 1971 at the year 12 HSC examinations in Victoria over 13,000 candidates sat for examinations in history subjects. That year there were altogether about 24,000 HSC candidates. Victorian Universities and Schools Examinations Board, Handbook of Directions and Prescriptions for 1971, Melbourne, 1970, pp. 52-4.

In 1980 this figure had declined to 8,750 with about 25,000 candidates. Victorian Institute of Secondary Education, Handbook 1980, Melbourne, 1979, pp. 59-65.

By 1992 it was down to 6369 enrolments with approximately 55,000 enrolments overall in the Victorian Certificate of Education. Victorian Curriculum Assessment Board, Report on Enrolments 1992, Melbourne, 1992.

Clearly there has been a dramatic decline in history at the senior level in Victorian secondary schools.

Figures can be produced to show the decline in history at Victorian universities - both for numbers of students taking history and numbers of staff.

A similar pattern is evident in the United States, for example students taking history majors in American colleges declining by 62% between 1970 and 1986. In the same period the number of graduates undertaking PhDs in history in American universities declined by 50%. Louis R. Harlan, 'The Future of the American Historical Association', American Historical Review, vol. 95, 1990, p. 2.

However, in marked contrast to these trends there has been a surge of interest in history outside the academic study of history in schools and universities. This has gone with the general growth of the interest in popular culture. There has been an enormous growth in historical museums, in the interest in genealogy, in historical buildings and historical sites.

There have been quite a few historical documentaries/dramas on TV.

Professional

historians have found enough work on mainly institutional histories to maintain house and home, if somewhat precarious an existence as the recession deepens.

Here we have two apparently conflicting trends - the growth of the interest in history within the popular culture and the decline of academic history in the schools and universities.

There are two fairly obvious reasons why academic history has declined in popularity.

The decline has mirrored the general depression of the economy since the mid 1970s.

History, like other subjects in the humanities, is not seen as relevant in the job market. It also has had to compete with the attractions of the many new subjects available in schools and universities, many of which appear to have, at least superficially a more obvious orientation towards the job market.

There is a lot of mythology around about the non-vocational nature of history and the humanities in general. Perhaps the best example of how this mythology can be

perpetrated is the example of the classics in the curriculum of the 'great' public schools of England in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Nothing would seem to be more vocationally remote than the study of classical civilisation and its languages. Yet in the historical context of the time they were vocationally appropriate.

They provided the upper/middle class boys who studied them and who were destined to be the future leaders of the Empire, a cultural milieu which was unique to them. It helped set them apart from the riff-raff they were to rule. It provided them with knowledge and a unique reference base for conversation and communication which immediately established their credentials in any part of the Empire on which the sun never set. The classics declined as the Empire declined!

The completion of degrees in the humanities requires students to develop advanced skills which include data analysis, archival research, proof reading, computer skills, media production skills, the ability to write clearly, and above all confidence with tackling tasks which require interpretative skills. See Denise Meredyth, 'Personality and Personnel: Rationales for the Humanities', in Ian Hunter, Denise Meredyth, Bruce Smith, Geoff Stokes, Accounting of the Humanities. The Language of Culture and the Logic of Government, Brisbane, 1991, p. 119.

In 1988 humanities students constituted nearly a quarter (24.1%) of all students enrolled in the higher education sector and in 1986 more than 18% of the total tertiary-education civilian population nominated humanities as their main field of study.

Some figures -

\* In 1988 47% of full time humanities graduates went into occupations bearing some

relation to the content of their studies.

\* The humanities provide the highest proportion of all graduates recruited to the Commonwealth Public Service.

\* In 1989 only 18.7% of humanities graduates went into the private sector.

\* In 1980 40% of full time employed humanities graduates were within the broad sphere of government/semi government employment.

\* The Government sector also employs a large percentage of those graduating from humanistically based diploma vocational courses in the arts/literatures/archives etc. Ibid., pp. 160-8.

Clearly the main avenue for the employment of humanities graduates is in the government/semi-government sector. In this, those with a background in history, social sciences and psychology are most likely to be recruited.

The myth of vocational irrelevance aside there are other factors which have not helped the study and teaching of history in our schools and universities, nor have they helped the humanities in general. I want to dwell on two of these - the media, especially TV, and also the influence of the prevailing ideology which over the last ten to

fifteen years has successfully permeated the economic and political discourse in Australia.

I believe most educationists underrate the influence of television. Many wish it would simply go away. But it does occupy the attention of most of their students for several hours each day. Neil Postman in his book 'Amusing Ourselves to Death' declares Television does not extend or amplify literate culture. It attacks it. If television is a continuation of anything it is of a tradition begun by the telegraph and photograph in the mid-nineteenth century, not by the printing press in the fifteenth.Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, London, 1987, p. 86.

