

Professor Mardiros and the Ph.D.

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Much of what professor Mardiros says about the Ph.D. in a recent issue of *Casserole* is valid but, in my opinion, his conclusions cannot be supported by his arguments and his recommendations are unwise.

Professor Mardiros' polemic against the Ph.D. is based on three biases: (1) his anti-Americanism; (2) his dislike of business as the quintessence of capitalism; and (3) his anti-reformism.

Professor Mardiros' anti-Americanism, which is one of the bases of his argument, is—I believe—quite evident. We are told that the Ph.D. is essentially an American institution, and I suppose that some people will be persuaded that it is bad on that score alone. Anti-Americanism (or anti-any-nationalism) is of course an untenable basis for reasonable argument, and while Professor Mardiros undoubtedly uses it he does not really make too much of it.

The arguments

Turning now to more serious, substantive aspects of Professor Mardiros' argument, we are told (in a language designed to convey the alleged close relationship between "ed byz" and the rest of "byz") that: *Demand for Ph.D.s outruns the supply*, that universities, research institutions, industry, and education departments want more Ph.D.s than graduate schools have been able to provide. Presumably what Professor Mardiros means is that there is a trend for salaries of Ph.D.'s to rise more rapidly than those of other occupations. Let us assume that this is the case. Would abolition of the Ph.D. remedy the situation? There is some support for such a position, though I doubt that Professor Mardiros would welcome of people like Milton Friedman whose *Capitalism and Freedom* has been interpreted as the intellectual basis of the Goldwater platform. According to Friedman, the shortage of physicians in the United States could be remedied by destroying the monopoly power of the medical association by abolition of the M.D. Let anyone, says Friedman, offer medical services in competition with anyone else who chooses to offer them, and let the competitive market price the services. I doubt very much that this is what Professor Mardiros has in mind when he advises that the Ph.D. be abolished. In my opinion, both the Friedman and the Mardiros arguments should be rejected on pragmatic grounds: Given the absence of a basic ingredient of a well functioning competitive market, perfect knowledge on the part of the consumer, a diploma or title is a very useful guide for the would-be buyer. It informs him that the would-be seller has satisfied certain "minimum requirements". The fact that there is a mass market for Ph.D.s necessarily means that potential buyers must look for certain outward signs of desirability of the product. The chore of investigating in depth the qualifications of every potential seller of the services now generally offered by Ph.D.s would absorb more time than is available to potential buyers for all their activities.

It should be concluded that abolition of the Ph.D., far from remedying the shortage of qualified personnel, would merely create chaos where there is order. I do not hold that "order" is synonymous with "ideal", nor that it should always be preferred to chaos. In the end, however, some kind of order will emerge, and I

would argue that abolition of the Ph.D. would not lead to a better but a worse order.

"Universities are not producing a standard product." Presumably Professor Mardiros does not mean that universities are providing a great variety of desirable talent, but that some universities are turning out superior Ph.D.s and others inferior ones. I would go even further and assert that products of uniform quality are not turned out even by a given department. What Professor Mardiros chooses to call a "product" (to emphasize the subservience of education to business) is a "product" in a special sense, and it might clarify the issue of we refer to it by its proper name: trained and educated men (women). Once we admit that we are talking about men (women) we are able to see more clearly the multi-dimensional nature of the "product". It would be not only an uninteresting but also entirely utopian world in which men would be of uniform quality. I claim no special insights into the nature of man, but it seems to me that the people who enter the educational process are a heterogeneous group, that the process makes them, on one hand, more homogeneous (they acquire a common foundation of knowledge) but, on the other hand, leads to further diversification (if for no other reason, then because they become "specialists"). I conclude that what emerges from the process is a group at least as heterogeneous as that which entered it—and I think that this is desirable.

However, what Professor Mardiros presumably has in mind is something else: There appears to be a process of selection whereby the best entrants in the educational process gravitate toward the best schools, acquire the best training, and emerge the best specialists. (And then gravitate—as teachers—to the most prestigious and best paying schools, thus perpetuating the established pecking order). I believe that this is substantially correct, but that it fits the past much better than the present and the future. If the past is any guide to the future, as it surely must be, it indicates that the elitist conception of education on this continent—but elsewhere as well—is giving way, and will be gradually giving way more, to a democratization process leading, on one hand, to the phenomenon of mass education and, on the other, to the emergence of excellence outside traditional elite institutions rivalling the traditionally best schools.

