

University education in America

Professionalising the professor

The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University. By Louis Menand. Norton; 174 pages; \$24.95 and £17.99

THIS subtle and intelligent little book should be read by every student thinking of applying to take a doctorate. They may then decide to go elsewhere. For something curious has been happening in American universities, and Louis Menand, a professor of English at Harvard University, captures it deftly.

His concern is mainly with the humanities: literature, languages, philosophy and so on. These are disciplines that are going out of style: 22% of American college graduates now major in business compared with only 2% in history and 4% in English. However, many leading American universities want their undergraduates to have a grounding in the basic canon of ideas that every educated person should possess. But most find it difficult to agree on what a "general education" should look like. At Harvard, Mr Menand notes, "The great books are read because they have been read"—they form a sort of social glue.

One reason why it is hard to design and teach such courses is that they cut across the insistence by top American universities that liberal-arts education and professional education should be kept separate, taught in different schools. Many students experience both varieties. Although more than half of Harvard undergraduates end up in law, medicine or business, future doctors and lawyers must study a non-specialist liberal-arts degree before embarking on a professional qualification.

Besides professionalising the professions by this separation, top American universities have professionalised the professor. The growth in public money for academic research has speeded the process: federal research grants rose fourfold between 1960 and 1990, but faculty teaching hours fell by half as research took its toll. Professionalism has turned the acquisition of a doctorate into a prerequisite for a successful academic career: as late as 1969 a third of American professors did not possess one. But the key idea behind professionalisation, argues Mr Menand, is that "the knowledge and skills needed for a particular specialisation are transmissible but not transferable." So disciplines acquire a monopoly not just over the production of knowledge, but also over the production of the producers of knowledge.

No disciplines have seized on professionalism with as much enthusiasm as the

humanities. You can, Mr Menand points out, become a lawyer in three years and a medical doctor in four. But the median time—median!—to a doctoral degree in the humanities is nine years. (Advertising note to American students: you can get a perfectly good PhD at a top British university in under four years.) Not surprisingly, up to half of all doctoral students in English drop out before getting their degrees.

Equally unsurprisingly, only about half end up with the jobs they entered graduate school to get: tenured professorships. There are simply too few posts. This is partly because universities continue to churn out ever more PhDs. But fewer students want to study humanities subjects: English departments awarded more bachelor's degrees in 1970-71 than they did 20 years later. Fewer students require fewer teachers. So, at the end of a decade of thesis-writing, many humanities students leave the profession to do something for which they have not been trained.

The key to reforming higher education, concludes Mr Menand, is to alter the way in which "the producers of knowledge are produced". Otherwise, academics will continue to think dangerously alike, increasingly detached from the societies which they study, investigate and criticise. "Academic inquiry, at least in some fields, may need to become less exclusionary and more holistic." Yet quite how that happens, Mr Menand does not say. In reality, baby and bathwater may go out together. Public exasperation with academic introversion may lead to a loss of some independence, the most precious right of academics in a free society. ■

A biography of Arthur Koestler

Intellectual fireworks

Koestler: The Literary and Political Odyssey of a Twentieth-Century Skeptic. By Michael Scammell. Random House; 689 pages; \$35. Published in Britain as "Koestler: The Indispensable Intellectual". Faber and Faber; £25

LONG before today's fashion for counter-intuitive polemics, there was Arthur Koestler. An early Zionist who later tried to debunk the very notion of a Jewish people; a communist whose novel "Darkness at Noon" is one of the most powerful demolitions of communism ever written; a lover of science who later championed the paranormal; Koestler was one of the 20th century's most powerful and controversial intellectuals, whose works still shape our thinking. This is the first authorised biography of the Hungarian-Jewish writer and it



He loved man, not men (or women)

is a majestic achievement.

Michael Scammell, a biographer of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, was granted full access to Koestler's papers. He has distilled more than a decade's research to reconstruct not just Koestler's life but the era in which he lived, from the last years of the Austro-Hungarian empire to Palestine in the 1920s, the struggle against fascism in the 1930s and the post-war years of Koestler's anti-communism. Mr Scammell's style is lively and authoritative, and the stuff of Koestler's life is engrossing. He brings alive a sparkling walk-on cast including Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, George Orwell, Albert Camus and Cyril Connolly.

Mr Scammell is sympathetic to his subject but does not gloss over the less attractive aspects of Koestler's personality. Like many intellectuals who profess their love for humanity as a whole, Koestler had problems dealing with real human beings, especially women. He expected his girlfriends and wives to serve as maids and secretaries. He would have nothing to do with his illegitimate daughter.

A short man, and a serial fornicator, Koestler, it seems, used his conquests as a kind of self-validation. As his editor, Otto Katz, once told him: "We all have inferiority complexes of various sizes. But yours isn't a complex, it's a cathedral." Yet it was doubtless that inferiority complex, and the insatiable hunger to be proven right, that fuelled Koestler's intellectual fireworks.

Koestler's legacy has been tarnished by the claims in a biography by David Cesarani that he had raped Jill Craigie, a British film-maker and feminist. Mr Scammell examines this episode at some length. But his case for the defence (he notes that Craigie did not mention the rape for almost 50 years until 1998 and that she and her hus-