The average length of a shot on American TV is 3.5 seconds. News grabs on Australian TV range from 30 to 90 seconds. The eye never rests. There is always something new to see. It requires minimum skills to comprehend and it is aimed at emotional gratification. It is almost entirely devoted to entertainment. Subject matter is meant to entertain, even the news.

The news provides us with daily fragments of tragedy and barbarism to which we are urged to return tomorrow for more. News is not taken seriously. It's part of the fun.

TV has made entertainment the natural form of all experience. It is impermissible on TV, even on 'discussion' programs to say 'let me think about that', 'I don't know'.

The fundamental assumption of the world of TV is not coherence, but discontinuity. Events stand, stripped of any connection to the past or to the future. TV is the soma of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.

Postman lists three commandments for TV -

1. Thou shalt have no prerequisites. No previous knowledge is required. It completely undermines the idea that there is a history beyond the event.
2. Thou shalt induce no perplexity. What is portrayed must be instantly understood.

3. Thou shalt avoid exposition. TV takes the form of story telling - there can be no arguments, reasons, refutations. It must be simple straightforward entertainment.Ibid., pp. 151-2.

We wonder why our students become impatient with education organised around the slow moving printed text. But TV forges ahead with its own curriculum - it controls the time, attention and cognitive habits of our young people and competes successfully with the school/university curriculum to the point of obliteration.

It places enormous pressures on teachers to present their material in an entertaining fashion.

When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when, in short, a people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; culture-death is a clear possibility.Ibid., p. 161.

To cater for the demands of TV it has been necessary for the media in general to categorise the immediate past as a series of easily recognisable 'time grabs'. Thus the division into decades or generations. The baby boomers, the hippy generation of the late 60s early 70s, the yuppies of the 80s or the 'me decade'. Every ten years or so we get a new image in much the same way as we trade in the new car (or used to). It all gives much employment for journalists and sociologists in detecting new trends in the popular culture. One thing is certain - today's attitudes, today's ideas will be superseded tomorrow.

Our collective understanding of the past has faltered at the very moment when our technical ability to re-create the past has reached an unprecedented level of development. Photographs and motion pictures and recordings, new techniques of historical research, the computer's total recall assault us with more information about history - and everything else - than we can assimilate. But this useless documentation no longer has any power to

illuminate the present age or even to provide a standard of comparison.  
The only feeling  
these mummified images of the past evoke is that the things they refer to  
must have been  
interesting or useful once but that we no longer understand the source of  
their forgotten  
appeal. Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven, Progress and its  
Critics*, New  
York, 1991, Chapter 3.

History becomes a series of modules, unrelated events. Social life becomes compartmentalised - the economy, education, crime, industry, family, sex.  
Bring in the  
expert on any one of these. A few 'time grabs' and we move on to the next  
'problem'.  
The assumption is that the 'problem' can be solved within its own category.  
It has to be  
solved within its own category because there is no time or desire to  
promote any general  
understanding of events across the social structure. In this way the  
meanings of social life  
are controlled and limited. History, along with the other humanities/  
social sciences, is  
denigrated.

With this comes the nostalgia movement - collecting nostalgia, preserving  
nostalgia,  
idealising the past within the module framework, going back to the basics  
in education,  
the veneration of pre-technology societies, the return to the arcadian  
countryside. It  
idealises the past but not in terms of ways in which it has influenced the  
present or may

influence the future.

By exaggerating the naive simplicity of earlier times it implicitly  
celebrates the worldly  
wisdom of later generations. It goes back to a past as if nothing had  
happened in the  
interim. It is quite ahistorical. Take Sovereign Hill, Ballarat, as an  
example. History  
requires more than knowing how people panned for gold or made candles or  
rode in  
coaches. It is a good day's entertainment. I recommend it to all those  
interstate visitors,  
but it freezes the past in much the same way as the TV images. The past  
becomes  
timeless, unchanging, but it can be entertaining. Above all it teaches us

'we are so much  
better than that now'!

This is fundamental to the other factor which has not helped humanities in the schools and universities. This is part of a much more significant feature of our society - the veneration of progress. Sometime in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries there came the realisation to certain philosophers (we would call them economists today), that insatiable appetites could keep society going. Where formerly the insatiable appetite was seen as immoral and leading to social discontent, the new ideology of Adam Smith, David Hume and Bernard Mandeville saw it as the very pivot on which society 'progressed'. Envy, pride and ambition made human beings want for more than they needed - their private vices became public virtues because they stimulated industry and encouraged innovation and invention. Thrift and self denial led to economic stagnation. Adam Smith insisted that the 'uniform, constant, and uninterrupted effort of every man to better his condition', and not the unproductive spending and kings and nobles was the 'principle from which public and national, as well as private opulence is originally derived.' *Ibid.*, p. 53.

