Branding Time at Bar-Alma U: Politics on Campus and the Loss of Spirit

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Par cette brève critique de la vie universitaire, on constate avec regret la perte d'un esprit politique vivant sur les campus canadiens. L'activité politique est perçue comme l'exercice du pouvoir par le soutien et le maintien d'autres activités humaines. Selon l'auteur, dans la plupart des universités, on accueille les idées et les valeurs reçues et les pratiques établies sans les mettre en question, sans exiger de justification.

Puisque nous choisissons inévitablement certaines activités humaines plutôt que d'autres — même par notre indifférence — la question que le monde universitaire doit se poser n'est pas: "Pouvons-nous demeurer objectifs et neutres et ainsi éviter une prise de position politique partisane?", mais plutôt "Nos inéluctables prises de position politiques seraient-elles conscientes, justes et nobles?".

Certaines des activités soutenues par les universités sont alors considérées selon leur signification politique: l'inculcation de valeurs sociales, la formation technique et professionnelle, la critique des valeurs et pratiques existantes, la conduite de la recherche, et même l'usage social des universités comme "jardins d'enfants" sophistiqués.

L'article conclut en prônant une direction qui transformerait les pièges des pratiques traditionnelles en autant de défis positifs et créateurs: il propose de considérer les classes comme autant de forums critiques sur les positions politiques non encore mises en question, de rechercher de nouveaux styles de vie économique et politique en réponse à notre malaise devant les orientations malheureuses de notre société dominée par les "corporations", d'utiliser les "petits" campus comme lieux pour faciliter la complète insertion dans nos communautés immédiates.

Just about the time one begins to draw hope and encouragement from the possibilities which exist for building totally new alternative educational patterns or lifestyles the old institutions place another stumbling block in the way or remind one of the entrenchment of the old ways and values. I want to address myself to the political nature of certain of these old ways and values which, as a professor, I have experienced over the years in a number of universities.

My chain of thoughts along these lines was prompted recently by some comments of a high school teacher friend about the way in which most spirited young people had been weeded out of public school long before university entrance.

His comments brought to my mind a vivid childhood memory of young calves being branded and castrated in the Red Deer river valley as I sat

bewildered on a neighboring fencepost observing the frantic kicking of pinned and helpless animals.

Perhaps it seems crude to associate the branding and castration image with a student or faculty member's loss of spirit and "intestinal fortitude" but so many of us as university teachers cannot help but be struck by the demoralizing and enfeebling effects of university life.

If my high school friend is right the drop-outs, delinquents, expellees, and "poor students" are just as often as not the gutsy, rebellious, earthy, spirited, impatient, and ambitious (although not in a scholarly way) young persons. They are often disrespectful of authority and unimpressed by commonly accepted social standards. They "flunk out," "sass back," "cop out," "waste time," and "don't give a damn" about many of the things that the adult world insists are most important – for example, continuing to get a "good education" and obtaining as a consequence "a good job" that pays well and offers a goodly portion of security.

Such an analysis may help to explain the spiritless, cautious, security-conscious product that manages to hang on at the university entrance stage. In other words, it may be that by the time we have weeded out the spirited rebels through eleven or twelve years of schooling, only those who do know how to take orders, and obtain good marks by performing the what and how of everything expected of them, remain. It still astonishes me when many second- and third-year university students are left immobilized when offered the opportunity to select their own topic for a term paper, or when students become totally bewildered when the choice of activities and work by which they might be examined or evaluated is offered to them.

But it should be noted that quiet submissiveness and obedience may not most accurately convey the character of those who remain "in school." The submissiveness exists but is not so much related to humility as it is to a cunning instinct for survival whose purpose is tied to money, status, and totally self-centred achievement and security.

If our educational institutions serve to reward the obedient and punish, expel, admonish, and generally belittle the nonconforming, unresponsive, or dissenting individual, all such activity of reward and penalty, whether material, social, or psychological, I prefer to consider as part of the *politics* of the educational process.

We reward certain people with good marks, certificates or diplomas, flattering letters of reference, personal praise, scholarships, and bursaries. We attempt to punish others by issuing poor grades and withholding praise, scholarships, and certificates. What determines whether we grant good grades or bad, praise or condemnation? In the spring of 1975 it was not at all uncommon to hear convocation speakers cry for the return of elitist-like standards in our Canadian universities. But in practice our criteria for standards may vary from correct spelling and "the right answers"

in a history or mathematics examination to ability to measure up to long-standing teaching procedures or business practices in the education and business faculties, or to an ability to appreciate and articulate the ideas of established academics and thinkers in the arts.