Revolutionary process

The process is, of course, essentially evolutionary, and one may be unhappy with its slowness; I agree that it would be better if every Ph.D. awarded would be of uniformly highest quality, but this is impossible, though there is a clear trend toward evening out of serious differences. In any case, the desideratum of a uniformly highest quality is not possible either under the status quo nor in any other system, and improvement is bound to be a slow process. I cannot see how the abolition of the Ph.D. could in any way hasten the improvement process.

Much the same argument applies to Professor Mardiros' third proposition: *The product is defective and ill-designed*. We are told that this is so because "... many Ph.D.s are turning out to be neither productive scientists nor dedicated scholars. Some never do anything after the Ph.D. research, while others turn out worthless trivia." I agree that this is so, and yet Professor Mardiros' assertion about the "product" hardly follows from such admission. On the contrary,

I would argue that the rigorous and demanding training of a Ph.D. is—in this day and age, and will be more so in the future—a necessary though not sufficient condition for scientific productivity and scholarly dedication. In any case, Professor Mardiros would be justified to argue from the particular to the general only if he could show—and he clearly cannot—that abolishing the Ph.D. (and the kind of graduate training of which the Ph.D. is an outward symbol) would somehow provide us with larger quantities of more productive scientists and more dedicated scholars than the existing system. It seems to me that striving for excellence, before and after the Ph.D., is a matter of incentives as well as inherent propensities. I doubt that Professor Mardiros can propose concrete ways in which inherent propensities can be radically changed. On the other hand, the system of incentives may well be improved. But to think that abolishing the Ph.D. would improve them is, in my opinion, barking up the wrong tree.

Paradoxical propositions

Next Professor Mardiros presents two paradoxical propositions: there is—in the Ph.D. market—*unfair competition from inferior products deceptively labelled and packaged, and the product is a luxury item too expensive for the mass market*. The first proposition may refer either to so-called "diploma mills", or to Ph.D.s awarded for training that is neither scientific nor scholarly. That is not to deny the existence of both abuses. However, the buyers—though their knowledge is imperfect—nevertheless possess sufficient knowledge to discriminate between broad categories. This is clearly so in the case of the diploma-mill Ph.D. which can be rejected immediately. As for the second interpretation, there is indeed a problem of labeling: Obviously most "doctors of philosophy" have no special training and knowledge of philosophy, and—in the interest of semantic purity—should therefore be called doctors of chemistry, mathematics, etc. But I don't think that this is what Professor Mardiros has in mind, that he does not object to the use of the Ph.D. title by disciplines other than philosophy, but rather to its use by certain "inferior" studies. Perhaps a good case can be made for this argument, but it would be a case for restricting the title to some studies (such as the traditional "arts" studies) and not using it for other studies that have become part of the modern university. In fact I believe that such a trend is already well established. In any case, to the extent that the problem exists it would not be remedied by the abolition of the Ph.D. but by delimitation of its applicability—on the basis of reasonable criteria—to a limited number of graduate studies.

Ph.D. standards too high?

The second of the two paradoxical proposition expresses Professor Mardiros' value judgment that (in some cases, in some institutions, in some departments) the standards for the Ph.D. are too high. This the ideal which Professor Mardiros has in mind appears not to be the utopian ideal of "uniformly highest quality of the product" but something less than that—perhaps a normal distribution with clearly superior and clearly inferior products forming insignificant tails. I would expect that the real world in fact tends to approximate such a distribution. If this is so, then we already have an "ideal", and there is no point in

abolishing the Ph.D. to stay in the same place.

Let me now come to what I consider the most objectionable part of Professor Mardiros' polemic: "In my view, the point is not to change the system but to destroy it."

First, the lengthy quotation from William James which introduces this part of the argument does not, in my opinion, support the above recommendation. James warned against the abuse of an institution, not against the institution as such. If graduate training and the Ph.D. were indeed "... a sham, bauble, and a dodge" and nothing else, there would be a clear case for their destruction. But in reality they are much more. The snobbery and ceremonialism are there but they are not essential characteristics of the institution. On the contrary its dominant characteristic is rigorous advanced training, not the medieval costumes or the "union card" aspect of the sheepskin. One can easily agree that the medieval costumes are a sham. As for the "union card" aspect, this obviously harks back to an earlier question of initial guidance for would-be buyers of Ph.D. services, and here the "union card" performs a useful function. (I would add at this point that a bourgeois society has no monopoly on licensing of academic skills. An analogous system of licensing exists in all the socialist countries of Eastern Europe—notably in the Society Union—which makes me think that if there were no such thing in our society as the Ph.D. we would probably have to invent it or import it.)

