

Is the Academic Mind pursuing Truth?

The Decay of the Academy

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AMERICANS AS A nation, in this century, have shown little serious interest in education, least of all in colleges and universities. To be sure, they have lavishly endowed a large number of private institutions of higher learning, and they have given the many state institutions the right to make enormous and ever-increasing claims on the public treasury. But what was to be done with their money was a question with which Americans could not be bothered. They commented on the football scores and left everything else to the "experts." Only now, when the more thoughtful understand that they may soon lose their country, are Americans coming to suspect that, in Dr. Richard Weaver's fine phrase, Ideas have Consequences.

Americans who now wonder what has been happening in the colleges are discovering that it is no easy matter to find out. Nothing, of course, is to be learned from the masterpieces of double-talk that are written by "public-relations secretaries" and read in public by the more ambitious

college presidents when they feel the urge to drum up more trade, to put the squeeze on the alumni or the legislature, or to get their names in the newspapers. The constant rattle of this prefabricated oratory subdues the pronouncements of the occasional president who has something to say and dares to say it. Even the most alert college student is unlikely ever to obtain a glimpse of the inner working of the scholastic machine through whose sieves he is passed with more or less effort. And there are almost no other sources of information, for what really defeats the inquirer is the rigid system of taboos that governs the academic Polynesia. It is a close world in which there is much that should not be said aloud—certainly not within the hearing of outsiders.

One is reminded of the mid-Victorian novel which created a realm of fantasy by systematically suppressing a large part of the reality that it pretended to describe. Dickens, for example, blandly recounted sentimental episodes in the lives of men and women who dwelt in a strange land in which sexual intercourse was apparently unknown. Cooper went even farther: he felt obliged to lie to his readers about the manners of Indians so that his virginal heroines might be represented as undergoing a long captivity among savages without "suffering an offence to their delicacy." The illusions thus created were pleasant to Victorian readers, and the novelists flourished accordingly. A similarly self-imposed censorship distorts most of what college professors say in public about colleges, and, on the whole, they too have flourished.

For this reticence there seemed to be good and sufficient reasons. College professors, like physicians, feel that the prestige of the profession demands that scandals should, so far as possible, be concealed from the public. There is, furthermore, the universally accepted dictum that the attitude of Americans toward learning and scholarship ranges from obstinate indifference to contemptuous hostility. There is always fear of reprisals by administrators or

by colleagues on those who break the taboos. But the major cause of the academic silence is the fact that the men whose interests are most directly affected are the least willing to speak. For the true scholar the keenest of all intellectual pleasures is that provided by the study and research which he regards as his true function in life. By instinct and tradition he withdraws from politics, whether national or academic, and, knowing that his life will not be long enough for him to learn all that he wishes to know or even for him to complete the investigations that he has undertaken, he feels an imperative need for peace and tranquillity, and is ready to purchase them at almost any price. If he is to attend to his real life's work, he must not dissipate his time and energy in controversy, whether in public or within the precincts of his own college.

The reasons for the academician's withdrawal from contemporary debate were unexceptionable in a time of social stability, but that time has passed. Reticence and tact are no longer feasible for the scholar, who must now—however reluctantly and fretfully—see that his very existence is menaced. He may still be willing, for the sake of peace in his own little cell of the ivory tower, to ignore the skeletons that have been accumulating in the closets and the corridors for more than half a century, but the choice is no longer his. The chronic indifference of the American public is yielding to a growing conviction that something is seriously wrong, and public inquiry has become inevitable. College professors must explain how the skeletons got into the academic closets or be suspected of complicity in murder.

The past season brought forth a dozen books that in various ways impugn the integrity and the usefulness of the whole academic profession. The two that I shall notice here, although written with widely different purposes, are so drastic in their implications that they lead their readers to the conclusion that colleges and universities are a menace to civilized society.

In *The Academic Marketplace*¹ two sociologists, Theodore Caplow and Reece J. McGee, present a "study" which differs from the usual thing in sociology in that it is written in intelligible English and that there is no indication that the questionnaires on which it is based were contrived to produce a predetermined conclusion. The book is therefore convincing—and damning.

The authors attempt to describe the ways in which college teachers obtain their positions. The scope of their inquiry was limited to liberal arts colleges and to the departments, from anthropology to zoölogy, which are normally a part of such colleges. No reader, therefore, can take refuge in the hope that any comment recorded in this book may come from a Professor of Outdoor Camping or a Professor of Hog Butchering.