This new faith in the inevitable progress of civilisation was given a tremendous boost by the multitude of nineteenth century scientific discoveries which seemed to assure an infinite expansion of the planet's resources to meet these human appetites of ambition and greed.

This notion of progress has permeated the work of Australian historians (not the least

historians of education), in a country which for many decades was regarded as a shining example of the inevitability of the constant improvement of the human condition.

The new science of economics was built on this assumption that the never-ending

improvement of material comforts would keep society going indefinitely. Both Hume and Smith concluded that this would generate new jobs. New wealth and would be driven by an ever rising level of productivity. The consumer society was born.

It had also the prospect of stability and permanence for it rested on ambition and greed which was clearly recognisable in the human condition. It no longer depended on divine intervention or some inner rationale. The 'invisible hand' led men and women to accumulate wealth and thus unknowingly to serve as benefactors in their endless pursuit of possessions. 'It is this deception which rouses in continual motion the industry of mankind.' *Ibid.*, p. 55.

What is more this society would be self-regulating. It needed no guiding hand of church or government. It would develop its own morality and its own system of regulation. It was assumed from the early days of free market theory that individuals and companies would always act rationally in their own interests. The competitive spirit so engendered between individuals/companies would maintain an equilibrium in the labour market in that demand would equal supply. Market forces would sort themselves out so long as governments did not interfere.

This scenario is now very familiar to us all since it is the prevailing ideology of the major political parties. It dominates the minds of our bureaucrats in Canberra and the states. It is utterly dependent on the assumption of progress, that the earth's resources are infinite, that what the market produces today will be better than yesterday.

What is the relevance of all this to the decline of history and the humanities in our schools and universities?

It is simply that in this prevailing ideology there is no place for history or the humanities.

It goes far beyond the perception of them as irrelevant for the job market.

The study of history covers the whole gambit of human experience. Historians examine the many variables of historical events. They select some and discard others, but the good historian tries to examine as many as possible. For the economic rationalist pure theory is held to describe how the world operates. When determining economic policy any input from employers, employees, the banks, any reference to learned experience that is history, is seen as irrelevant. The economic rationalist does not ask the question what is wrong with the present situation, what is the historical background and experience, but acts under the assumption that change must take place according to the prescriptions of the economic model.

When the economic rationalist devises his computer models of the economy they are based on what are seen as 'scientific' principles. Assumptions are built into a model - an endless 'stream of contingencies', in which outside influences such as pressure groups are specifically excluded. They are based on a choice made by the model maker of assumptions that are acceptable in economics. Many of these, are, of course, highly controversial. See Michael Pusey, Economic Rationalism in Canberra. A Nation Building State Changes its Mind, Melbourne, 1991, p. 42.

Economic rationalism is an all persuasive ideology. It is not confined to economics. It has come to dominate decision making in many areas, particularly in education. For example, in the education sector the many committees of enquiries which have reported in recent years have been characterised by the lack of any attempt to examine the historical roots of the existing situation in schools, colleges and universities. They start from the assumption that change we must have and change must be according to the economic imperative. All other factors are seen as irrelevant. The Green and White Papers with which John Dawkins launched his assault on the colleges and universities and the recent Finn Report had no systematic argument or analysis outlining the rationale for change.

The most recent thrust of rationalist ideology in education has been in the area of competencies. The Finn Report which first outlined competencies in some detail made it

quite clear that they were to encompass 'all aspects of education other than that small part of general education which has no clear vocational character.' Australian Education Council Review Committee, Young People's Participation in Post Compulsory Education and Training (Finn Report), Canberra, 1991.

The more recent Mayer Report has defined seven key competencies for the Australian vocational certificate which it is proposed all students will sit for in their final school years. They are -  
collection and analysing information  
communication ideas  
planning activities  
working with others  
using mathematical ideas  
problem solving  
using technology

These are instrumental and related to the perceived needs of industry. While there may be little wrong with these then if balanced with a broadly based curriculum, this is not the assumption of the Mayer Report. They focus on the capacity to apply knowledge and skills rather than the acquisition of knowledge of specific subjects. They are 'not only essential for effective participation in work but are also essential for effective participation in other social settings'. While the Finn Report dismissed 'general education' of little consequence, at least the Mayer Report gives us an assurance that competencies are important outcomes of general education' which includes 'a wide range of knowledge, understanding, skills and values, including for example, the culture and history of Australia and knowledge of a language other than English.' Unfortunately while the Mayer Report reassures teachers that competencies will not displace the existing curriculum, it is quite clear that they are designed to do exactly that. There will be a

further squeeze on the so-called non-vocational subjects to make room for the competencies. *Mayer Committee, Employment Related Key Competencies: A Proposal for Consultation*, Melbourne, 1992, pp. 5, 14.

