

The Civic Mission of the University

by Benjamin R. Barber



The modern American university is embroiled in controversy, fueled by deep uncertainty over its pedagogical purposes and its civic role in a "free" society. At times the college establishment seems to know neither what a free society is nor what the educational requisites of freedom might look like. Nonetheless, both administrators and their critics have kept busy, for like zealots (classically defined as people who redouble their efforts when they have forgotten their aims), they have covered their confusion by embellishing their hyperbole. They wring hands and rue the social crises of higher education — apathy, cynicism, careensism, prejudice, selfishness, sexism, opportunism, complacency, and substance abuse — but they hesitate when faced with hard decisions, and prefer to follow rather than challenge the national mood.

Students, reflecting the climate in which they are being educated, are, well, a mess. Minority students at Dartmouth receive anonymous hate letters from their peers, and feminists at Dartmouth are sent notes enclosed in condoms reading, "You disgust me." Students at the University of Utah are voting members of the "Who Cares?" party in student government, embracing their promises to pay their way by "panhandling, and running strip bars, raffles, and prostitution." Youthful hijinks, perhaps: after all, a decade earlier students at Wisconsin had elected the "Pail and Shovel" party into office (its platform: stealing and wasting as much money as possible); and panty raids of one kind or another have been campus staples for a century. Yet one can only feel uneasy when these newer signs of distress are

read in conjunction with the wave of racism, overt sexual discrimination, and homophobia that is sweeping America's campuses; or when they are correlated

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with national patterns of student political apathy (less than one-fifth of the 18-to-24-year-old population voted in the 1986 congressional election, less than one-half of the 37 percent of the general population that voted); or, more pointedly, when they are seen to induce paralysis among school administrators who have necessarily abjured the infantilizing tactics of "in loco parentis" without, however, having a clue about what might take its place.

The privatization and commercialization of schooling continues apace. At the college level, we still honor teaching in the abstract, but we mainly reward research. To be sure, the two should be congruent, and administrators are fond of saying that only great scholars — superb researchers toiling on the frontiers of their discipline — can be good teachers. But good teachers need to spend at least a few hours a week in the classroom. No matter how gifted, the educator cannot practice the teaching craft in front of a computer, in the laboratory, or at the library.

The reality is, as Jacques Barzun recently pointed out, that research and scholarship have not only become ever more narrow and specialized and thus remote from teaching, but they have taken the

very culture which is their putative subject and held it hostage to their reflexive scholastic concerns. "Since William James, Russell, and Whitehead," Barzun reminds us, "philosophy, like history, has been confiscated by scholarship, and locked away from the contamination of cultural use." And, we might add, from the contamination of educational use. The new scholasticism that is academic specialization has in fact turned the study of culture into the study of the study of culture — self-conscious preoccupation with method, technique, and scholarship displacing a broad humanistic concern for culture itself. We no longer simply read books; we study what it means to read books; we do not interpret theories but develop theories of interpretation. We are awash in what W. Jackson Bate of Harvard calls "self-trivialization," pursuing an intellectual quest that takes us farther and farther from students and the world in which they are supposedly being educated to live.

Two Universities

There are two positive models of the university being purveyed today to address the current crisis in education. Mirror images of each other, one calls for a refurbished ivory tower, while the other calls for an uncritical servitude to the larger society's aims and purposes (real whims and fashions). Neither is satisfactory. We may call the first the purist model and the second the vocational model. The first is favored by academic purists and antiquarian humanists and is an embellishment on the ancient Lyceum or the medieval university. In the name of the



abstract pursuit of speculative knowledge, it calls for insulating the university from the wider society. Learning for learning's own sake: not for career, not for life, not for democracy, not for money; for neither power nor happiness, neither career nor quality of life, but for its own pure sake alone. To the purist, knowledge is radically divorced from time and culture, from power and interest; above all it eschews utility. It aspires to reconstruct Aristotle's Lyceum in downtown Newark — catering, however, to the residents of New Athens rather than of New Haven or Newark.

