

Academic Freedom: The Student Version

by

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*Student participation in senior committees of the university, only now beginning, may bring a more youthful approach to university affairs, a new willingness to experiment and take chances. On the negative side, student activists' naive attachment to an anti-intellectual, authoritarian point of view and their acceptance of violence may have grim consequences.**

ACADEMIC freedom, like most ideas and issues within the university, has traditionally been seen in the context of the teaching staff. An obvious result of the present student discontent has been to fasten attention upon the student and to give to both the academic community and the public at large an awareness of the identity and the cohesiveness of the student body. The awakening to a sense of student strength and purpose did not come easily in North American society. Student society was, as Richard Poirer has pointed out,¹ the classic contemporary example of the perpetuation of the pastoral myth: student life was pleasant and innocuous, cut off from history and a sense of responsibility. Society as a whole approved of the myth: it conveniently removed students as a source of real concern, turned their occasional eruptions into alegal pranks, and provided a substantial basis for light satire. The pastoral myth also reinforced the contrast between the unreal world of the university and the real world outside, and students were thereby encouraged to look outside for their ultimate goal. The pastoral concept of the student life was reinforced

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by its imaginative treatment in fiction. Undergraduate life was a subject either for comic treatment or for the pastoral idyll this side of paradise. Recent fiction, however, — in such a book as Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe* — warned that the academic Eden was swarming with serpents; and we can expect a whole succession of sombre novels about the conflict on the campus. Now the North American student has joined the European as a political figure of portentous significance, who can confound the authorities and shake governments. Indeed, the scope of the North American student is greater than that of his European counterpart, and his impact profounder. Since, in Europe, universities are largely wards of the state, student revolts have been directed against the government. In the United States and Canada where we emphasize the autonomy of the individual institution and the virtue of diversity, student protest against government policy is only one element, and often an oblique one; more important is the structure of a particular institution, or a general feeling of moral malaise.

How widespread is student discontent and how important is it? On returning to the classroom last year, I felt as if nothing had changed since I had last taught twelve years ago — the assumed and accepted authority of the teacher, the student mood of sceptical deference, the mild flurry about exams and essays, an occasional sign of intellectual awakening, a mingled sense of relief and accomplishment as the teaching year moved to an end. All this was far removed from the dogged jargon of the undergraduate newspaper, the unnegotiable demands and confrontations, the sit-ins, and the riots, which engage the attentions of administrators and the mass media. Why not ignore these as the unusually turbid froth on an unresting sea? One reason for not ignoring them, particularly for those who work in a university in a large urban centre, is that the media won't let you. Here are the Westerns of the intellectual world where university administrators appear daily as tough sheriffs, shabby remittance men, or crafty government agents.

But one must be careful not to think that such reflections constitute an explanation. The mass media have hit upon a good script; it is also an important script. It is not a question of numbers; the number of

committed students on any campus — and by committed I mean those who have political and social convictions and are prepared to act upon them — has always been small. But they are more visible to-day because, in the large multiversity, they have reached a “critical mass”; and compared to their predecessors — say the student radicals of the thirties, — they are much more concerned about the university itself. Even among the small group of the committed, there are divisions. Along with a great many others, I have tried to make one principal distinction:

Among students deeply concerned with the role and the future of the University, there are two recognizable groups. One is small, made up of fanatically committed members, and, therefore, powerful far beyond its numbers. In the United States its hard core is an organization called The Students for a Democratic Society. They draw upon a literature that is philosophically elaborate, but their actions are governed by four simple assumptions: western society is hopelessly corrupt; the university is part of that society and its principal apologist; the university must, therefore, be destroyed and refashioned; in the work of cleansing destruction, the ends justify the means. Let us call this group the extremists, or even the saboteurs. The second group, much larger than the first, although still a minority on the campus, believes that the university is central in our society, that it should be in the vanguard of reform, and that, accordingly, it should be governed in such a way as to reflect the opinions and wishes of those who are most closely identified with it. These students believe in open discussion, and, in the statement of their view, they are persistent, uncompromising, and immensely self-assured. Let us call this group the activists. Many of the young men and women who are elected to student governments belong to this group. They are well informed, intellectually adventurous, and idealistic. They are a main resource of the university. It is they — not the truncheons of the police — who can confound the extremists.²

