

## **Book review:**

# **Microcosmographia Academica: Being A Guide for the Young Academic Politician**

**F.M. Cornford**  
**Bowes & Bowes Cambridge 1908**  
**ISBN 0 370 00145 1**

**Reviewed by Richard Ennals**

## Social Anthropology of Innovation

It would be a mistake to regard the discussion of workplace innovation and organisational change as only a recent concern.

In 1971, the first elected student representatives completed their academic year as members of the College Council of King's College Cambridge, under Provost Edmund Leach, a controversial social anthropologist. It was resolved that all such representatives should be presented copies of "Microcosmographia Academica: Being A Guide for the Young Academic Politician" by F.M. Cornford, an eminent classics scholar at King's, who died in 1943. This sociological masterpiece was published in 1908, and Cornford later observed that it was relevant not only to academic politics, but also to Government departments in the first world war. Later editions, with the text unaltered, were popular in electrical engineering companies before the second world war, who saw the business world as in need of such advice.

The opening advertisement for the book provided a view of the intended audience:

"If you are young, do not read this book; it is not for you;

If you are old, throw it away; you have nothing to learn from it;

If you are unambitious, light the fire with it; you do not need its guidance.

But, if you are neither less than twenty-five years old, nor more than thirty;

And if you are ambitious withal, and your spirit hankers after academic politics;

Read, and may your soul (if you have a soul) find mercy!"

## The Enemy

Cornford saw the enemy as inertia: "There is only one argument for doing something: the rest are arguments for doing nothing." The editor of the 1949 edition, W.K.C. Guthrie, concluded that the experience of two world wars, where arguments for doing nothing were often popular, suggested that "a few more of the qualities of the *Young Man in a Hurry* might have saved the situation".

Cornford speaks directly to his young audience: "My heart is full of pity for you, O young academic politician. If you will be a politician you have a painful path to follow, even though it be a short one, before you nestle down into a modest incompetence."

Later in their careers, he warns that "from far below you will mount the roar of a ruthless multitude of *Young Men in a Hurry*. You may perhaps grow to be aware of what they are in a hurry to do. They are in a hurry to get you out of the way."

## Reason

Cornford mocks the simple idea that people in general listen to reason: “You think that you have only to state a reasonable case, and people must listen to reason and act upon it at once. It is just this conviction that makes you so unpleasant.” Rather, he suggests: “Nothing is ever done until everyone is convinced that it ought to be done, and has been convinced for so long that it is now time to do something else. .... And are you not aware that conviction has never yet been produced by an appeal to reason, which only makes people uncomfortable .... You must address your arguments to prejudice and the political motive.”

He provides an insightful summary of the parties in academic politics: “There are five, and they are called Conservative Liberals, Liberal Conservatives, Non-placets (committed to inaction), Adullamites (committed to seeking money), and *Young Men in a Hurry*”.

## The Young Man in a Hurry

His target audience are the last group.

“The *Young Man in a Hurry* is a narrow-minded and ridiculously youthful prig, who is inexperienced enough to imagine that something might be done before very long, and even to suggest definite things. His most dangerous defect being want of experience, everything should be done to prevent him from taking any part in affairs.”

“The *Young Man in a Hurry* is afflicted with a conscience, which is apt to break out, like measles, in patches.”

Cornford presents change as being brought about by informal Caucuses, with a system which is intended to maintain the balance of power, excluding all the *Young Men in a Hurry*. “The *Young Men in a Hurry* have no regular Caucus. They meet, by twos and threes, in desolate places, and gnash their teeth.”

“All Caucuses have the following rule. At Caucus meetings which are only attended by one member (owing to that member’s having omitted to summon the others), the said member shall be deemed to constitute a quorum, and may vote the meeting full powers to go on the square without further ceremony.”

## Business and Knowledge

The first challenge is to acquire influence. This, he says, is the province of business men. “All business men are good; and it is understood that they let who will be clever, provided he not be busy at their expense”.

Decisions are left to a scattered body of older members, who lack corporate feeling. Actions require extensive prior consultation. Rules are introduced in order to free younger men from the burdensome feeling of moral or religious obligation. “Plainly, the more rules you can invent, the less need there will be to waste time over fruitless puzzling over right and wrong.”

In the field of academic knowledge production, Cornford cited *The Principle of Sound Learning*: “the noise of vulgar fame should never trouble the cloistered calm of academic existence”. He added: “If you should write a book (you had better not), be sure that it is unreadable; otherwise you will be called “brilliant” and forfeit all respect.

### **Doing Nothing**

Cornford argued that “it is a mere theorist’s paradox that doing nothing has just as many consequences as doing something. It is obvious that inaction can have no consequences at all.”

*The Principle of the Wedge* is that “you should not act justly now for fear of raising expectations that you may act still more justly in the future”.

*The Principle of the Dangerous Precedent* is that “you should not now do an admittedly right action for fear you .... should not have the courage to do right in some future case” .... “Every public action which is not customary, either is wrong, or if it is right, is a dangerous precedent. It follows that nothing should ever be done for the first time.”

*The Principle of Unripe Time* is that “people should not do at the present moment what they think right at that moment, because the moment at which they think it right has not yet arrived.”

### **Jobs**

The most important part of political activity is, of course, connected with Jobs. “My Jobs are public-spirited proposals, which happen (much to my regret) to involve the advancement of a personal friend, or, (still more to my regret) of myself. Your Jobs are insidious intrigues for the advancement of yourself and your friends, speciously disguised as public-spirited proposals.”

### **The Academic World**

Cornford argues that when the reader reaches middle age, at the age of thirty five, a change may come. “Remember that other world, within the microcosm, the silent, reasonable world, where the only action is thought, and thought is free from fear.”

As we consider workplace innovation in the knowledge society, we should recall the warning from Plato with which Cornford began:

“Any one of us might say, that although in words he is not able to meet you at each step of the argument, he sees as a fact that academic persons, when they carry on study, not only in youth as a part of education, but as the pursuit of their maturer years, most of them become decidedly queer, not to say rotten; and that those who may be considered the best of them are made useless to the world by the very study which you extol.” (Plato, Republic, vi)

### **Biographical Note**

Richard Ennals was an elected Student Member of the College Council of King’s College Cambridge in the academic year 1971-72.