In the Lyceum, knowledge is mined from the great intellectual veins running through the canyon of the canon. What the

canon teaches is that there is a knowledge that is not conditioned by culture and interest, that is not some other century's fashion or some other culture's dominant paradigm, but which — transcending time and space — has earned the status of, if not universal truth, at least universal wisdom. This claim to universality uproots the canon from the contexts that might once have created it. (That Eton in the nineteenth century had one science master, one math master, one modern languages master, and twenty-seven classics masters teaching Latin and Greek and the cultures they mediated is seen as a product of the canon, rather than a force conditioning its modern incarnation.) On the other hand, belief in the independent and objec-

tive veracity of the canon does not prevent purists from seeing all other knowledge, all deviations from the canon (such as feminist studies or comparative religion), as the subjective effects of contemporary cultural contexts that are transient, con-

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tingent, and subjective; that is to say, the product of liberal pedagogical conspiracies and political interest.

The vocational model abjures tradition no less decisively than the purist model abjures relevance. Indeed, it is wildly alive to the demands of the larger society it believes education must serve. Where the purist rejects even the victories of modernity (equality, social justice, universal education) as so many diseases, the advocate of education as vocational training accepts even the ravages of modernity as so many virtues — or at least as the necessary price of progress. The vocationalist wishes to see the university go prone before modernity's new gods. Service to the market, training for its professions, research in the name of its products are the hallmarks of the new full-service university, which wants nothing so much as to be counted as a peer among the nation's great corporations that serve prosperity and material happiness. Forging dubious alliances with research companies, All-American U. plies corpora-

tions for program funding and stalks the public sector in search of public "needs" it can profitably satisfy. In each of these cases, it asks society to show the way, and it compliantly follows.

If this requires that teaching be subsumed to research and research itself reduced to product-oriented engineering, so be it. If it means taking bribes, such as advertising, that privatize and commercialize education in ways wholly inconsistent with learning, that is the price of survival. If it requires that education take on the aspect of vocational training, and that the university become a kindergarten for the corporate society where the young are socialized, bullied, and otherwise blackmailed into usefulness, then the curriculum must be recast in the language of opportunism, careerism, professionalism, and, in a word, commerce. Where the philosopher once said all of life is a preparation for death, the educational careerist now thinks all of life is a preparation for business — or perhaps, more bluntly, that life is business.

A Dialectic of Life and Mind

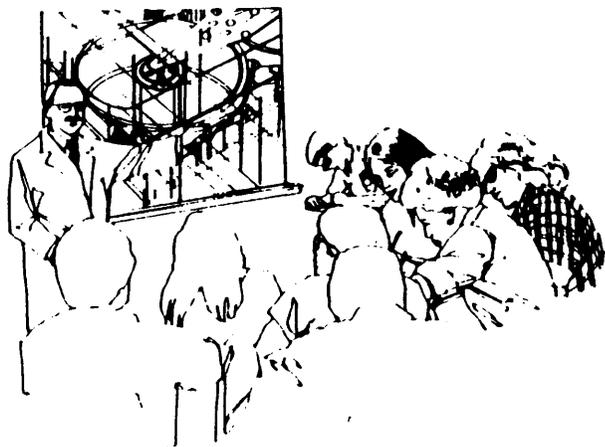
The first of our two models is aristocratic, humanistic, and poignantly nostalgic — not merely Luddite in C. P. Snow's sense, but profoundly antimodern: it wishes to educate the few well and perceives in the democratic ideal an insuperable obstacle to excellence.

