EDITORIAL

Philosophy and race

This special issue of *Radical Philosophy* presents five papers from the recent Radical Philosophy Conference, 'Philosophy and Race', held in London, 6–7 November 1998. The conference was a response to concern about the lack of discussion of race and ethnicity within both mainstream and alternative, more progressive, philosophical discourses in Britain. Furthermore, while the Black and Asian populations are well represented in the student body of British universities, such students stay away from philosophy in droves, even in those universities with up to 50 per cent non-White students.

Why has philosophy proved unable to attract Black students? American colleagues who have addressed this question within their own socio-cultural context have emphasized the perceived irrelevance of philosophy to Black students. In this case, it is up to philosophy to demonstrate that it deserves Black and Asian students, rather than the other way around. Whilst philosophers cling to criteria of what is 'philosophical' which act to exclude the cultural history, political realities and lived experience of a large proportion of British youth, philosophy will continue to be perceived as irrelevant. If an 'adapt or die' situation presents itself in British philosophy departments, it might be hoped, ironically, that the student 'market' will force changes. The current situation, however, leaves one less than optimistic with regard to the democratic powers of this market. North American colleagues have stressed the need to construct a non-mainstream philosophical practice and canon for academic research in areas of alternative concern. Yet the profoundly conservative, centralized structure of the funding of research (and thereby of teaching) in British universities makes such innovation unlikely, if not impossible, in institutions where Research Assessment ratings are the gold standard of academic life.

The recent expansion of higher education in Britain has created a new tier of universities which are less aloof from developments in secondary and continuing education. It seems unlikely that if such institutions are committed to the survival and expansion of their philosophy programmes they will be able to ignore developments in these other sectors. Encouraging Black and Asian students to study philosophy, to do graduate work in philosophy, to begin to teach and do research in philosophy – in short, to galvanize the traditional discipline of philosophy – cannot be left to developments in the tertiary sector alone; especially when rumblings from Millbank (Labour Party HQ) suggest that the distinction between 'intellectual' and 'technical-vocational' education may be utilized for the division of secondary education. Such a distinction will, of course, operate in accordance with economic, and thus racial, divides.

Certainly, the British Left has not been mute with regard to the question of race, especially in the mode of autocritique. It is noticeable, though, that academic voices of dissent – voices that would contribute to the formation of public policy in the fields of education, welfare, policing, immigration, employment practice, and so on – come almost exclusively from disciplines other than philosophy. On this point, in fact, philosophy often finds itself bereft of resources, other than arguments for questioning the reality of race itself. The imperative to learn from other disciplines, and to reflect philosophically upon their accumulated materials, thus presents itself as inexorable, as the disciplinary range of speakers at the 'Philosophy and Race' Conference and in this special issue – as in other issues of *Radical Philosophy* – makes clear.

In one way or another, all the essays in this issue reflect on concepts of 'race' and 'ethnicity': questioning their structure, status, and the scope of their legitimate application, in ways which are distinctively philosophical, yet also irreducibly social and historical in character.

Other papers from the conference will be collected, together with those published here and additional essays, in a volume, *Philosophies of Race and Ethnicity*, to appear in autumn 2000.