Within graduate and professional schools or in the humanities and social sciences generally the sanctions become increasingly political in nature since they have to do with *already established* practices and standards set by those holding positions of influence. Hence, we can ask such questions as: Who sets the standards by which a successful graduate in education, business, or the arts is judged? What purposes and values are intended to be fulfilled by these standards? Why are particular values chosen in preference to others?

Let me explain further the political dimension to university practices by using my own university's education department as an illustration. This traditionally respectable department has chosen in past years not to accept as valid towards teacher certification an alternate or free school teaching experience for its practice teachers. The attitude of the department had been defended on the grounds that the provincial department of education had not as yet recognized such experience as acceptable for the certification of teachers in the province. The cautiousness of the university education department, I submit, can be understood as a political stance – at one level designed, perhaps, to move carefully and patiently until a government came around to changing its policy. While it may be true that such a cautious policy on the part of our education department could have allowed a government the time and space within which to reconsider its policy, it is highly unlikely that such a purpose motivated the department's caution.

Other education departments in the same province at exactly the same point in time had chosen over the years to turn a blind eye to antiquated government practices and allowed, if not encouraged, certain education students to obtain their practice-teaching experience in an alternate or free school setting. In fact, one education department at a neighboring university where I was also employed set up its own experimental school in order to facilitate this alternative kind of experience for its students. Such activities are political not because they have to do with circumventing government policies but because they involve something of a set of values which open possibilities and alternatives, and, even if incidentally, call into some question the single, unchallenged route to teacher certification. My own university's education department, to the extent that it refused to risk such possibilities, took a different political stance – one which preferred support of the established ways of doing things at the expense of withholding support from fledgling-like alternatives at a point in time when the alternate and community schools movement most required assistance. Such a stand is political. It is political because it is based on a set

of values, principles, and practices which have power and influence. The stand is political because it supports one type of behavior — practice-teaching in public schools — while withdrawing support to its alternative — practice-teaching in "free schools." And the university education department's position is political because it supports an existing system of education which in itself reflects wider societal attitudes, purposes, and values which differ from, and very often war against, the values, goals, and directions of alternative schools and the critique of society such schools reflect. Perhaps the most interesting observation from all of this is that I am sure those who made the decision in my own university's education department believed they were avoiding any and all political positions.

Most academics would, for reasons of objectivity and academic freedom, fight indignantly against the introduction of political positions on campus. Yet, I believe we fail to recognize that politics is a dimension to life which cannot be avoided. It is not so much a question of "can we remain objective and neutral and hence avoid one-sided political positions," but rather, will our inevitable political positions be conscious, just, and noble?

Much of what is political, inside and outside of education, is analogous to the old saw — "not to decide is to decide." If we wait around long enough our decision may be made for us. If we refuse to act on given social issues the issue is often decided by our indifference. And our indifference may weigh heavily against those who might have been calling for justice, change, or peace.

Let us consider this unavoidable political dimension as it applies to some of the more general conscious purposes and unconscious functions of the university.

Universities have as a conscious purpose that the central values and ideas of our civilization shall be appreciated, and passed on to the intelligent young. I need not point out that any effort to preserve and perpetuate a cultural heritage is a highly significant political activity essential for the continued existence of any social order.

Universities are also designed to train young people for much-needed professions and vocations in society. The political dimension to this long-established purpose becomes clearer when jobs are in either great demand or very short supply. Our economic system from time to time seems to run efficiently with fewer of the chemists, physicists, or teachers than at other times we had reason to expect. Yet it is always difficult for the university to adjust to a shortage of available jobs.

In recent years career conferences around the world have been concerned to offer increased career training for university students. Just how career concerns become part and parcel of political matters can be seen in a description of a recent American conference which set itself the task of creating a "careers index" or "compendium of information on the developing need for various careers." "The index," said a report, "would

utilize the skills of futurists from government, industry and academia to predict which jobs will be needed in the near and distant future, so that students can be counselled to seek those jobs" (Careers and the Future, 1972).

Only a few years ago it was common practice to criticize the Soviet Union (seen so often as the epitome of a totalitarian social order) because we popularly believed that students there had little or no choice about their vocation. "The government tells them what they are going to do," we used to complain. Since it appears we are about to do the same thing, perhaps it will no longer be seen as such a social evil. What would be amiss, however, is any perpetuation of the myth that ours is a completely open, free market society without economic or political controls or directions, when this is not the case. Whether we counsel or coerce students to take the jobs which our economic system, by its operation, exposes as necessary tasks, these demands are political by nature of their generality, power, and authority.