I see no reason to modify this analysis. But one should not derive any solace from it. There are numerous bonds between the two groups, and, in a crisis, the bonds become tougher and tighter. The two groups might be described as the left and right wings of a party that, on an issue, will respond faithfully to party discipline. They represent an emotional, rather than an ideological division: — between those who

temperamentally resist action that may lead to violence and those who embrace such action as a means of bringing the issues to a flaming climax and thereby achieving their own self-fulfilment.

Another reason for the high visibility of the committed is that the uncommitted are invisible. They are generally opposed to those who desire radical change, but it is an opposition based on inertia, not on conviction. They are not likely to feel any strong identification with the University. If a crisis gains momentum, they are likely to swell the chorus of dissent — as the 100 or so members of the Students for a Democratic Society at Columbia became, by rapid accretion, a protesting body of several thousand. Uninvolved, they view the crisis with the comfortable relish with which people view a fire in a neighbour's house.

The minority of which we speak, then, is an important one, important both in itself and important for what it can do. A considerable body of literature exists now that describes in general terms the kind of student who becomes one of the committed. If we omit the few emotional and intellectual misfits and the hard core of mercenaries, we have an impressive group. Their academic home is usually the social sciences, particularly Political Science and Sociology. In Canada where the overt political issues have not been as strong as in the United States, there is a fair sprinkling of philosophers and theologians, the latter stemming from the post-war movement to relate higher education and Christianity. The leaders are generally academically gifted, with more than average powers in the manipulation and expression of abstract ideas. They come from comfortable middle-class homes with a professional background. They have been in a position to follow a number of options, and their decision to join the committed has been careful and deliberate. They are not, so Keniston discovered,¹ conspicuously in revolt against their families; indeed, they usually come from permissive, liberally-inclined families that have fostered an atmosphere of idealism and utopianism. The pessimistic nihilism widespread a few years ago among youth is certainly not dominant. There is a general feeling that time has not yet run out and that great revolutionary changes may yet capture the future for mankind.

The power of the committed is best seen in changes that have taken place in the intellectual climate of the university; and I propose now to look at the concept of academic freedom in the new context. Academic freedom has, for many decades now, been the watchword of the academic community. To say of a given action or comment that it was a threat to academic freedom was to damn it utterly. Traditionally the concept of academic freedom has been expressed exclusively in terms of the faculty. A member of the faculty, so the faith has it, must have freedom to express himself without fear of constraint; otherwise he cannot function as a university teacher. A faculty member's freedom automatically generates an atmosphere of freedom within the university, it which the whole community shares. It is true that in the German universities of the nineteenth century, from which the doctrine emerged in its most precise form, there was both a faculty and student version. *Lehrfreiheit* was the faculty emphasis, the freedom to search all the evidence, and then to report on it in public lectures. *Lernfreiheit* was the student emphasis, and it meant the freedom of the student to move from university to university, to be free of any obligation to attend lectures, to choose his own sequence of courses, to be exempt from all tests save the final examination, and to live in private quarters and control his private life.⁴ But these were not freedoms designed to give the student a special and distinctive autonomy. His mobility, his freedom from residence rules and classroom routine was a mark of scholarly maturity, of his right to work closely with the faculty in the expansion of knowledge. The student's freedom was a password to the ivory tower where he could help his master keep the pure light of scholarship burning.

