Closed minds in Open University

HOW controversial should a university course be? Should a course of study offered by, say, the British Open University, merely present the unvarnished facts and leave the student to unearth for himself any moral issues involved?

Or should the university march boldly into the ethics of the subject and give the student something on which to test his moral judgments?

Questions such as these bombard the senses during a reading of the course literature for "The Changing Countryside", an intensive course of study offered by the Open University as part of its Personal and Cultural Education Programme.

The course, despite its inviting title, is not concerned with the attractions, the beauty, the grandeur of the British countryside. It is a prosaic, workmanlike discourse on the developments — economic, social, environmental — which, over the past few centuries, have affected the rural landscape and the people who make their livelihoods from what is conveniently termed "the land".

It consists of a group of four loosely connected studies, the subjects being:

a. agriculture and its putative rising productivity;
b. the expansion of towns and the planning that attempts to regulate that expansion;
c. the process of "conserving the environment";
d. the sustaining of rural communities.

A potted history of British agriculture covers the industry from the time of the enclosures to the era of mechanisation and of State (and EEC) intervention. The enclosures, say the course authors, especially those of the 18th and early 19th centuries, drastically changed the face of English farming, the common lands of the people being almost completely engulfed by the forbidding tide of fencing-in.

Mechanisation continued the transformation, with chugging tractors, reapers and combine harvesters dominating a landscape once tenderly cultivated by armies of men using scythe or sickle and ox or horse-drawn ploughs.

Yet despite this progress in technical efficiency, farming was being progressively subsidised, until our entry into the European Economic Community sent the process plunging to a *reductio ad absurdum*, British farmers making their sterling contribution to the milk lakes, butter and beef mountains etc. which, in the end, go to aiding the economy — of Russia.

From agriculture, the Open University tutors turn to the towns and their expansion which, since the mid-19th century, has been dramatic. Between 1851 and 1914, for example, the population of England and Wales doubled, while the number of people living in towns trebled.

The course makes occasional reference to the Town and Country Planning Acts of 1947, 1968 and 1971.

Side-by-side with the expansion of the towns has come the transformation of villages into dormitories for the swelling legions of commuters, while words such as "overspill", "urban sprawl" and "ribbon development" nosed their way into the language together with Green Belts, New Towns, urban and rural fringe and many more.

Under the heading "Conserving the Wild", the course discusses the establishment of Nature Reserves, National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and assesses the work of organisations such as the National Trust and the Nature Conservancy.

Finally, its section "Sustaining Rural Communities" is an historical survey of the social life and the material development of the English village, referring to its industrial role and the gradual provision of mains water, transport and other services.

It endeavours to make a case for the sustaining of small rural communities on the ground that "there must be some virtue in the wide distribution of the people and not merely in their concentration in cities where overcrowding could give rise to a range of social ills."

These studies will be valuable and informative to anyone interested in "the land". But they are likely to leave the student asking many questions on the moral issues churned up by British farming and by land-use legislation during the past millennium.

Were the enclosures merely a technical development in the organisational pattern of a great national industry or were they a Great Robbery of the people, a sordid land-grab on a gigantic scale designed to reinforce the power of a privileged elite and their control over the condition and destiny of the masses?

With agricultural efficiency supposedly reaching a standard close to perfection, why has the industry qualified for government subsidies for so long and at such cost?

As between the passing of Town and Country Planning Acts by Labour Governments (1947 and 1968) and their repeal or emasculation by the Conservatives, where did the balance of virtue lie?

Were the Acts the right and proper solution to the age-long problems of land — planning, betterment, constantly rising values — or is there some superior alternative that has not been tried in Britain?

It is true that the course material occasionally touches on questions such as these. Its brief passage on "Landownership — the Forgotten Power in Agriculture" is incisive and illuminating. But generally it seeks no moral conclusions. It keeps to its factual brief, allowing itself merely a fleeting curl of the lip from time to time.

This is a pity. The subject of "the land" — not to mention the Land Question — cries out for proper dissection and discussion by all universities.

Let us hope one day they will get round to it.

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