The vocationalist knows these predictions for sequestration to be dangerous and probably impossible. For him, education and its institutional tools are for better or worse embedded in the real world. His pedagogical tasks are socialization not

insulation, integration not isolation. Education must follow where society leads: support it, ape it, reinforce it, chase it, undergird it, affirm it, preserve it. Whatever society wants and needs, the university tries to supply. Indeed, society defines the university rather than the other way round. Society says what, the scholar as researcher shows how; society says Yes or No, the teacher helps the pupil pronounce the words; society says I need doctors, I will pay lawyers, students nurture medical skills and acquire legal credentials. Education as vocationalism in service to society becomes a matter of socialization rather than scrutiny, of spelling out consequences rather than probing premises, of answering society's questions rather than questioning society's answers. Where once the student was taught that the unexamined life was not worth living, he is now taught that the profitably lived life is not worth examining.

Neither purist nor vocationalist recognizes that education is a dialectic of life

and mind, of body and spirit, in which the two are inextricably bound together. Neither acknowledges how awkward this makes it for a liberal arts university at once to serve and challenge society, to simultaneously "transmit" fundamental values such as autonomy and free thinking, and create a climate where students are not conditioned by what is transmitted (transmission tends toward indoctrination), and where thinking is truly critical, independent, and subversive (which is what freedom means). For such a university must at once stand apart from society in order to give students room to breathe and grow free from a too insistent reality, and at the same time it must stand within the real world and its limiting conditions in order to prepare students to live real lives in a society that, if they do not mold it freely to their aspirations, will mold them to its conventions. To live eventually as effective, responsible, critical, and autonomous members of communities of discourse and activity, students must be both protected from a too precipitous



engagement in them and acclimated by responsible and critical participation in them.

If the young were born literate there would be no need to teach them literature; if they were born citizens, there would be no need to teach them civic responsibility. But of course educators know that the young are born neither wise, nor literate, nor responsible — nor, despite the great rhetoric to the contrary, are they born free. They are born at best with the potential for wisdom, literacy, and responsibility, with an aptitude for freedom which is, however, matched by an aptitude for security and thus for tyranny.

The Civic Mission

Thomas Jefferson regarded habituated belief as an enemy not only of freedom but of usable conviction, and argued that "every constitution and every law naturally expires at the end of 19 years." Canons, like constitutions, are also for the living, and if they do not expire every 19 years they surely grow tired and stale and heteronomous as time passes. Which is not to say they must be discarded: only that they must be reassessed, relegitimized, and thus reembraced by the current generation. A canon is no use if it is not ours, and it becomes ours only when we reinvent it — an act impossible without active examination, criticism, and subversion. That is why teachers cannot teach the canon properly without subverting it. Their task is not to transmit the canon but to permit their students to reinvent it. Paradoxically, only those "truths" founded on abstract reason which students can make



their own, founded on their own reason, are likely to be preserved. Waving the *Republic* at the young will do nothing for restoring literacy or extending the truths of the old.

What I wish to urge is a far more dialectical model of education: one that refuses to prostrate itself, its back to the future, before the ancient gods of the canon, but is equally reluctant to throw itself uncritically, its back to the past, into the future as envisioned by the new gods of the marketplace. This argument suggests not that the university *has* a civic mission, but that the university *is* a civic mission, is civility itself, defined as the rules and conventions that permit a community to facilitate conversation and the kinds of

discourse upon which all knowledge depends. On this model, learning is a social activity that can take place only within a discursive community bringing together reflection and experience. On this model, knowledge is an evolving communal construction whose legitimacy rests directly on the character of the social process. On this model, education is everywhere and always an ineluctably communal enterprise.

I mean to suggest much more than that democracy and education are parallel activities; or that civic training and the cultivation of knowledge and judgment

Education is above all about setting students free, but there is a great deal of difference between setting them free and leaving them alone.

possess a parallel structure. I am arguing that they are the same thing: That what distinguishes truth, inasmuch as we can have it at all, from untruth, is not conformity to society's historical traditions or the standards of independent reason or the dictates of some learned canon, but conformity to communicative processes that are genuinely democratic and that occur only in free communities.

