

The State of the Academy and the Hope for the Future

Herbert I. London

This paper is divided into two distinct themes which in themselves mimic Jacques Maritain's belief in degeneration and revitalization. In the traditional vision, the university perpetuated the idea of Western civilization in two separate but related ways. First, it imparted a sense of intellectual method which rejected dogmatic, orthodox, and conspiratorial formulations in favor of a broad-minded empiricism and a regard for the world's complexity. Second, it conveyed an underlying appreciation for the values of free society's respect for the individual and for the ideals of personal liberty and constitutional democracy which emanated from it. As a result, the university experience had a dual character, in part a process of intellectual training and in part a process of socialization.

This view of the academy, however, is alien to the spirit of what aspires to become the new, activist vision, protected by the same institution of tenure and academic freedom as the traditional version, yet fundamentally at odds with it methodologically and substantively. Armed with a variety of totalistic visions and millennial expectations, its partisans have little sympathy for open discourse or analytic procedures that fail to guarantee desired conclusions. As Howard Zinn, erstwhile professor of history at Boston University, once put it, "In a world where justice is maldistributed, there is no such thing as "neutral" or representative recapitulation of the facts." In such a view, objective truth is only what the present dictates or the future requires.

The organizing principle of the new scholarship inheres in its purpose rather than in its methods or theories. And its purpose is unremitting attack on cultural institutions, as well as political and economic institutions. This is a scholarship which sets out to prove what is already known—in short, the direct antithesis of what scholarship is.

30 HERBERT LONDON

Yet the ally in this systematic campaign to "capture the culture" (to borrow a phrase from Antonio Gramsci) is tenure and academic freedom. The classroom is now frequently employed as the setting for ethnic and class antagonism. Until recently the university served as an important means of assimilating the upwardly mobile and integrating future leaders of American society. A significant portion of the professorate now strives to do the reverse, fostering political estrangement and cultural segmentation. Tenure and academic freedom in the febrile minds of would-be revolutionaries have been transformed from institutions that militate against external pressure and manipulation into institutions that promote them.

The agitation organized by students during the overheated period from 1967 to 1973 was prompted, in my judgment, by rootlessness. The combination of war, the draft, a desire for social experimentation, spiraling divorce rates, promoted activism instead of thought, problem-solving instead of evidence gathering, doing instead of reflecting. The university as a center of learning was converted into the Paris Commune.

As I look back to that period, the high-school education that students received did not help matters. It was an era of curriculum experimentation producing a generation out of touch with basic cultural cues and unfamiliar with even the rudimentary facts about government and history. As Chester Finn Jr. and Diane Ravitch have pointed out in *What Do Seventeen Year Olds Know?* the answer, after much testing, is not very much. Thrust into a college setting, in thrall to a utopian vision, these naive seventeen-year-olds, who do not know that the American Revolution came before the French Revolution, turned into right-thinking revolutionaries. Rather than arriving at opinion through a process of learning, reasoning and concluding, these products of American high schools made judgments *parti pris*, as if they were in the air they breathed or the coaxial cable that brought them visual images.

The prototypical student radical of the late sixties has been replaced by a different, complacent prototype today, albeit rootlessness is a feature common to both generations. In the past, rootlessness manifested itself as rebellion, now it is manifest as a search for orthodoxy, whether that takes the form of symbols, deconstruction or the emergence of an obsession with Third World authors. Students, as befits their age and idealism, have been in search of facile answers to complex questions, but it is—or should I say was—the responsibility of faculty members to lead them to a path which truth is sought rather than slogans.

It is, of course, customary for university presidents to proclaim that graduates are being prepared to face the demands of modern life. Yet the

meaning of these words "prepare for life" is ambiguous. Recently a colleague tried to address this problem by proposing that students should learn problem-solving techniques as undergraduates. When pressed, he had to admit that problem-solving without knowledge was impossible. On another occasion I heard a distinguished scholar refer to the need for student "experience." Again the claim had a spurious ring to it. If experience is the essence of education, then my grandfather quite obviously deserved a Ph.D. in experience.

Professor Jacques Barzun advances the notion of *preposterism* to make the point that since knowledge is valuable, every intending college teacher shall produce research. The resultant knowledge explosion has had its fallout in every sector of society. There is more published to little purpose than was ever the case before. And the more that is published, the less we understand about our nation, our individual roles, our principles, our beliefs, and ourselves. So much of this so-called research is produced at the expense of teaching. Professor Barzun contends that the best liberal arts colleges have "a strong grip on solid subject matter and trust to its broadening, deepening and thickening effect." If this claim was once true, it is most certainly less true now. Universities compete for scholars judged mainly by reputation. Despite lip service given to teaching, it is much less valued than research, as both the allocation of chairs and salary determination amply show.

The explosion of research has also trivialized the curriculum through the proliferation of courses which pay obeisance to what is fashionable; one critic of higher education refers to the course guidebook as the "Chinese menu for dilettantes." What the extensive listing of courses actually represents is the abdication of faculty responsibility. In an atmosphere in which the purpose of higher education has been obscured by a reformist agenda and the curriculum has been turned into a battleground for departmental scrimmage, the number of courses grows in proportion to designated self-interest and the effort to accommodate "new" disciplines. The by-product of this change is an undergraduate program often devoid of commitment to teaching and often lacking an coherent purpose.