The authors quote extensively and verbatim from many of the replies to their questionnaire. From these quotations the reader will discover that the ranking professors in liberal arts are a collective disgrace. Some of them draw their vocabulary from the inspirational messages that are sometimes scrawled on the walls of low-class latrines; many are so nearly illiterate that such barbarisms as "between you and I" flow smoothly from their pens; most of them write English crudely and awkwardly; and no more than four or five seem to have discovered that language can be used lucidly and accurately. But even more appalling than this mass of linguistic ineptitude is the sheer vulgarity and meanness of the thinking that it expresses. Aside from a few differences in terminology, we might be listening to ditch-diggers describing the ways in which ditch-diggers get jobs. Indeed, if this were a book about ditch-diggers, some do-gooder would now be collecting funds or demanding legislation to redeem them from intellectual and moral squalor.

I do not overstate the conclusions that must be drawn from this book. They are so obvious that Professor Jacques Barzun

in his introduction had to apologize for the authors' "unwillingness to take up the cultural conditions of the repeated failures of mind, ethics and dignity which they report. Why has the American college and university so little connection with Intellect?"

A complete answer to this question would be virtually a cultural history of the United States, but I think that the basic reasons for the "repeated failures of mind, ethics and dignity" can be suggested by summary mention of five developments that belong largely or entirely to our own century.

I. Although education and training were sharply distinguished in the Western world from the time of the Renaissance, the distinction has been almost obliterated in American colleges. The traditional conception of education was that it was *liberal*, i.e. suited to free men. Its aim was to produce cultivated gentlemen and intelligent citizens, not to teach a trade or profession by which a man could earn a living. This education included mathematics and natural science, but its principal emphasis was literary and historical, and the greatest amount of time was devoted to the attainment of proficiency in reading *and writing* Latin and Greek. This concentration on the learned languages was believed to be justified by many considerations, including (1) the most important competence that any man can acquire—must acquire, if he is to be an intelligent member of a free society—is mastery of all the processes of language, including all the devices of logic, rhetoric, and poetry; (2) the history of the ancient world, particularly of the Athenian democracy and the Roman republic, including their final failures, are the world's most impressive lessons in the problems of society and hence most likely to impart to young men, so far as that can be done by education at all, a certain wisdom and maturity; and (3) the classical literature, free from both the grotesque eccentricities of the Baroque (e.g. Rabelais, Cervantes, Shakespeare) and the wild irrationality of Romanticism, combines a restrained beauty

with sober consideration of all the fundamental ethical problems of mankind. It was further believed that the very severity of the discipline thus imposed on the pupil would develop both intellectual *and moral* powers that would make the educated man superior to the uneducated in *all* the walks of life.

The validity of these claims need not be discussed here, but we may note that the historian of the classical tradition, Mr. R. R. Bolgar, believes that all the many objections urged against it can be reduced to one: "classical training inculcates a view of life which respects individual responsibility and the individual integration of human experience." And the distinguished economist, Mr. Ludwig von Mises, says bluntly that "The passionate endeavors to eliminate the classical studies from the curriculum of the liberal education and thus virtually to destroy its very character were one of the major manifestations of the revival of the servile ideology."

II. This tradition, though earlier attacked, was first effectively breached in the years following 1884 by the establishment and gradual extension of the "elective system" in Harvard College. The result has been the conversion of colleges into collections of rival shops engaged in furious competition among themselves. There was frantic proliferation of courses of all kinds, first in the natural sciences and foreign languages, then in English and the so-called social sciences, next in training for trades, such as accountancy and journalism, and finally in such unabashed frivolity as basket-weaving and hair-dressing. Since in most institutions the size and hence the standing of a department depends on its enrollment, each department is under strong pressure to sell its wares as cheaply as possible. Those which can promise their "majors" immediate employment at high salaries can usually maintain standards, but the "humanities," except to the extent that they may be protected by college requirements that may be changed from year to year, are more and more

driven to substitute entertainment for instruction. Conditions vary greatly from institution to institution, but the demoralizing effects of departmental competition for business are almost universal. In some low-grade colleges the classics have completely disappeared; in others, the lone survivor tries some shyster's method of "hot Latin," just as the incurably sick often listen eagerly to the promises of any quack. In the modern languages Molière and Goethe are being replaced by idle conversation, and English literature is more and more regarded as a harmless amusement for those co-eds who are interested only in marriage.

