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SOCIAL CHANGE IN AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES

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There has been a great deal of talk about students destroying universities. The dissension certainly is understandable to faculty members. After all, universities have been run very largely for faculty members, and students want some changes made in those arrangements. When faculty members say students are trying to destroy the universities, what they generally mean is that students are trying to change existing arrangements; faculty members think such changes would be somewhat disadvantageous.

I do not, however, think that students will be the agents of destruction, although there are a few who are literally bent on that course. If universities are destroyed or—more realistically—if they are seriously crippled and their effectiveness curtailed, it will not be because students set out consciously to attain that end. The crippling and curtailment will be a consequence of the conflict over what students want, something we all do in the process of wrangling.

What do the students want? Some of them (a relatively small number, even in the most politically active student bodies) do want fundamental political changes in the universities. They want to “radicalize” them, to make them more responsive to a radical political movement. They want to use universities as the cutting edge of radical political change.

Many students want other things which the universities either have not provided or cannot provide. They want peace—they want the Vietnam war to end. However one conceives the role or character of universities it is difficult to imagine how they can bring that about. But that is really beside the point. When people get active politically, they get active in the place they happen to be. Students want peace, and they will continue to agitate for it whether or not they are tactically correct.

There are other things that universities have not provided. Students want to spend some time testing themselves out. One of the most striking developments in this society over the last thirty or forty years has been the increasing institutionalization of training. Adolescence is now completely institutionalized; the only way an adolescent can be respectable now is to attend school. If young people are to advance in the university, then they must do it the way everyone has always done it—take courses and get degrees. I regard this as a dangerous and difficult pattern, for

there are many things young people need to do that should not be done under the auspices of large public institutions like schools.

An important feature of growing up is testing out. There is a need to try out social roles, to try out jobs, and to try out careers. This is hard to do. One reason for this is the draft, but another is the institutionalization of almost everything about education. The need to test out, to try out, and to make real mistakes is at the root of much of the restlessness.

There is more. Students want education, but they would like the elimination of capriciousness in administration (especially in administration relating to student affairs) and the removal of a good deal of the archaic which abounds in the existing system. It is difficult to make some of these changes, because in public universities change becomes a political matter. But these demands are not going to go away, and they should not—they are reasonable. There is no reason why deans or assistant deans should have the authority to regulate the lives of people who, in other important respects, are treated like adults.

Finally, students say they want relevance. It is hard to know exactly what that means. Many would suggest that relevance means the things I have already discussed—an end to the war, an end to the draft, or an end to highly organized curricula. It has different meanings because it has several sources. One source is the substantial shift in opinion among students about the aims of education. More and more students think education should be socially useful, although their notions of social utility vary. Some think social utility means useful to radical political organizers. But others do not link it to an explicit political ideology. They think it denotes the issues they care about—eliminating poverty, or making a better life for America, or cleaning up air pollution.

Can these desires be accommodated? Many would be relatively easy to attain, were it not for one fact; universities are run for (though not by) faculty members. The things some students want are incongruent with the sorts of things to which faculties are accustomed. Faculties, administrations, and students have different ideas of what universities are about.

Faculty members want to “do their own thing”; that is what they have been doing for a long time. That is what the struggle for academic freedom has been about—faculty members seeking to do their own thing, without external interference. It is a worthwhile end, but this autonomy can easily conflict with other people’s priorities. State legislatures often have difficulty in understanding it; students have increasing difficulty understanding it. Both groups feel their questions about purpose and performance are legitimate.

Faculty members also do political work—although they are not accustomed to thinking of it as such. For example, they train teachers, doctors, and nurses, and they teach farmers to grow better crops. That is political work. It is not being done because someone felt he wanted to, but because the society decided—through formal political channels—that it is important. That is why a college of education is set up in a state university; the state legislature allocates money to train teachers because the state decides that its children should be educated.

Universities undertake other more explicit political work. They work for state governments, for federal governments, for foreign governments, as consultants or contractors or teachers. Some of this work is obviously acceptable and some of it is questionable. But aside from that, it is in the political area that much important training, research, and teaching goes on.