The ambiguity in the curriculum of most colleges is deeply embedded in the general ambiguity of what a university should be. There are two oft repeated contradictory messages in higher education: this is a public institution capable of participating in the affairs of state (At New York University we say "a private university in the public service"), and this is an elite institution, an ivory tower, if you will, whose majesty should not be compromised by the affairs of state. Retaining the dignity of the university, specif-

ically its devotion to research, is increasingly difficult when the desire to merge and blur all roles and all purposes dominates university life.

It is instructive, I believe, that as demands are imposed on universities which they cannot fulfill and do not resist, the rhetoric associated with higher education has changed. Literature describing the institution invariably refers to saving neighborhoods and even saving nations, having world-class athletic programs and world-class laboratories; rarely do these descriptions mention the value of simple exchange between mentor and student that may inspire a thirst for knowledge, that may enrich the soul.

A. N. Whitehead maintains in *Science and the Modern World* that the twentieth-century research university is constructed according to principles of seventeenth-century physics. He argues that the revolutionary physics of our century, with its reconceiving self and world and its integration of fields of study, came too late to be incorporated into a Newtonian structure of mechanical parts separated by function. The "new" university is in fact old at heart, fracturing science and the humanities and reducing truth, goodness and beauty to mere expressions of subjective judgment. Moral virtue, which was an essential component of education before the Enlightenment, has been relegated to the archaic as professional and technical study are in the ascendancy.

William James's discussion of this "scientific nightmare" did not deter the evolution of the modern university, nor did the emergence of revolutionary ideas in physics and philosophy that defy narrow disciplinary boundaries. These ideas offered a conception of an integrated world of freedom, responsibility, and moral vitality. But the university was already well on its way to a Cartesian world of departments and bureaucracy. Although I may be daydreaming, I'm persuaded that many people outside the academy believe that the university has failed to address the common concern for meaning, for the humane and for the ethical.

In the present form of the university each department guards jealously a domain of expert knowledge, a subject-matter base underwritten by professional associations. Hence, will-nilly, the university has become a gatekeeper for professional power and academic identity. The combination of narrowly defined areas of interest combined with the pathology of the late sixties and beyond has produced courses that verge on the absurd, such as "Clitoral Hermeneutics" which I saw listed under Feminist Studies at a west coast college. Moreover, as technology is increasingly focused and as professionals are increasingly specialized, judgments about the world that emerge from the study of disciplines are construed solely in technical terms, often imperiling a sense of broadly defined human significance, the

common *humanities* that inspired the liberal arts in the first place. Of course in some instances, the "new" disciplines such as semiotics challenge human significance.

It is hardly surprising that a new breed of humanities professor has similarly relegated all subject-matter to the realm of ideology, on the principle that truth is transitory. Universals are repudiated by this new-age professor, nurtured by an environment that is narrowly specialized. Professionalizing the humanities should be seen as an essential contradiction. It is worth recalling in this context the subtitle of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind. It is How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students.*

The failure of the modern university is, in my opinion, its unwillingness to consider "holistic" thinking that cuts across disciplinary barriers and the trivialization of knowledge with courses that foster a political ideology. To conceive of a mind separate from a body is to misunderstand the interdependence of all the elements within the self. At the same time, an obsessive concern with the self, with the ego's interests, has converted much learning into the pursuit of "I." I have lost patience with colleagues who start every discussion with the words, "How do you feel about . . . ?" The question is ultimately foolish unless clearly related to a reasoned conception of life.

When Wittgenstein engaged Freud in a conversation about psychotherapy, the would-be master of the mind replied that through protracted and undirected talk one can ultimately decipher the mystery of the unconscious. Wittgenstein, however, remained unpersuaded. "Sigmund," he reportedly said, "the reason I believe your assumption is wrong is that talk without limit or purpose ends in futility." It seems to me that Wittgenstein was not only making a point about psychotherapy, but also about education. Pedagogy demands limits and purpose. We cannot study everything or know anything without some idea of what is to be learned.

With cynicism about higher education increasing at a rate slower only than the increase in tuition, it is time to consider the end of the university as we have known it. I should hastily note that I do not welcome this outcome; my observation is little more than a logical extrapolation from what I have seen and experienced in the last quarter of a century.

In her book *The Case Against College*, Caroline Bird maintains that in calculating the costs and benefits of a college education, middle-class parents should not automatically rule in favor of college for their children. Whether a degree provides the economic rewards widely promised relative to the investment is, however, less significant than the fact that the university is a likely casualty in a changing climate of opinion.

How will the university change? Although presently impervious to market conditions because of regulations, retrenchment of public funds for public institutions and student aid will lead inexorably to new ways of delivering education. The Internet is in fact a potential worldwide university. Parents are already rebelling at the expenditure of \$30,000 for an education in what Veblen once called "trained incapacity." Conceive of middle class folks who scrimp and save to send Mary or Johnny to a prestigious college where students learn to speak a form of psychobabble, do not understand the polity in which they reside and call their folks bourgeois pigs. Consider the search for orthodoxy that has emerged *pari passu* with the rootlessness of the young. And consider as well a spiritual awakening, and the contours of a "new" university became apparent.

Higher education will change, and from the point of view of someone who has observed standards vitiated in the zeitgeist, the change cannot come soon enough.