The conditions of truth and the conditions of democracy are one and the same: as there is freedom, as the community is open and inclusive and the exchange of ideas thorough and spirited, so there is both more democracy and more learning, more freedom and more knowledge (which becomes, here, ideas conditionally agreed

upon). And just as no argument will be privileged over other arguments simply because of how or from whom it originates, so no individual will be privileged over other individuals simply because of who he is (white or male or straight) and where he comes from (old money, good Protestant stock, the United States of America).

Once this is understood, we can move beyond the old instrumental arguments on behalf of democracy that rest the case for citizen training inside the university on the prudential need to shore up democracy outside the university. These arguments are powerful — neither education nor research can prosper in an unfree society, and schooling is the only way we are likely to be able to produce citizens who will uphold freedom — but they are prudential. The prudent Jefferson is known for his linkage of education and democracy: if, Jefferson writes in his *Notes on Virginia*, the people are "the ultimate guardians of their own liberty," then we had best "render them safe" via a prudent and thorough education. "The only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty," he writes to James Madison in 1787, is to "educate and inform the whole mass of the people."

However, my argument here goes well beyond Jefferson's instrumental formula making education "the guarantor of liberty." It suggests that liberty is the guarantor of education; that we not only have to educate every person to make him free, but we have to free every person to make him educable. Educated women and men make good citizens of free communities; but without a free learning community



you cannot educate women and men.

The Sense of Community

Walt Whitman, who refused to wall off democracy from life, or life from poetry, or poetry from democracy, mocks those who try to cut the fabric of democracy to the sorry measure of their own tiny imaginations (he must have had the first political scientist in mind!):

Did you too, O friend, suppose democracy was only for elections; for politics, and for a party name? I say democracy is only of use there that it may pass on and come to its flower and fruits in manners, in the highest forms of interaction between men, and their beliefs — in religion, literature, colleges and schools — democracy in all public and private life. . . .

The point where democracy and education intersect is the point we call com-

munity. For if democracy is a mode of associated living, then it is also true, Dewey has written, that "in the first place, the school must itself be a community life. . . ." Dewey is framing a careful philosophical argument rather than just a provocative metaphor. He is insisting that the "realization of the meaning of linguistic signs . . . involves a context of work and play in association with others." He is saying that in the absence of community there is no learning; that language itself is social, the product as well as the premise of sociability and conversation.

We should comprehend him, for underlying the pathologies of our society and our schools — beneath the corruptions associated with alcohol and drugs, complacency and indifference, discrimination and bigotry, and violence and fractiousness — is a sickness of community: its corruption, its rupturing, its fragmentation, its breakdown; finally, its vanishing and its absence. We can no more learn alone than we can live alone, and if little

learning is taking place in American schools and colleges it may be because there is too much solitude and too little community among the learners (and the teachers too). Schools that were once workshops of intimacy have become as alienating as welfare hotels and as lonely as suburban malls. They lack neither facilities nor resources, neither gifted teachers nor able students; but they are for the most part devoid of any sense of community. And without community, neither the almighty canon nor the almighty dollar can do much to inspire learning or promote freedom.

Dewey's conception of education is often deemed "progressive," yet in fact it harks back to classical and neo-classical models of *paideia* and *bildung*. *Paideia* was the term the Greeks used to encapsulate the norms and values of public life around which citizenship and learning

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were organized. To be an educated Athenian was to be a free and participating citizen. These were not two distinctive roles, two parallel forms of training; they were a single identity revolving around common norms each individual made his own. Imagine Socrates recommending a canon to his pupils, or telling an Athenian youth that what he learned in the Lyceum was not meant to apply to life beyond the



bleached stones where the two of them sat in the sun conversing. The German Enlightenment term *bildung* possessed the same unifying cultural thrust; it brought together under the rubric of life, learning, and self-reflective experience the same ideals of the fully developed citizen of a civil cosmopolis. The education of Emile (Rousseau) or the education of the young Werther (Goethe) was a lifetime task of which schooling represented only a phase. Emile did not imagine his pupil could separate the cultivation of his civility from the reading of books; Goethe never conceived that Werther could or should wall off his life from his learning.