There are, of course, other things that universities have done. One is to teach people how to behave. This is one of their older purposes, one that is being greatly questioned. But if people were asked what students get out of a university education, they probably would say something about a career, something about political values and learning how to think, and finally something about behavior. Universities have traditionally been expected to produce people who are polite, obedient, and generally easy to work with—people who know how to tie their ties, brush their hair, speak nicely, and work hard.

Finally, an important aspect of universities—although it is not one faculty members talk about very much except with each other—is that they support a new class. One of the standard jokes is that those who get a university appointment embark on a new life—the leisure of the theory class. The things faculty members identify as important rewards of university life are scholarships, sabbatic leaves, and grants. All these rewards mean that we do not have to worry, we can do our own thing.

In its own way, each of these faculty activities—political work, doing one's own thing, teaching courses, training good behavior—stands in the way of accommodating the needs students are expressing.

Faculty members place much too much value on the things they do. It is understandable that people in the education business would believe that schooling is important, but we overdo it. This is clear in the question of performance in course work. Dozens of studies have been made about the relationship between college grades and later performance in occupations. The correlations show no strong relationship. The value of academic success is probably overrated in this society, particularly by academic people.

Moreover, doing our own thing has in many respects, grown wild—we are reaching the point where it is questionable. Universities are resources, many of them are explicitly public resources, and it is reasonable to question their use. But faculties generally do not. They operate like legislators, generally on the “pork-barrel” principle. There is little serious discussion of priorities; hardly anything ever is stopped on the grounds it is unwise.

But apart from the merits of these points (assuming we could formulate some sort of nice resolution for each of them), what can we do to avoid crippling the universities?

First, universities should not be organized as single purpose, political institutions. They should not have departments in charge of left-wing ideology. They should be diverse institutions, with a diversity of political purposes; the point is to maintain and expand that diversity.

Second, it is silly to resist the patently sensible things students want, to enter arbitrarily into the administration of student affairs. It can only produce the opposite outcome of what was intended.

Third, much educational work needs to be done. I do not think that improving education in the traditional sense is required, however. We have to abandon the notion that schooling, i.e., sitting in classrooms and listening to someone else talk, is the proper way to prepare people to be adults. More and more emphasis is put on classrooms and listening to other people talk and less and less emphasis on letting people experiment. Much of the discontent is a consequence of being forced to go through more and more classroom rituals. Most people are not naturally so inclined. I have a hard time thinking of anybody I would care to hear three days a week, an hour a day, for a year. And yet, we put our students through this and devise all kinds of strange and arbitrary ways of classifying it.

The humanity and enjoyment of our own lives must be available for students. Although I despair of reducing the length of schooling, I think it is possible to diversify it, to open up the university, to devise new curricula which will allow people to go out and experiment. It is difficult, but it is possible.

Fourth, greater legitimacy and focus should be given to students’ feelings that higher education should be “relevant.” This is a vague and unformed idea in most cases, but many of the most powerful ideas in this world have been vague and unformed. We should not turn our backs on it just because it does not have logical clarity.

For example, there is a great need for high schools and colleges of “human resources,” or colleges of “human development,” where people

can learn those things that are most commonly associated with “relevance”—social work, nursing, education, community organization, etc. Those are useful and important careers; they embody practice, and training in them is congruent with what I suggested first—that we de-emphasize sitting in classrooms for long periods of time cut off from the world in which most people live.

Fifth, we must strike a new political balance of power within the universities. This is the most difficult thing to cope with. Faculty members are just not used to thinking of students as people who have a legitimate political interest in anything about schools. But that day is gone forever. In obvious areas like student affairs, a system of checks and balances can easily be established, to eliminate arbitrariness and capriciousness. I find it difficult to see how a similar system of checks and balances, with respect to curricula, could be worse than what presently exists—it could be significantly better.

The suggestions I have made are conservative. I do not believe that students have greater vision than I have, or any greater hold on political virtue. I think the university is an important institution, and should be preserved. I like doing my own thing. My suggestions for change are a way of maintaining the best of what we have now, by including new voices in the decision-making process. My suggestions are not costly in dollars, but this does not inspire me with confidence that they will be carried out—because of the other costs. There will be deep psychological costs, because reform involves giving up our dominion over the young. And there are political costs—we will have to give up the notion that students should not have a voice in the educational process. If these barriers are not overcome, there is a good chance that higher education will become more sterile, more conflict-ridden, and less useful for all concerned.