The concept of academic freedom as it developed in the United States and Canada had Victorian roots. Mill's emphasis on the role of the eccentric genius, the unorthodox thinker who deviates from the commonplace, lies behind a good deal of theorizing on academic freedom. Thus, the professor could be seen as a gifted eccentric, perhaps with a slight suggestion of the licensed fool, to whom from time to time flashes of insight came. Then with the growth of specialization and the triumph of the scientific method in all areas of human knowledge, the

doctrine of freedom developed a much more substantial basis. The professor was the man who knew; to inhibit him was, therefore, to stultify progress. In recent years, the doctrine has lost much of its triumphant and aggressive quality. The tendency has been to emphasize the responsibility of freedom and to relate it to economic security. The emphasis on responsibility tended to restrict professional comment to matters of professional expertise, and, in a world of increasing specialization, this became more and more restricted. The guarantee of economic security — what is known as tenure — was designed to encourage freedom of expression; but it rarely had that effect. Rather it tended to encourage professional caution. Still, despite the decline in crusading urgency, the concept of academic freedom is basic to the functioning of the university. It is presumably of less significance in the Sciences, where heterodox ideas are not likely to arouse popular indignation. But in the Social Sciences, where theory may have an immediate effect on the lives of all of us, it is an indispensable bulwark. The concept, it should be observed, operates only in the area of ideas and opinions: the university would tolerate a professor who espouses and expounds fascist doctrines, but would presumably be less tolerant of a professor who devotes himself to organizing a party to implement his ideas.

Lernfreiheit is no longer relevant, except possibly for a small group of students in the graduate school. The student is not interested in mobility: although he may be fiercely critical of an institution, he still clings to it, if only as a convenient object for invective. He is concerned about freedom of speech — particularly his freedom to listen to whoever may appear on the campus. Behind the Berkeley uprising lay a long history of oppressive legislation, which sought to keep “controversial” speakers from the campus, so widely interpreted that it included Adlai Stevenson. Increasingly freedom for the student — whether committed or not — means his power to make decisions about his environment and to be protected against institutional coercion and injustice. He repudiates the *in loco parentis* theory of the function of the institution. In disciplinary matters he is concerned about proper legal procedures, and about drawing a distinction between offences

as a citizen and as a student. All this is defensive. But the committed student seeks to give a more positive content to freedom. Freedom is the right and the power to make the decisions that shape one's environment. When the Students for a Democratic Society held its inaugural meeting in 1962, it presented the following statement of its essential purpose: "We seek the establishment of a democracy of individual participation with two central aims: that the individuals share in those social decisions determining the quality and direction of his life, and that society be organized to encourage independence in men and to provide the media for their common participation." The end of freedom, then, is not the attainment of some ultimate truth, but an experience that is valid and immediately relevant. The mind is not fastened on ultimate solutions, but on the resolution of immediate problems. Time does not stretch out endlessly, as it does in the traditional concept of freedom, but is sharply constricted. One cannot afford, then, a relaxed attitude towards error and obstruction.

Freedom becomes possible only in a society of equals. If any special privileges are attached to status or to seniority in years, it is impossible for the individual to order his own life in accordance with his individual decisions. He fights against hierarchy in the university, whether it is the superior position of the professor in the classroom or the deference accorded to the administrator. He also fights against evaluation of one person by another, since this is demeaning and prevents the free development of the individual.

There are at least two aspects of the committed student's concept of freedom that bring it into sharp contrast, and at times, conflict, with the traditional concept. First, the impediments to freedom are not primarily outside; they are inside, in the institution itself. The savagery of the committed student comes as a violent shock to those for whom the university is still alma mater. I recall my amazement, on returning to Toronto after a year away, to find that a mean little diatribe called "The Student as Nigger" had become a standard piece of protest literature. It did not occur to the students that their attitude towards the piece was a combination of colonialism and social hypocrisy, for they were arguing that the culture of an obscure junior college in

California was similar to that of, say Queen's or Dalhousie, and that the economic position of middle-class students in Canada could be equated with that of the depressed American negro. The second contrast, which well may become a conflict, is in the attitude to the relationship of staff and student. The traditional concept is staff centred. It is concerned about the defence of the staff against outside interference, and this interference is most serious when it is a question of staff appointments. These must be in the hands of the staff itself; a teacher must be chosen and promoted by his peers. Now the committed student is saying that this may lead to professional tyranny, with the student as the principal victim. The remedy is to give the student a major voice in appointments and promotions. But this, says the faculty, would destroy the freedom of the teacher in the classroom. He would owe his allegiance not to his discipline, but to the fluctuations of student fashion. I doubt whether there will be any easy reconciliation between these two concepts of freedom.

