

Rerum cognoscere... Darwin

The Department of Rule and Rebellion recently moved to a less tattered part of the School, partly in order to improve its own accommodation, and partly to make way for its old quarters to be refurbished to within an inch of their life. For months the corridors, stairways and rooms were busy with boxes and bin liners, as academics rifled through their books and papers, wondering what they could pack, what they could send to other more needy universities, and what not even the most needy colleague in the most under-resourced college could possibly regard as anything but a burdensome use of shelf space.

Moving rooms concentrates the mind wonderfully, and yards of academic journal back numbers which had been saved with care over years and years were suddenly recognised as redundant when the choice was between packing them, then unpacking and reshelving them, or simply popping them in a black bin liner. The intellectual content of compost and landfill rose very sharply over the next few weeks, and my colleague Dinah B Feart remarked that had worms and crows been able to scavenge words and thoughts as well as just bits of discarded pizza, a cultural advance would have taken place in the natural world which would have thrown the evolutionary hierarchy into turmoil, and challenged the human monopoly on intelligent information with a revolution by species that humanity had despised or neglected for too long.

I was going through my own dusty shelves and forgotten drawers to see what I really needed, and what I had obviously forgotten I ever had and so could clearly do without for the next ten years. One consequence of the long hibernation of much of my library which I hadn't appreciated before, was the simple physical decay of so many of the books and journals. Not just the fading which sunlight inflicted slowly and relentlessly, so that pages went brown and cracked and crumbled at the edges, but glue dried up and collapsed into dusty crumbs so that pages fell away, and whole sections where the paper itself seemed to have fallen apart. Pages had shreds completely missing, as if time had replaced the yellow highlighting of text with its physical removal. It was almost as if sections of paper had been nibbled away. I packed what was still useable, binned the rest, and stood back to see what else in the room needed a decision made about it.

There was very little left, and only one last small cupboard, inherited from a long ago retired

colleague who had in their turn been given it by Harold Laski himself. I opened the upper of two small doors, and began taking out the curling cardboard folder at the front. There was a scuffling sound, a whisper of disturbed paper, and several small tails disappeared through a crack in the back of the woodwork. Mice! I thought we'd got rid of those a long time ago, but here they were back again, and if it weren't for the move, I'd never have known. I took out the concealing folder, and looked in dismay at the chewed pieces of paper that lay behind it. A capacious mouse nest.

But there was something odd about it. Usually these weavings of gnawed scraps have an anarchic random mix of colours and textures, as if nature's own paper shredder had been at work to make sure that nothing remained of meaning or data. This was quite different. I turned my anglepoise lamp so that it shone directly into the back of the cupboard and looked more closely at the shreds of paper

which rested there. They were in alphabetical order. And not just any words, sentences, or paragraphs. 'Agitprop'; 'barricades'; 'coup'; 'dialectic'; 'entryism'; 'Foucault'; 'guerrilla'. Across the wooden shelving they spread, the purloined fragments from my shelves, the data base of insurgent mammals.

On the lower shelf was a faded wooden reproduction of the old LSE coat of arms, with a beaver below, and two books above. And curled beneath was the familiar motto, 'rerum...' – but no, it wasn't, someone had changed it. I looked more closely. There could be no doubt, it was quite different, and in the vernacular, the favourite language of revolutionaries of all kinds and in all places. The words, though a little obscured by dust, were still quite clear: 'Rodents of the world unite, you have nothing to choose but your brains.' ■

Rodney Barker