The trouble with the purist's canon is that it renders knowledge a product stripped of the process by which it is endowed with its quickening vitality and its moral legitimacy. The canon does not produce the cultural education the Germans called *bildung*; *bildung* produces

the canon, which consequently needs to be no less flexible and mutable than the life processes that make it. The trouble with the vocationalist's servitude to society is that it fails to distinguish society or society's fixed conventions from the free society and the unique educational prerequisites that condition freedom. A free society does not produce *bildung*, which is always critical of it; *bildung* produces a free society, keeping it from ossifying and perishing — helping it to overcome its most difficult contradiction: the institutionalization and petrification of the spirit of freedom that animates it.

Common Living

We can address these troubles, both those of the purists and those of the vocationalists, by insisting on the centrality of community to both education and democracy, both convention and freedom. Where in the quest to preserve the canon is a concern for the communal conditions of learning upon which its revival (and thus its preservation) depend? In the rush to serve the society that beckons from beyond the schoolyard, what has happened to the schoolyard's own precious community, whose delicate ties alone permit the young to learn the art of civility and to create a common language in the face of private differences, so that they might conduct a conversation about common knowledge and shared belief?

It is not really a matter of making the liberal arts university into a community; for it already is a community, however corrupt and frangible it has become or however little it is seen as such by its privatized inhabitants (students, faculty,

and administrators alike). It is a matter of recognizing the communal character of learning, and giving to community the attention and the resources it requires. Learning communities, like all free communities, function only when their members conceive of themselves as empowered to participate fully in the common

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activities that define the community — in this case, learning and the pursuit of knowledge in the name of common living. Learning entails communication, communication is a function of community. The equation is simple enough: no community, no communication; no communication, no learning; no learning, no education; no education, no citizens; no citizens, no freedom; no freedom — then no culture, no democracy, no schools, no civilization. Cultures rooted in freedom do not come in fragments and pieces: you get it all, or you get nothing.

The sociopathologies that currently afflict American universities (renewed racism, substance and alcohol abuse, alienation, suicide) are then anything but contingent features of higher education, mere symptoms that can be isolated and treated one by one like so many cuts on an otherwise healthy body. They speak rather to a disease of the whole, a systemic

affliction of education's integral body, which is nothing less than the community of teachers and students in which education subsists.

If we wish to treat the symptoms, I suggest we try to treat the disease: the corporal weakness of community itself. I will not try here to specify what it might mean to reform our universities and colleges focusing on the needs of community rather than the demands of a canon or the needs of a hungry society. But when I think about how crucial teaching is to all education and thus to democracy, I am put in mind of a remarkable stanza that brings Walt Whitman's "A Song of Occupations" to its conclusion. Whitman writes:

When the psalm sings instead of
the singer,
When the script preaches instead
of the preacher,
When a university course con-
vinces like a slumbering woman
and child convince. . .
I intend to reach them my hand
and make as much of them as I
do of men and women.

Whitman always reminds us of the obvious; perhaps because it is the obvious that we always forget. Canons don't teach, teachers teach. Poems cannot enchant, only poets can do that. History will not

preserve us from the errors of the past, but historians just may, if they are teachers.

Education is finally a matter of teachers teaching students; and where teachers teach and students learn, there we will discover community. Or, to put it the other way around, only where there is a genuine community will there be genuine teachers and students and anything resembling genuine learning.

Does the university have a civic mission? Of course, for it is a civic mission: the cultivation of free community; the creation of a democracy of words (knowledge) and a democracy of deeds (the democratic state). Perhaps it is time to stop complaining about the needs of society and worrying about the fate of the canon and despairing over the inadequacies of students, which after all only mirror our own. Perhaps the time is finally here to start thinking about what it means to say that community is the beginning and the end of education, its indispensable condition, its ultimate object. And time then, if we truly believe this, to do something about it in words and in deeds.

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