How shall we estimate the impact of the committed student on the university, and what will it mean for those liberal values, of which academic freedom is the chief, upon which the university has been based? There are some positive factors. There are others which, it seems to me, are mistaken and even threatening. Both the positive and the negative factors have a far wider significance than the context in which they appear. A number of commentators have pointed out that the student today is more than ever a forerunner of developments in society and that what he is doing and thinking may well anticipate what will be done and thought in the wider society. Comments about the generation gap and about the effect of permissive upbringing, no matter how elaborately clothed in sociological language, cannot explain away the phenomenon of the committed student's activities, though they may help us to understand something of its quality and style.

We can begin with the self-evident proposition that the rise of student power means a more youthful approach in university affairs. Universities have always had, as I suggested earlier, a youthful emphasis, but it was peripheral and decorative, at its symbolic best at the football game where middle-aged graduates in the stands ap-

plauded the agile young men on the field and the nubile maidens on the sidelines. Tolerance, if not enthusiasm, was extended to the less formalized antics of the young. On the campus even vandalism could take on a cheerful romantic quality. But at the heart of the university age took over. The graduate system of preparation for teaching guaranteed that the scholar would finally arrive on the campus with a sobering sense of a long and demanding past. Wisdom, it was assumed, grew with the years, and promotion was a product of time. This pattern has been broken in the Sciences and Mathematics; there graduate students often complete their work at an early age and then go on to major work at a time when their opposite numbers in the Humanities and Social Sciences are still immersed in basic courses in English Composition or Logic. The administrative world, despite the bad estate in which it is generally held, has been progressive, and age has not been counted a necessary virtue. Something of this spirit has spread to departmental organization, and in many universities "chairman" has taken the place of the old "head", which often means the substitution of a competent administrator of relatively junior years for a senior director determined to fashion the department in his own image.

It is too early yet to estimate the impact of the youthful outlook upon the administration and temper of the university. Students are only beginning to participate in some of the senior committees of the university. It is not unreasonable to suggest that they will bring a willingness to experiment, to take chances, which has not been notably evident so far in the histories of universities. I can think of two areas where my experience indicates that students will play an expanding and releasing role. One of these is in the area of the physical plant. They will be less enamoured of the repetitive design of the past, more sympathetic to innovation, which often arises out of the energies of the youthful architect. The other area is in the recognition and espousal of new curricular emphases. At the University of Toronto it was student agitation that finally led to the establishment in the latter part of the nineteenth century of a chair of Political Science in an institution that had been up until that time predominantly moralistic and

mathematical. One must remember that the youthful virtues are not always open and exuberant. Youth can be hard-headed and pragmatic, resourceful, and resoundingly ruthless. In the increasingly tough world that lies ahead for universities it will be good to have such resourceful and indefatigable allies, and weakening to have such resourceful and indefatigable enemies.

Having said these encouraging words about the role of youth in the universities, I would like to enter a strong caveat against its overromanticization. Professor Lewis Feuer has recently pointed out the dangers of generational relativism, whereby virtue is thought to inhere either in youth or in age.⁵ When the generation gap is particularly strong, as it is to-day, the conflict between youth and age is seen in much the same light as the Communist concept of the conflict between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Youth, like the proletariat, becomes the custodian of all truth. Magazines these days reverberate to the sounds of the clash between the generations. George Kennan's recent⁶ solemn lecture to impetuous youth inspired a whole series of replies from indignant students. Jacques Barzun's recent study of the American university is, as usual, a brilliant counter-attack on popular positions, one of which he believes, is the doctrine of the creativity of youth.⁷

If anything, the response on the other side has been more impassioned and considerably less cerebral. Consider this passage from Martin Duberman's "On Misunderstanding Student Rebels", which appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, November, 1968:

