Book Reviews/Comptes Rendus

Michael Walzer. *The Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1988, 260 pp. Reviewed by Michael L. Skolnik*

What is the appropriate relationship of the social critic to the society or milieu which he criticizes? Should he maintain a stance of intellectual detachment and critical isolation from, or of intimate connection to, that society? This is the question which Michael Walzer's book addresses through a study of the work (and to a very limited degree, the lives) of eleven prominent Twentieth Century social critics. Although academe is scarcely mentioned in it, the book has important implications for the university which I will note briefly at the end of this review.

Walzer's answer to the question which he poses is clear. He is impatient with the stereotypical view of the social critic as one who "with much attendant drama, detaches himself from all emotional ties, steps back to see the world with absolute clarity, studies what he sees (scientifically in accordance with the most advanced views), discovers universal values as if for the first time, finds these values embodied in the movement of the oppressed, ... decides to support the movement and to criticize its enemies, who are very often people such as he was once". To Walzer, the words of such a critic will lack the authenticity and moral force that come from engagement with the people to whom the critic is, or should be, speaking. The socially detached critic will tend to utter arid, hollow sounding, and often hackneyed rhetoric.

The book abounds with examples of connected and detached criticism. Noting Ignazio Silone's connectedness to the peasants of the Abruzzi, Walzer says, "Silcone's truth is commonplace, practical, and enduring; the truth of the party is esoteric, theoretical, and historically mutable. Silone is committed to his dialect, the party to its dialectics". Walzer contrasts Simone deBeauvior's work on women and the aged – groups with which she had both identification and connection – with her, and Sartre's writing on class and nationalism. He finds the former original, attentive to her own and other people's actual experience, and highly influential; the latter shrill, dogmatic, and often "fitting too easily into a bad stereotype".

Walzer's answer to the question of detachment vs. engagement is dependent upon his view of the tasks of social criticism, which metaphorically he likens to Hamlet's glass in which the Prince's mother saw simultaneously what she really was and what she most deeply wished to be. He posits three tasks of social criticism: "the critic exposes the false appearances of his own society; he gives

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expression to his people's deepest sense of how they ought to live; and he insists that there are other forms of falseness and other, equally legitimate, hopes and aspirations". The latter gives particularity to the experience of such diverse groups as Orwell's England, Buber's Jews, and Camus' pieds noirs. Without this particularity, the critic's canvas is just too broad, and hence his painting too abstract. Walzer likens a critic speaking to the oppressed in general – as distinct from addressing the unique experience and condition of a particular group – to a dog barking at the moon.

Walzer's analysis is a normative one, and if there is a weakness in the book it is that he does not explicate the criteria for his normative judgments. He is clear, however, as to what are not his criteria. Success, in terms of amelioration of the conditions to which the criticism is addressed, is not an appropriate criterion, as the best critics "will not necessarily, or even often", be successful in that sense. Neither does Walzer regard "critical success" (i.e. impressing other critics) as a suitable criterion. He seems to judge critics by the extent to which their books are "read and reread by the people", and whether they touch the hearts of their readers. Touching hearts is more the job of the poet than the scientist, and it is not surprising that the critic whom Walzer seems to admire most is the South African poet-critic, Breyten Breytenbach, and his least admired is the very unpoetic Marcuse.

There is an almost circularity in Walzer's approach to the question of the appropriate relation of the critic to his audience. He starts with the premise that good criticism is characterized by the critic speaking intimately to a particular audience in a manner that conveys an identification with and a sensitivity toward the experience of that audience. It is difficult to imagine how a critic's work could have these qualities if the critic himself dos not have a very intimate, connected relationship with his audience. Thus, Walzer's book is not so much an empirical analysis of the outcomes of various types of relationship between critic and audience as it is a plea for a particular style of social criticism. This is not to denigrate his accomplishment, for he has given penetrating insights into the qualities that differentiate critical works of enduring vitality and authenticity from others which seem sterile or shrill and, at best, of interest only to other critics.

There are at least two ways in which this book is highly relevant to current debates about the role and nature of the university. First, Walzer's question about the relation of the social critic to his society is in many respects an analogue of the recurring question of the appropriate relationship of the university to society. The chapter on Julien Benda provides the case for detachment of the social critic that is remarkably similar to the case for detachment of the university presented, for example, by Allan Bloom; and Walzer's critique of Benda could, by extension, provide the basis for a provocative rebuttal of Bloom's argument for the disengagement of the university from society.

The second, and more biting, connection between this book and current issues in academe pertains to the social criticism function of the university. Social criticism is one of the most venerated, if poorly understood and often neglected, functions of the university. In facilitating, legitimating, or merely allowing this

function, the university must address the issue of detachment vs. connectedness which is the subject of Walzer's book. For example, will the university recognize as legitimate (say, for tenure or promotion) only critical works of a detached nature which emulate the methodological style of the natural sciences? If so, then the university cannot hope to be a home for the vital, socially meaningful criticism of the type which Walzer celebrates. It must abdicate this role to other societal agents, and in a sense, itself become irrelevant to the amelioration of the adverse conditions to which social criticism seeks to draw attention. What in the university is sometimes called social criticism will "have no echo outside the academy since the critics have no material ties to people or parties or movements outside. Academic criticism under these circumstances tends steadily toward hermeticism and gnostic obscurity; even the critic's students barely understand him". In short, what is for the social critic the choice between social connectedness and detachment is for the university a choice between social relevance and method-ological purity. Approached with the latter question in mind, the book can provide an excellent basis for discussion of the critical role of the university in society, and of what ultimately determines why some critical work is called scholarship and other critical work, even of rigour and depth, is not.

Roger L. Geiger. *Privatization of Higher Education: International Trends and Issues*. Princeton: International Council for Educational Development Conference Report, 1988. Reviewed by Robert M. Pike, Department of Sociology, Queen's University†

This slim monograph is a summary analysis of the papers and proceedings of a special seminar on the privatization of higher education organized by International Council for Educational Development in 1987. The seminar brought together a group of distinguished educators representing nine countries directly, and four countries indirectly, to outline and discuss national and international trends in the privatization of institutions of higher learning. Roger Geiger – the author of a major study on *Private Sectors in Higher Education* (1986) – attended the seminar and prepared the analysis at the request of ICED which is a U.S.-based international organization for the comparative study of priority educational problems.

    In a preface, the chairman of ICED notes that the increased privatization of higher education is on the agenda of many countries. Originally meant to refer to a process of moving utilities from the public to the private sector (for example, the privatization of Air Canada) the general concept has taken three major forms when applied to the higher education sphere: a more positive attitude to the creation of private sector universities and colleges financed mainly by endowments and

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