As we know there are more things in education than simply preparing our students for work (not that I accept that these seven competencies are in any way a sufficient guide to an adequate preparation for work).

\* The future citizen may be competent in 'collecting and analysing information', but how will she/he know what to collect and analyse?

\* The future citizen may be good at planning, but where will the wealth of knowledge come from that is the basis of all planning?

\* The future citizen may be proficient in working with others, but where will his/her general understanding of people, his/her cultural literacy, his/her sensitivities come from?

Unless these competencies are directly linked with a program of general education they will be quite out of context and isolated. They will not even have achieved the purpose of subsuming education to economic imperative where work is the essential, if not the only, aim of education leaving nothing else for the non-working hours but the hedonistic pursuit of entertainment and 'mindless consumerism'.

The technically proficient citizen with an attention span of 3.5 seconds mouthing phrases from a 'how to get on with people' textbook (or an instrumental video), whose main joy in life is based on consumerism and whose relaxation is the soma of TV, is the reality of the vision of those in government and business who are obsessed with the ideology of economic rationalism.

These competencies could be linked with a thoroughgoing reorganisation of education to provide a basic general education for all students, but that clearly is not on the agenda.

Competencies are also seen as a key to improving the nation's human capital resources and raising general productivity. In a recent paper Richard Sweet has noted that there is little direct relationship between the proportion of national wealth devoted to education by governments and productivity growth. In fact, the relationship might be negative. Japan and Germany devoted a smaller proportion of their GDP to the public educational expenditure than most other OECD countries in the early 1970s and early 1980s yet their productivity in that period was among the highest in the OECD. USA, Sweden and Canada with high educational expenditure had low productivity growth.

Sweet has argued that the nature of the education system and the curriculum has much more relevance to productivity growth. For example, German industry has available to it a high proportion of broadly trained workers who are capable of independent action and need less supervision than in countries such as Australia, USA and France. The key to the German success is the close links between general and vocational education for those who gain qualifications below first university degree level. Vocational education is closely related to on-the-job education, but at the same time a general education is seen as an essential part of the education process. Germany is fortunate in not having a culture that separates vocational from general education, as we do in this country. Richard Sweet, 'Learning a Living - Looking into Education's Black Box', in Economic Planning Advisory Council, *Education in the 1990s: Competencies, Credentialism, Competitiveness?* Canberra, 1992, pp. 85-96.

Obviously it is not simply in the current political context where governments are preoccupied with economic rationalism that leads to the denigration of the humanities in favour of the vocational subjects. Nor is simply TV or the perceived non-vocational nature of the humanities.

Why then this assault on humanities? Why the perpetration of the myth that

the  
humanities are non-vocational? What is the political context of this  
assault?

Is it part of the general assault on the government, semi-government  
sector?

I believe a recent interpretation of these current developments can help  
explain what is  
going on. The British historian, Harold Perkin and others have put forward  
the thesis that  
the present conflicts in western societies are related to growth of the  
professional class  
over the last 100 years. Harold Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society.*  
England Since 1880, London,  
1989. See especially pp. 1-26.

This class which is not a class in the Marxist sense, but a collection of  
parallel  
hierarchies, each with its own ladder and many rungs. It has built its  
strength on the rise  
of the welfare state and the notion of equal opportunity.

We can divide this professional class into two groups -

The public professionals who are highly dependent on the state and look to  
the state as the

ultimate guarantor of professional status. They have a vested interest in  
the growth of the  
state.

The private corporate professionals who want as little state interference  
as possible and as  
little state activity as possible because it means higher taxation and eats  
into their  
acquisition of wealth.

Public professionals have a vested interest in the growth of state services  
because this  
helps create professional employment with the vast array of government and  
semi-  
government agencies that it necessitates, especially schools, universities,  
hospitals, health  
care, the law, social services etc. Many are employed in government, semi  
government  
institutions. Many others are self-employed or in private employment, but  
heavily  
dependent on state funding, either directly or indirectly through their

clients, grants or consultancies.

These professionals also create their own opportunities by discovering problems which need professional service to rectify. Social workers and psychiatrists are probably the best examples here, but teachers also know how to create a need for more schooling.

