

# LETTERS

Dear RP,

I am sure that readers of RP respect the tenacity and courage with which the philosopher Julius Tomin resisted the brutality and irrationality of Czech totalitarianism. Clearly the significance for Oxbridge philosophy of even its limited contact with aspects of the situation of Czech philosophy goes far beyond what Martin Walker's journalistic summary in the Guardian could possibly convey. I would like to express my gratitude to Tomin for indicating as much in his short piece in RP No. 37, and my appreciation, too, to the editorial collective for agreeing to carry the report of someone whose philosophy can hardly be termed 'radical'. It is Tomin's postscript with which I feel one ought to take issue: in it Tomin raises Socrates' claim against the Athenian authorities for free time, or schole, for philosophy. In directing this at his Oxford colleagues Tomin, who remains unemployed, transmutes this claim, somewhat paradoxically into a claim that he be allowed three hours in a fortnight in intellectual exchange with his more fortunate (i.e. employed) colleagues. And it is implied that in this claim, it is the deprivation of human dignity by the modern concept of redundancy which is at stake.

Tomin's case really does raise in a pointed and poignant manner issues of importance for philosophers, professional or non-, and especially for the way in which they conceptualise labour, including their own. For that reason it is vital to clear up some of the confusion sown by Julius Tomin.

The kind of free time demanded by Socrates for philosophy was only ever conceivable against the background of Athenian slave-labour, and 'the slave labour has come to an end which guaranteed him his idleness (Musiggang)' (Walter Benjamin). It is not 'in the power of philosophy to restore the dignity and direction of free time' (as Tomin claims). It was not in slave-owning Greece and it is not in a Britain on the road to underdevelopment, and permanent unemployment.

Philosophy as a 'living human activity' (Tomin) is a privilege. As an esoteric, self-perpetuating and self-indulgent profession, academic philosophy is even more so. Tomin, a courageous exile who has lived philosophy, addresses a plea to the Oxford dons, most of whom only teach it. Of course his plea is justified. It would be even more laudable if it had been made on behalf of the many, many unemployed and unemployable graduates, some of whom desperately need to participate in the academic life of the

universities both to keep their minds alive and as the only way of furthering blighted academic careers.

Few of the great philosophers of the past restricted their labours to philosophy and only a limited number of past thinkers who today matter most to us had professional academic sinecures. No-one could fail to respect someone like Spinoza who, forced to grind lenses to earn a living and forced to consort with artists and bohemians because his views were not respectable, was still able to rise above all feelings of bitterness, and retain an absolutely undiminished faith in the reality and ubiquity of truth.

I fully support Tomin's plea and I applaud RP's decision to publish it. I only wish it had carried the motto, again I quote Benjamin: 'There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.'

Philosophical works, too, 'owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries'.

Yours sincerely, Lloyd Spencer



## Addendum to Levitas article

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The Social Security Report affirms the principle of a minimum income (whose level is unspecified). It sets out four principles for the reform of the benefits system:

(a) Help should go only to those in need (hence the abolition of universal benefits such as child benefit).

(b) Help should be in the form of financial support so that the recipient can provide a basic standard of living (not defined) for his (sic) family, while retaining personal choice.

(c) There must be work incentives, so increases in income will only be penalised by a 90p in the £1 deduction from benefit. (Greater incentives aren't

possible because of the conflict with (a).)

(d) There should be a shift to a system of compulsory private insurance, with the State paying minimum contributions for those unable to pay.

Cost-based benefits (housing benefits, rent rebates) will be ended, and a flat-rate average payment substituted (although this will be regionally variable). Minimum income levels for categories of individuals and families will be adjusted for 'local and even seasonal variations in housing, food, transport and so on'. Individuals will be assessed and given 'tax codings' defining their entitlement to benefit, which might be distributed by a 'bank card' bearing this coding and combined with the 'medicard'. Description of the administrative arrangements is singularly absent.