

One of the more unexpected consequences of the collapse of communism in eastern Europe may be the revival of Classics. In a fascinating article in *CA News*, the newsletter of the Classical Association of Great Britain, Anton J.L. van Hooff of Nijmegen University, the Netherlands, has reported some of his own experiences in touring the east and helping colleagues there re-establish long dormant programmes. Readers of *Labyrinth*, I am sure, will be moved to reflection by some of the conditions he reports.

In Russia, the aim of the former school system was to produce identical results in every student. Independent thought was discouraged, and the only values to which the students were exposed were those of Marxism-Leninism. Technical subjects were heavily stressed to the exclusion of everything else. The population at large had little faith in the quality of instruction and often paid whatever they could for outside tuition in order to ensure their children a place in a university. Now, the aim is twofold: to produce a student who can enter university without passing further entrance examinations; and to begin the humanization of education. This means teaching Classics.

The Church is becoming increasingly involved in education too, now that the constraints on religious practice have been lifted. Ancient Greek is being taught in church-run schools, with a view to reading patristic literature. But in most cases the schools are concentrating on Latin. Professor van Hooff thought this somewhat surprising (the Russians have always been closer to the Greek half of the old Roman empire), but his friends there told him that they wanted to belong to mainstream Europe again. "It was moving," he writes, "to see one of the claims of our Classical teaching confirmed on the fringes of Europe: that Classics is part of our common cultural tradition. Europe is not just an economic and technological community: the 'European dimension' in education also means making students conscious of the common European roots."

Similar stories are told of Czechoslovakia. Latin is being reintroduced into the schools, and at the universities there has been an explosion in enrolments. Formerly, only a tiny number of students was permitted to study Classics by the communists. Now that the restrictions are gone, they are coming in droves: 60 students as of September 1989 in Prague University, with further increases expected. Many of these are high school teachers previously forced to teach other subjects, usually Russian.

I witnessed similar happenings in East Berlin last June while visiting the Humboldt University. This university was founded in 1810 and set the pattern for all other universities in the nineteenth century. By 1900 it was the leading university of the world. The events of the twentieth century all but destroyed it. But they are rebuilding. My host told me that when he arrived in 1988, he was the only teacher of Classics, with half an office and no students. Now there are nine teachers and a corridor full of offices; the old Institute of Classical Studies is operating again; and they have 90 students in the Department.

With West German money helping out, the East Germans (at least at the Humboldt University) are comparatively well off in terms of books and equipment, if still lagging far behind us. In Russia and Czechoslovakia it's another story. Professor van Hooff showed some teachers how to make slides from photographs in books; he thought he was being helpful by taking along an older model of camera. But even this camera had disappeared from the shops a year before. They could get other cameras, but film had disappeared too. In Leningrad he saw a teacher using photocopies of a textbook written before the Revolution (itself based on an older German original). Nothing else was available.

We sometimes complain about the unfavourable climate here for humanities. Contemplating these stories makes one realise that it could be much worse! But by the same token it makes one appreciate all the more the fundamental importance of the Classics. For our eastern colleagues it is a simple matter of getting connected again with the rest of humanity. Their commitment to the restoration of humane learning in spite of enormous obstacles ought to give food for thought to educationalists and other leaders in Canada, a country which still enjoys immense wealth in comparison with the nations of the old communist bloc.