The public professional ideal emphasises human capital but not in the economic rationalist sense i.e. as a means of increasing production. It stresses trained - expertise and selection by merit. These professionals live by persuasion and propaganda claiming that their particular service is indispensable to the client/society/state. They often control the market to create a scarcity e.g. medicos. Their rewards come in prestige, honour, service and, but not always, monetary returns.

Counterpoised to the professionals are the entrepreneurs who prove themselves by competing in the market, the private corporate professionals. They too create their own opportunities within the private sector and in this they use corporate management structures to create problem solving situations and the consequent need for professional expertise. The acquisition of wealth gives them their fringe benefits and prestige. Modern corporate capitalism is mostly run by salaried managers increasingly with MBAs

from the universities. But their prevailing ideology is free market, economic rationalism. They reject state regulation and high personal and company tax as hampering initiative.

Here is seen the basis of much of the present conflict in our society, particularly in Victoria. When Jeffrey Kennett, Premier of Victoria, makes the following statement it encapsulates this conflict.  
There is no such thing as equality.  
We live in a competitive world.  
If you try to make the fat man thin, then the thin man ultimately dies.

We have got to encourage the fat man to become fatter so  
that the thin man can become fatter ...

The alternative is an environment where everyone is  
fundamentally equal.

That then removes choices and there will be no fat men.

We will all be thin and get thinner. Age, 27 October 1992.

This approach is known as trickle down economics or as John Galbraith has noted 'if one

feeds the horse enough oats, some will pass through to the road for the sparrows'.

What is Kennett saying here?

1. He is challenging equality of opportunity - one of the bulwarks of the welfare state  
and one of the essential supports of the public professional.
2. He is lauding free enterprise and free competition - the basis of private corporate professional ideology.

His policies reflect his attack on the public professionals - his savage cuts for the public service and public services - his removal of state controls - restrictions on market forces.

The state health and education systems, bulwarks of the welfare state and principal backbones of the public professionals (teachers, health worker) have come in for particular attention. Hospital finances are to be drastically cut, schools closed and teachers sacked.

The public professionals (and others) are being punished for a state economy which was

largely ruined by the greed of the private professionals in the private companies and the banks. In many respects this situation was reflected in the inappropriateness of the rhetoric used by the Trades Hall Council Secretary, John Halfpenny when addressing the huge anti-Government rally in Melbourne recently. He was addressing the 'traditional' working class, but in his audience were many thousands of solid middle

class

professionals who like the working class were under attack.

If we see the present conflict in the context of the public versus the private professional and the private professional very much in control of the game at the moment, this gives us a context for the denigration of the humanities.

1. We have seen how history in particular, and the humanities in general, by their very nature, challenge the basic assumptions of the free marketeers. They stress history, social context, morality, humanity - all in conflict with basic creed of the 'fat man'.

2. We have seen how the humanities, including education and history, provide a large percentage of the recruits for government service. Their very presence with their subversive ideas represent a threat to the hegemony of the free marketeers. Also drastic cuts in government funding and employment undermine the livelihood of the professionals not only in government but also in the semi-government and private spheres.

Whether we agree or do not agree that the present conflict is between the public and the private professionals, the denigration of history and the humanities in favour of 'vocationally oriented' subjects is a reality in our schools and universities. Today when students in higher education and TAFE must make a decision to invest large sums of money in education, they are being encouraged to think of that investment in vocational terms. Fees not only follow one of the central maxims of the economic rationalists, i.e. user pays for the full cost of services (plus profit), but they also encourage institutions to provide courses which have clear vocational pathways. It spells disaster for generalist subjects and generalist streams, particularly in the humanities, but it also will affect the

sciences and the social sciences, whether they are vocational or not. So

long as they are perceived as non vocational by the public and the tertiary administrators, they must suffer.

So long as reform in education is seen along the narrow instrumental approach of competencies and national testing, the so called general, non vocational subjects will be eased out.

The human capital approach which sees the growth of a skilled workforce as a fundamental part of the solution to our economic problems is simplistic and naive. It is far more complicated than that. Simply providing our young people with instrumental skills, (even if they are the skills which industry demands), will not create the clever country.

Our young people are not robots, nor are they being trained to be robotic engineers. Nor should they have to rely on 30 second TV grabs to inform them about life: about what they should consume next.

They need an understanding of history, literature, science, language, their own and other religions and cultures. A broad, general education can introduce them to these vistas and can help make them better, more tolerant, understanding individuals who are able to make considered decisions, not only about their own lives, but also in the workplace. Above all it can increase their appreciation and enjoyment of life.

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