III. It is a biological fact that parasites, if not checked, multiply until they destroy their host. The process by which bureaucrats multiply in government has been paralleled in the colleges. The ever-growing swarm of directors, counsellors, advertising experts, and statisticians instinctively seek to build larger nests, and, except where enrollments are strictly limited, strive to abolish the few remaining standards in order to expand the market for diplomas. They instinctively see in every undergraduate an infant who needs a nurse, and in every teacher a hired hand who needs a supervisor.

IV. The old faiths, both religious and cultural, on which the colleges were originally founded have to a large extent been replaced by Pragmatism. This is not the place to discuss this doctrine's superficial resemblance to the methods of empirical science, nor to analyze its endless double-talk about "democracy" and "social good." The central idea that lies concealed behind the fog of verbal incoherence in which John Dewey loses his less wary readers and perhaps himself is neither complex nor novel. It may have been formulated, as it certainly has been practiced, by cut-purses and cut-throats since the dawn of history. By denying the concept of truth, Pragmatism necessarily denies the possibility of moral values. With the abolition of right and wrong, man can consult only

his appetites and his calculations of expediency. The only test of an action is whether "it works." Logically a Pragmatist must condemn himself for a foolish weakness if he refuses, for example, to grind up his grandmother and sell her for hamburger in circumstances in which it is certain that he could get away with it and either realize a profit or have fun in the process. For anyone who carries Pragmatism to its logical conclusion, the criminal mentality is the *only* form of rationality.

There are less spectacular, though not less baneful, applications of the doctrine to daily life. When the practicing Pragmatist expounds an argument, his words are merely the cover for his purposes. They are the flag hoisted by the pirate while stalking or approaching his victim. Where there is no truth there can be no rational debate, and the function of speech is to befuddle the gullible. And when the disinterested pursuit of truth is recognized as the Quixotic pursuit of an illusion, colleges must become hunting grounds for petty scoundrels.

V. The academic world has been treated to a most impressive demonstration that Pragmatism does work. Every college teacher now works in the shadow of a vastly successful "college" of "education." How completely the horde of "educators" has captured the public schools and converted them into machines for destroying mind and character, has been amply described by Professor Arthur Bestor in his *Educational Wastelands* and *The Restoration of Learning*. But even more demoralizing to the colleges than the annual influx of mental cripples has been the prodigious success of this gigantic hoax. Even when the very many "educators" stowed away in the numerous institutes, "research" appointments, and administrative positions are excluded, the number of professors of "education" in American colleges is about four times the number of professors of mathematics. In some places the proportions become spectacular. The University of Southern California in a recent summer

session had on its faculty two professors of physics, two professors of chemistry, and *ninety-seven* professors of "education." The academician who looks over his wall at this flourishing forest of green bay trees can have no doubts: Pragmatism works!

The inevitable result of the five processes that I have mentioned has been a general collapse of ethical standards. The groves of Academe have been invaded by brigands. Mr. Norbert Wiener in his recent autobiography, *I am a Mathematician*, has recorded the dismay which he and his colleagues felt when they encountered the new breed of freebooters in science:

We all knew that the scientist had his vices. There were those among us who were pedants; there were those who drank; there were those who were over-ambitious for their reputations; but in the normal course of events we did not expect to meet in our world men who lied or men who intrigued.

Wiener complains of the "general breakdown of the decencies in science," but his observation is at least equally applicable to the whole academic world. Practicing Pragmatists out for loot have made their appearance in every field, and even in the oldest of the humanistic disciplines a scholar may now be forced to recognize with shock and pain that a cloak of routine learning or of zeal for "creative teaching" may cover the soul of a pick-pocket.

So much for the causes of the "repeated failures of mind, ethics and dignity" reported by Messrs. Caplow and McGee—causes of which they show not even the slightest awareness. The shocked reader of their book must look elsewhere if he is to discover that their report is fragmentary and partial.

As perusal of a learned journal in any serious discipline will adequately prove, the academic world also contains scholars who, at least in the narrow area of some highly specialized research, are devoting their energies and their lives to the dis-

interested pursuit of truth. The standards *and the ethics* of scholarship have thus far survived the disintegrating forces of our time; they are the residuum of health and vitality in the academic organism. So long as the belief in intellectual integrity persists, there is a citadel that has not fallen. But the citadel must be defended. It has become necessary for everyone seriously engaged in the pursuit of objective truth to realize that, however absorbing his research may be, he will have to take time out to defend his faith in the principles of science and learning. Neither he nor his work can survive an application of the dogma, now enunciated by some "educators" and "social engineers" and tacitly accepted by their numerous allies, that "the only truth is social truth" and that "social truth is what it is expedient for [the thugs who capture] a society to tell its members." Every man who seeks by research to ascertain objectively the facts of natural phenomena or of history implicitly repudiates that dogma; the time has come for him explicitly to say so.