Distorted image

We are also told by Professor Mardiros that the present system of graduate studies is inimical to original inquiry, that it substitutes unworthy title seeking for appropriate and proper motives for research, that it persists in maintaining the link between intellectual inquiry and the red tape of academic life, that it puts a premium on imitativeness, that it destroys the student's independence, that it wastes the time of the supervisor.

These are serious charges. In my opinion, however, they may present a distorted image of the institution. Far from being "inimical to original inquiry" every bona fide program of graduate studies I know of subscribes to the proposition that what is expected of students is to master their field of study in order to enable them to engage in original inquiry. Whatever the "appropriate and proper" motives for research may be, the cause of research would be ill served by abolishing the apprenticeship which is simply indispensable for the vast majority of individuals to be able to embark upon a scientific and scholarly career.

As for the alleged link between intellectual inquiry and academic red tape, this may again be the case, and I agree that unnecessary bureaucracy should be eliminated. I would argue, however, that in this case, as in many other, the objective of improvement is not likely to be achieved by thoughtless destruction first and thinking about alternative order later on, but by planning a workable alternative first and then working towards its adoption via reform.

This brings me to the last exception I take to Professor Mardiros' argument: His anti-reformism. To my mind revolution is the proper course of action if the system is demonstrably intolerable and a clearly superior alternative is available. Of course, any revolution is likely to produce in-

itially chaos, but a superior order may emerge from it. The losses inherent in the chaos, however, cannot be ignored. This is why, in my opinion, reform must be considered first by any sincere objector to any institution or system.

So much about Professor Mardiros' specific arguments against the Ph.D. Turning now to his concrete proposals, it is not surprising that they are rather weak. Thus we are told that advanced studies (presumably not leading to the Ph.D.) should be pursued "... by and large although not exclusively ... by a university's own undergraduates" since "graduate migration" is often disturbing "... wasteful and uneconomic ..." I doubt that this is a sound proposal. If a high degree of mobility (geographical, occupation, etc.) is a necessary condition for efficiency—as most people believe—then the recommendation to freeze people in their localities, jobs, or universities is not a progressive but reactionary advice. I am reinforced in this opinion by Professor Mardiros' supporting argument that the "graduate migration" is an aspect of "... Canada being a subsidiary of the United States ... our best undergraduate students tend not to stay with us ..." Professor Mardiros' anti-American bias was noted earlier. That it is a bias is shown by his assertion (unsupported and unsupported) that "... our best undergraduate students go to better advertised or wealthier universities across the border." The truth is that they go to better universities, across the border or across the ocean. The argument, incidentally, makes little sense in view of the quite general practice of American universities to encourage their best students to migrate to other universities. I am sure that Professor Mardiros is familiar with the "inbreeding" and "cross fertilization" arguments for this practice.

Revolt only a catalyst

Professor Mardiros' second proposal is also weak. We are told that a full-scale revolution is not likely; the current student unrest and revolt will not lead to "... breaking up of the rigid and conformist framework of graduate studies" because "... most students are busy working their way through the system, and the most we can expect from the others are abortive 'peasant revolts' ... disorganized and lacking in rational motivation ..." I disagree with Professor Mardiros' resigned sigh. I doubt that the "student revolt" will bring about a revolutionary transformation, but it may very well be the catalyst required to bring about some useful reforms. No institution is perfect and this applies fully to the Ph.D. Not only graduate studies, but undergraduate studies and university administration can and should be improved. If student activism will provide the necessary push to bring this about it should be welcome. I am more optimistic than Professor Mardiros who proposes to "... withdraw from so-called graduate work and divide his time between undergraduate teaching, his own scientific and scholarly work, and informal and unorganized communication with advanced students", hoping that "... if enough of this happens, eventually the present organization of graduate studies ... will collapse under the weight of its own futility and mediocrity."

If Professor Mardiros were really concerned about the shortcomings of graduate studies and the Ph.D. he would try to do more about it than write a letter to the *Gateway* and then retire to proverbial ivory tower.