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Axelrod, Paul. *Values in Conflict: The University, the Marketplace, and the Trials of Liberal Education.* Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002. Pp. xi + 203. CDN\$24.95 (paper).

Reviewed by Doug Owram, University of Alberta

Paul Axelrod has written on a subject on which there are many opinions. He is therefore probably well aware practically nobody will agree with everything he has said. Academics care deeply about the state of their institutions and a book on what is wrong with them and how things should be corrected will create controversy. These opinions will be shaped by discipline, ideology, and the particular institution to which the academic belongs. Nonetheless, while I too have points of disagreement, it is important to begin by saying that Axelrod has written thoughtfully, has considerable insight, and that this is a work that deserves attention.

The theme is familiar. Universities are going to hell in a handbasket because the foundational areas, particularly the liberal arts, have been undervalued and underfunded in the past decade or so. This is phrased in an urgent, even apocalyptic, tone. "It is possible that a decade from now our universities will resemble little more than giant training warehouses, where short-term corporate needs dictate curricula to students who are increasingly taught not by professors but by advanced, impersonal technology"(5).

Such allegations raise several questions. First, the liberal arts are an elusive category. Many of us have a vague sense of what we mean but definitions are hard to come by. Axelrod is to be commended for attempting a definition. What emerges, however, is hardly the sort of snappy phrase that we can use to portray our cause to the public. "Liberal education in the university refers to activities that are designed to cultivate intellectual creativity, autonomy and resilience; critical thinking; a combination of intellectual breadth and specialized knowledge; the comprehension and tolerance of diverse ideas and experiences; informed participation in community life; and effective communication skills" (35).

The main question, though, is whether liberal arts, however defined, are really in trouble. Extreme rhetoric is likely to be greeted with more than a little cynicism by politicians and public. After all, academics have through the ages proclaimed the death of the university or at least its irredeemable deterioration. Change, it might be replied, is part of a healthy institution. If we remained configured today as we were in, say, 1900, universities would have theology departments as large as English departments and Engineering Schools would not exist. Universities have to respond to evolving social values and needs, and change is inevitable. Is the call of concern just another professor spinning another self-serving vision of the apocalypse?

No, for the lament arises from very specific events that have altered the institution and threatened to undermine it. In the 1990s, governments across Canada had to come to terms with over-spending, increased taxes, and rising debt. They cut, some with ferocity and ideological righteousness and others in despair and confusion. In all instances, the impact on the public sector was enormous. Universities, the school system,

and health care all underwent significant reductions. In my own province, for example, the government removed 18% of core funding in a three year period. Equally important, unlike other sectors, this funding has not been fully restored.

The result was not only a generic poverty in universities but a significant re-engineering. Universities had to find funds to keep operations going and to do so they turned increasingly to fund-raising, the private sector, and tuition. As governments returned to the field, they did so in targeted and partial ways. The funding that has come back is welcome but it is much less flexible and much more oriented toward key areas that have initially been better at arguing they are necessary to economic growth, public well-being, and so on. In sum, an imbalance has developed that leaves university administrations with little flexibility and foundational Faculties with less access to funding than a decade ago. It is this relative decline in resources and the imbalance of those resources that form the heart of Axelrod's lament. He writes that the most serious threat to liberal arts is "recent government policies that privilege certain academic endeavours over others, namely, applied science, high technology, business, selected professions, and mission-oriented research, all at the expense of the social sciences and humanities, the fine arts, and basic scholarly enquiry" (86).

In all of this I agree with Axelrod. There has been a distortion and the "liberal arts" have suffered more than most in the changes of the 1990s. I would also agree that there is an urgent need to address the situation. Even on purely utilitarian grounds, we need more attention to the liberal arts. They form the basis of understanding for so many issues of direct relevance to social well-being--whether environmental policy, international relations, or civil society.

That having been said, we must avoid the tendency to portray the liberal arts and their practitioners as innocent by-standers overtaken by philistines and fools. Faculty members in the liberal arts bear some responsibility for their relatively impoverished position. There is no entitlement that ensures that the public must support a particular discipline. The liberal arts have much to offer but many faculty somehow feel it is beneath them or, worse yet, some sort of slippery slope to talk about the "uses" of the liberal arts. Responsiveness, adaptability, and relevance are not words to be dismissed out-of-hand. In sum, I don't think I really agree with Axelrod "that liberal education is its own justification" (64). I am not sure he does either given his subsequent attempts at justification. More importantly, such rhetoric will not convince politicians or much of the public. More is needed and more is possible. There is much to justify liberal arts in terms of social well-being and even in fairly utilitarian terms. These justifications are not confined to the more obvious social sciences. Recent events in the corporate world and the attacks of September 11 demonstrate, to give two examples, the relevance of ethics and the importance of Islamic studies. Only a couple of years ago both fields would have been dismissed by the pragmatists as frills.

While often reluctant to justify our uses, we have also actively contributed to our own problems. The culture wars of the 1980s saw disciplines turn on themselves. Indeed, some of the harshest critics of the importance of much of the writing in Faculties of Arts came from within Faculties of Arts. Axelrod touches on this, noting the uncivil nature of much of the debate around curriculum in the 1980s and 1990s. "If liberal education were to thrive in the contemporary university, it appeared to require a more consistently dispassionate and civil discourse, and a meaningful affirmation of the principle of intellectual tolerance" (29-30). I will take this a step further and say that we have been our own enemies. Too often the culture wars deteriorated into narcissism and self-indulgent righteousness. By the time external forces appeared to dismantle liberal education, the whole edifice had been weakened. It is hard to argue for the value of liberal education when liberal educators deny the value of their own traditions!

Finally, I think that Axelrod tends to presume too much about the comfort and style in which other areas of the universities live. The core budgets were slashed across the country and whatever special funding may exist, this fact has worn down infrastructure in medicine as well as modern languages. South of the border a strong economy (until recently) and a strong dollar pulled hardest at those Faculties in the professional areas

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and left Deans across the system struggling to keep the best and brightest at home. The risk to Canada by the beginning of the twenty-first century was not just that liberal arts would fail to maintain standards but that Canadian universities as a group would fall behind.

In the end though I would argue that whatever the differences in details, Axelrod has focused on the most acute problems. Universities are under stress and the liberal arts are under the greatest stress of all. Recent initiatives, especially at the federal level, have been helpful to all but have been more helpful to the health and science areas than to the liberal arts. It is time to restore the balance. After all, some of Canada's greatest strengths historically have been in the liberal arts. Think of Harold Innis or Northrop Frye. Let us play to our advantages and in so doing ensure that the country is able to meet the cultural and policy challenges of the future.