

## History cont.

The inevitable result of the marriage of elitism and structuralism is the division of one's students into two classes: those who adapt rapidly and eagerly to the structure and are rewarded with the symbols of elite status, i.e., high grades, and those who do not.

The former are the students to whom the professor addresses himself, the only ones who can be "saved" and who are worthy of salvation. The others are treated with more or less disdain. Their failure to respond is generally attributed to lower intelligence, sometimes to emotional instability. Whatever the "reason" they are not seen as recruits to the discipline and can be written off. There is even an expression for this in academic circles: the cooling off process.

How does all this apply to history? In the same way that it applies to philosophy, the classics, the fine arts, literature and the other humane disciplines. It means that a discipline originally intended to offer all students certain guidelines applicable to their lives, whatever vocation they choose to follow, is distorted into a corporate guild dominated by careerists.

This is a development that has been in train a long time, since the early 19th century. History was, in fact, one of the first humanistic disciplines invaded by scientism and elitism. The German school of historical research and the German graduate school of history of 150 years ago became the models for similar developments affecting all other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences.

However, the nature of history, and the character of the men who chose to study and teach history, long resisted indoctrination by scientism, elitism and structuralism. These doctrines have had their dedicated enthusiasts among historians, but the independence and autonomy of historians, who rejected them was respected or at least not seriously threatened.

This autonomy is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain, at the very time that elitism in the discipline is driving non-careerist students away from it.

It is no coincidence that these tendencies are occurring simultaneously. When an institution, in this instance the discipline of history, is believed to be threatened, it becomes more orthodox. Dissent is feared and curtailed. "Standards" are tightened. This very process of "drawing in the walls" makes the discipline less attractive to the un-



converted or the unorthodox.

History, threatened by an economic bear market for its "products," is taking defensive measures which it hopes will make it more reputable in an age of scientism, quantification and professionalism. This strategem cannot succeed. History, unlike the social sciences which are of advantage to the political and bureaucratic power structure, is a discipline useless to the Establishment. It is, in fact, by its very nature, anti-Establishment, being a discipline of criticism, dissent and even rebellion. If history becomes exclusively an orthodox "science", closed but to an elite and aspirants to an elite, it will commit suicide. This is precisely what is happening in the discipline today.

"Certainly a few of our students will still need training in the historical tools necessary for graduate schools and careers as professional historians," wrote Peter J. Frederick in The History Teacher recently. "But only a few. It cannot be emphasized enough that most of the students in our schools are not going to graduate school.... We should take heed not to sour the many while speaking to the few."

If we are to heed Frederick's injunction, however, there must be a veritable revolution against the elitism and structuralism dominating university history departments. Such a revolution cannot succeed at large universities whose departments are dominated by graduate professors and their disciples. It must begin at small undergraduate universities - like UPEI.

Perhaps it is time for such schools to break decisively with the "graduate school syndrome" and teach courses in "people's history", as is being done at some of the American community and junior colleges and a few of their counterparts in central and western Canada. Perhaps a compromise is possible, on the lines of Britain's "Open University", in which inn-

ovative scholarship is allied with flexible pedagogical experiments directed at a mass audience.

Professors indoctrinated in the graduate school mystique are obsessed, as we have seen, with the transmission of approved knowledge and the mastery of prescribed content, even at the expense of general intellectual growth. The ordinary history student, even the average history major, is at best marginal to their objectives. Such students, relatively low in verbal skills and reading comprehension, not avidly fascinated by the printed word or possessed of studious habits, are "turned off" by the structural elitists.

The techniques of the latter -- lectures, reading assignments, occasional discussions, exams -- are at best tolerated by most contemporary university students. In a study I made last year of student opinions on examinations and evaluation, I found few who defended compulsory exams. In other student opinions I have elicited, dislike of the boredom and confinement of the typical lecture has come through strongly. Yet in our own UPEI History Department, as at other Canadian Universities, the trend today is toward greater rather than less structuralism, for the reasons I have indicated.

Academic history is therefore at a critical stage. My own view, paraphrasing Clemenceau's opinion of war is that "History is too important a subject to be left to the professional historians." It is time for our constituents, the students, to speak up and tell us what they want. Are they satisfied to be the receptacles of transmitted knowledge? Or do they, like the historical philosopher, Ortega Gasset, see history as existential in their own lives, that understanding of one's self implies a personally acquired understanding of the past of which each individual is the product? Ortega's kind of history is not in vogue with the conventional wisdom of the discipline.