Another exposé of the academic world, different in its purpose but even more drastic in its results, was financed by the Fund for the Republic and sponsored by Columbia's Bureau of Applied Social Research. *The Academic Mind*², by Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Wagner Thielens, Jr., is (of course!) based on a questionnaire, but although the statistics may be accurate, the critical reader will from the first suspect manipulation. The academic mind is represented exclusively by "social scientists," including historians and geographers, but strangely excluding all but a few psychologists. Although the authors once suggest "possible differences" between this group and teachers in other fields, they usually imply that they are describing "the professorial mind" in general.

The authors' purpose is disclosed by the scarcely subtle slanting of the statements that are embedded in ostentatious displays of formal objectivity. We are assured that the *Nation*, *New Republic*, and *Reporter*

are all "moderately left-of-center," but the editor of an unnamed conservative periodical, W. K. [sic] Buckley, represents a "rather extreme stand." Fear of Communism is blandly explained by reference to "general hysteria" and the prosecution of witches in Salem in the 1690's.

Equally revealing is the elaborate system of jargon used to avoid clear distinctions. Colleges, for example, are divided into the "traditional" and the "secular." The former, which include teachers' colleges, are relicts which remain "wedded to the earlier function of improving the educational level of the population at large [sic]" because they have not yet "evolved into the fully secular type." The characteristic of "secular" colleges is that they "see their main task as the training of students who will later perform specific intellectual functions either in the professions or in specialized managerial roles throughout the community." Perhaps you will find some clue to what all this means when you learn that "in the 1952 campaign . . . Eisenhower stressed more traditional and Stevenson more secular values."

The neatest trick, however, appears in the classification on which the whole book is based. When the authors tell us that some professors are "conservative," they mean politically conservative, but the opposite of "conservative" is not "radical" or "liberal"—it is "permissive."

The statistics show that 14% of college teachers are "clearly conservative," but by cumulative hints and comments it is made clear that they are a rather dull lot and hopelessly out-of-date. Indeed, we are finally assured that "scholarly accomplishment . . . is not . . . consonant with the intellectual mood of the conservative." And we may wonder whether such fellows have any business in the academic world at all, for the authors quote with approval Carl Becker's pronouncement that the old-fashioned scholar, who sought to preserve the cultural tradition, has been replaced by the "new class of learned men . . . whose function is . . . to undermine rather than

stabilize custom and social authority."

"Permissives," on the other hand, are obviously the élite of the academic world. They form "the most distinguished and representative sector of the professorate," and therefore, "the better a college, the more of its social scientists are permissive." In fact, "it is the function of the social scientist . . . to be permissive" because only thus "his way of thinking is in harmony with the tasks entrusted to him."

Now, if you look closely, you will find that "permissives" are people who approve of two things, viz. Communist teachers in faculties, and Young Communist Leagues in the student body. Although the authors report that 72% of college teachers are basically "permissive," many of them were either timorous or confused, so that only an élite of 48% were sure that Communist activity on the campus is a Good Thing.

Professors Lazarsfeld and Thielens most solemnly assure us that an eagerness to see Communists at work in the universities is not a proof of sympathy with Communism. Perhaps so, but they could have made the point more convincing had they thought of ascertaining how many of the "permissives" would permit anti-Communists on the campus, if the decision were left entirely to them. And only the most inattentive reader will fail to see that they have ignored the really interesting question: how many of the teachers they interviewed *are* Communists? And how many of those who are not actually members of either the official or the underground party are, through either stupidity or opportunism, collaborating with the conspirators?

In 1953 Dr. J. B. Matthews estimated that the Communists had by that time "enlisted the support of at least 3500 professors," and it is no secret that powerful cells exist in most major and many minor institutions. The membership of these cells may be uncertain, but their power may be estimated from the terror they inspire—the kind of terror that may be inspired by any gang of ruthless criminals. At least

two highly placed administrative officers, admittedly from fear of vendettas, will discuss Communist activities on their respective campuses only in strict confidence behind closed doors. But we may ignore this point.