And as for experience I am not at all sure that the 18-year-old who has had his senses activated by early sexual relations, strobe lights, pot, soul, and rock, and his political instincts honed by Vietnam, the draft and the civil rights movement, should not be considered more vitally alive, more instinctually sound than the typical 40-year-old who has spent his additional 20 years glued to the tube, routinized job, the baseball and stock statistics . . . [He concludes his article with this rhapsody:] I doubt if we have ever had a generation, or at least a minority of one that has engaged itself so earnestly on the side of principal action, that has valued people so dearly and possessions so little, that cared enough about our country to jeopardize their own careers within it, that wanted

so desperately to lead open, honest lives and have institutions in society which would make such lives possible. (63-70)

The cult of youth, as these quotations indicate, finds a sympathetic response among those in their 40s and 50s. It may be that they have a guilty conscience as a result of growing up in the post war years of affluence, when ideals withered in the atmosphere of cold war. Certainly committed youth may find strong allies among members of the teaching staff who are not all under the statutory 30. Discussions in Faculty meetings these days divide on lines determined by one's sympathy towards, or revulsions against, the pretensions of youth.

A second positive factor that the strength of the student movement has brought is the awakening of an interest in the analysis of the university as an institution. On the whole, academics have shown an unusual capacity for failing to examine their own environment. They have taken it for granted as something intrinsically good, clearly superior to the world outside, which is devoted to material goals and harsh competition. The academic, no matter how badly paid, or systematically patronized, has always in his heart of hearts thought of himself as living in an élitist society that enshrines man's secret aversion to the struggle for material power. In this euphoric atmosphere the academic has rarely asked fundamental questions about his institution. In matters of the spirit, as in matters of finance, he has followed a policy of incremental budgeting, which involves simple yearly additions to assumptions he has never really questioned. Now fundamental questions about the institution are being asked by men and women who will not content themselves with easy answers. Most arguments rest upon prejudice and contingency. The committed student is himself committed to first principles and he is determined that others will either accept his or discover ones of their own.

I come, in conclusion, to an aspect of the youth movement in the universities that I find most dangerous. In brief it is the attachment, either conscious or unconscious, to an authoritarian point of view. This has some honourable causes. It is, to some extent, the outcome of moral idealism, the conviction that somehow or other human values, in the institution that is supposed to prize them most highly, have been

slighted. It comes from the delight in abstractions, in reducing every problem to a set of basic ideas. It comes from the reaction against the non-evaluative, value-free approach of the Social Sciences, against the triumphant paen to the death of ideology that characterized much analysis of society in the fifties. All of these factors — moral idealism, the delight in abstractions, the revolt against scientific relativism — bred a resolute dogmatism, a conviction of correctness that is reminiscent of the mood of the Chinese Revolution at its most puritan. The great antagonist becomes the liberal tradition, with its emphasis upon tolerance, its faith in rational discussion, its preference for gradual accommodation to revolutionary dislocation. The more successful the liberal, the more vitriolic the attacks upon him. He is the person who may effect a peaceful transition and thus snatch the delights and glories of revolution from the hands of the revolutionaries.

In this authoritarianism there are elements of both the naïve and of the grim. It is naïve because committed students see in the university an institution that can exist in a predatory world without any allies. Society, they say, is hopelessly corrupt and the ultimate institutional betrayal is the kind of university portrayed in Clark Kerr's *The Uses of a University*, which is convinced that it can work with business and government for its own and society's good. They are more tender towards government than towards business, possibly because of the conviction that in the fullness of time they will take over the government. In the meantime they are contemptuous of trying to provide a non-academic buffer between the university and the government. The university itself can, through a dynamic student body, preserve its own autonomy. Actually, however, there is little concern for the concept of institutional autonomy in the thought of the committed student. He is so immersed in creating his own little circle of freedom that he is oblivious to what happens to the institution. He knows his actions drive governments more and more towards direct control of the university, but he is indifferent to the danger. Indeed, he often seems to welcome it. Anything in the public domain is good or potentially good; anything in the private domain is bad and beyond repair.