The important point is that it is no longer possible for a moderately well-informed person to mistake the nature of Communism. In the 1920's it was still possible for apple-cheeked freshmen to regard Communism as a delightful naughtiness, as appealing as Satanism had been at the *fin du siècle*; it was a dramatic pose that compelled attention, but was inherently safe since obviously nothing would really come of it in a civilized country. By this time volume after volume of sworn testimony before congressional committees has placed the imminence and the nature of the danger to the United States beyond all doubt, and although these reports are usually ignored or only vaguely mentioned in the newspapers, "social scientists" have a professional duty to inform themselves on such matters. Communism is a criminal conspiracy actively engaged in preparations for a *coup d'état* in the United States on the pattern of its successful operations in other countries, and its present strength has been estimated by the Chairman of the Committee on Un-American Activities as "the equivalent of some twenty combat divisions of enemy troops on American soil." No one doubts that the Communists plan systematically to torture and massacre all whom they regard as real or potential opponents. And the really frightening thing is that 48% of the "social scientists"—if Messrs. Lazarsfeld and Thielens are to be believed—think that this criminal conspiracy should be promoted in colleges and universities. This view, regardless of the proportions in which it may be based on ignorance, doctrinaire bigotry, pragmatic opportunism, and complicity in the conspiracy, is proof of an appalling moral collapse.

It should be obvious to the academic community, as it will be obvious to all

conservative readers of the book, that Americans are being offered a choice between national suicide and some drastic reform in the colleges and universities. And while the Liberals may shriek that the alternative to suicide is "unthinkable," it is hazardous to assume that an alarmed people could not think of it.

The Communists and all their allies take refuge behind the principle of "academic freedom," which is the proudest and most cherished prerogative of the academic profession—which is universally an ideal and to a considerable extent an acknowledged reality in major institutions (except for the clandestine infringements of it that self-righteous "Liberals" sometimes permit themselves). Now the American conservatives who would solve the problem by simply revoking the principle and granting powers of censorship to a board of trustees or a state commission are committing, it seems to me, both a tactical error, since the proposal will alarm many of the most conservative teachers, and a philosophical blunder, since they seem to deny the scholar's ethical duty to state the truth as he sees it. But there is much less excuse for academicians who think it either proper or feasible to contend that their profession absolves them of ethical responsibility to the nation in which they live and the culture that they represent.

It would be well for everyone concerned with the question to remember two simple historical facts.

The principle of academic freedom, which gave the scholar the right to speak the truth as he saw it, came into being at a time when all university men shared a common culture and were the products of an education that was antecedent to all specialized or technical training. The principle was therefore based on the assumption that there was a common ethos and an acceptance of standards of right and wrong inherent in the Classical and Christian traditions and confirmed by the long experience of the Occidental world. Men assumed that it was the function of the

learned man to preserve and refine the Western tradition, not to undermine it.

The principle of academic freedom was conceived at a time when the recognized disciplines from astronomy to zoölogy did not profess to teach a science of government or claim the right to change the social order. Now no one has ever proposed to extend the principle to matters of faith. No one has ever suggested that Christians, who must as an article of faith believe that Christ was the Son of God, have an academic right to train Jewish rabbis, who must as an article of faith believe that Christ was either an impostor or a myth. No one has contended that Jesuit priests should be taught theology by Lutheran ministers.

Both history and observation assure us that a society exists only by virtue of a common faith in certain ethical principles that are, at least in their origin, religious. They are no more susceptible of *scientific* demonstration than the proposition that a man is a nobler organism than an amoeba.

(Scientifically man is more complex, the amoeba, simpler, but neither complexity nor simplicity has value in itself.) "Thou shalt not steal" may be the command of a deity or, at least for a certain fraction of the population, the dictate of personal honor, but so long as the injunction represents the common faith of a society, a cohesive association of free men is possible. The Pragmatist's revision of this dictum, "thou shalt not steal when there is a chance of being caught," can produce only a horde of brutalized slaves terrorized by master criminals.

If America can regain, both morally and intellectually, the bond of faith in the Occidental tradition, it can live and resist, with some hope of success, its foreign enemies. If it does not, its colleges and universities will have exactly the importance of the brain in the corpse of a suicide. And the sooner that academicians realize this, the better.

¹Basic Books, \$4.95.

²Free Press, \$7.50.