The authoritarianism carries with it, sometimes covertly, a deep

anti-intellectualism. Committed youth is so concerned with his vision of a Utopian society — an amalgam of Paul Goodman, the Oxford group, and a caucus of his favourite political party — that he is suspicious of any disinterested emphasis on things of the mind. He is suspicious of such words as “intellectual” and “learning”, and he speaks of the goals of the university in terms of self-development and moral muscle. He is openly contemptuous of any scholarship system, even though he is often an élite beneficiary of the system, and he sees the University, not as an intellectual centre, but as a political cooperative, in which wisdom wells up from mass meetings of equals.

The grimmer side of the authoritarian emphasis comes out in the attitude towards violence — a coy flirtation that can swiftly become a passionate love affair. Lewis Feuer talks about the suicidal and parricidal elements in all youth movements, the acceptance of a philosophy of nihilism “because it is also a self-critique of society” and “because it is also a self-critique moved by an impulse towards self-annihilation”. Committed youth would deny the validity of this analysis (although it seems to be an uncomfortably accurate explanation of what happened at Sir George Williams.) They all know Marcuse’s phrase “repressive tolerance” (although I suspect few have survived more than a few paragraphs of Marcuse’s opaque prose), and they see in violence the only way of breaking through the restraints of a one-dimensional society. I would suggest that most actions of student violence — including the sit-in — are attempts to thrust a minority position on a peaceful community, to negotiate by threat and not by persuasion. This is usually accompanied by a refusal to accept legal consequences. Those who sat in during the Civil Rights disturbances in the South were prepared to pay the legal penalties for their action; the student begins his sit-in with loud, self-righteous demands for complete immunity from the normal operation of the law. One has the feeling that he has deified himself and his actions. Shouting down a guest speaker, he believes, is not hooliganism, or, at the very least, a denial of free speech; it is confrontation on a high spiritual plane that makes discourse (to use the liturgical word) meaningful.

Committed youth’s concept of freedom has several welcome quali-

ties: the insistence upon seeing freedom as significant to the individual only in terms of his personal decisions; the emphasis upon freedom as a moral as well as an intellectual value. But in its willingness to use coercive action in place of reasoned discussion, it undermines the whole structure of the university. The irony is that the university, by history and inclination, will often tolerate what may ultimately destroy it. The time has come, as it must to all liberal institutions, when it must resolve this contradiction. The resolution will not come by retaliatory force (although this may be unavoidable), but by the compulsion of an aroused community.

NOTES

- ¹ Poirier, Richard. "The War Against The Young", *The Atlantic* (October, 1968), 55-64.
- ² Bissell, C. T. *A Strategy for Change* — Convocation address, University of Windsor, June 1, 1968.
- ³ Keniston, Kenneth. "Young Radicals. Notes on Committed Youth", N.Y. 1968. Pp. 44 ff.
- ⁴ This is based largely on The discussion in Hofstadter, Richard and Walter P. Metzger. *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States*, N.Y. 1955, pp. 386 ff.
- ⁵ Feuer, Lewis S. "Conflict of Generations" *Saturday Review* (January 18, 1969), pp. 53-55; 66-68.
- ⁶ Here is Kennan at his most solemn and paternalistic:
 "And one would like to warn these people that in distancing themselves so recklessly not only from the wisdom but from the feelings of parents, they are hacking at their own underpinnings — and even those of people as yet unborn. There could be no greater illusion than the belief that one can treat one's parents unfeelingly and with contempt and yet expect that one's own children will some day treat one otherwise; for such people break the golden chain of affection that binds the generations and gives continuity and meaning to life." [Kennan, George F., *Democracy and the Student Left*, Boston, 1968, 14.]
- ⁷ And here is Barzun in one of his waspish moods:
 "For the cry of participation of students in the running of the university obscures the secret will of the petitioners, which is not so much to run the university more efficiently as to toss things around, make holes to let in air, and change everything every few years. That inclination is visible in programs where students are asked for their suggestions after taking the course: they propose changes which, if adopted, are invariably reversed by the next participants all unaware that they are advocating the reactionary *status quo*ants." [Barzun, Jacques, *The American University. How it Runs, Where It Is Going*. New York, 1968, 82.]