In the face of the careers problem the university fulfils several social functions, keeping down the unemployment of the young and serving as a highly intelligent and effective baby-sitter. One has only to consider the unpleasantness caused each spring when the job markets are flooded with university students looking for summer work to consider what might happen if large numbers of students (high school and/or university students) were suddenly to demand jobs instead of remaining in school. Or, try to imagine what our society would do with millions of children and young people who no longer spent five days a week in public school. "Good God," you might say, "they would be all over the streets." Hence, we have schools and universities: not because we must keep our children off the streets and off the job market, but ostensibly for the more positive purposes of inculcating culture and career training, which—just incidentally — keep young people off the streets and out of the manpower offices. Thus, we have the difference between an intended purpose and an unintentional but a consequent function of the schools and universities.

Universities have two other high purposes worth considering. They are meant to engage students in a highly challenging and creative critique of existing values, ideas, and ways of doing things. Such an activity is by nature political since it is designed to question the social and political order and call for improvement. By either giving or withdrawing support for such critiques we again enter a crucial political activity which may go so far as to involve the university in defending oppression, or, at the other extreme, condoning bloody revolution.

Similarly, universities are seen as places designed to foster human growth and development for their participants. But in actual fact, the Director of Research for the American Council on Education, recently commenting on the University's role in promoting human development,

concluded that even the best universities are what they are only because of what the students have already brought with them. In studying two million students in five hundred leading institutions, and using as a measure the performance of students on Graduate Record Examinations (GRE), the Council found:

> simply that many of the relatively bright students who attend high quality institutions are still relatively bright four years later. College quality does *not*, however, appear to be related to student performance, once initial ability and background are taken into account. These findings indicate that there is apparently no "value added" from attending a high quality institution, at least with respect to cognitive performance as measured by the GRE. [Astin, 1972, p. 62]

Hence, we have it on good authority that even the best universities likely contribute much less than we think to important dimensions of human growth, and we are left to ponder other reasons for the existence and activity of universities.

I will only briefly mention what is perhaps one of the most political of all university functions: research, and the extent to which our universities are tied to government, and, in particular, defence programs. In the United States between 65 and 75 per cent of all university research is directly or indirectly government sponsored. In Canada, a recent study has shown that we spent more per capita on military research in our universities than the United States. Our Defense Research Board sponsors research in almost every Canadian university. Twenty-five hundred students are employed in studies which include, among many others, research into areas directly associated with chemical-biological warfare, "insects of military importance," and bombs and rockets. Canada, incidentally, is the world's fifth largest international arms exporter with active salesmen and a five-hundred-page catalogue of war-fare for any interested buyer (Wiseman, 1972; Cobban, 1971).

When I spoke earlier of castration it is this head-in-the-sand and unspirited indifference to the university's social functions, and the climate that promotes or preserves such ignorance, that I had in mind.

University life involves doing as you are told. "*This* is important – write about *this*!" "*That* is correct – remember *that*!" So much of our life is spent within the confines of educational institutions that many of us begin to interpret broader social activities or functions in terms of the more narrow, castrated school activities.

If I might add to a list that social critic Paul Goodman once prepared – being a good citizen becomes doing your homework or attending classes; apprenticeship becomes passing tests for jobs in the distant future; sexual initiation is tamed to high school dating; for the rites of passage we substitute the receiving of diplomas; crime is breaking a school window or perhaps even copying a book report; rebellion or revolution is a sit-in staged in the Academic Dean's office. And happiness is the blissful ignorance

of spending a year under the care of mother university — and her care serves faculty as much as, if not more than, students.

However, there may still exist very real possibilities for spirited learning and involvement in life, particularly in the smaller universities and community colleges.

My own small university is said to be the only remaining women's university in the commonwealth. And perhaps in the international women's year climate we need to remind ourselves that the major arenas of political importance are increasingly those very basic realms often thought to be the preserve of women — not just female liberation, but consumerism and the questions of the cost and quality of the food we eat; the education of our children; the quality of life in our immediate community, neighborhood, family, church, and school and our opportunities to remake that life in keeping with our own goals and values; the protection of the environment around us; the preservation or rediscovery of a sense of community and individual worth independent of crass commercial and stifling institutional definitions.

In such a context we require leadership from our institutions of higher learning. Not the cautiousness of faculty and their departments which hide behind administrative regulations and public approval as the excuse for closed mouths, inactivity, and oppressive classroom activities. But rather, the willingness to recognize the political nature, the power and influence of our authority as teachers and its emasculating effect on students.

University administrations are called to lead as well. Not too long ago a number of very intelligent and seemingly humane university and church leaders, presidents and at least one archbishop, along with members of boards of governors of Canadian universities visited NORAD headquarters in Colorado Springs right on the heels of the careful CBS documentary "The Selling of the Pentagon," which sounded the alarum of this nefarious selling job of American warfare to non-suspecting community leaders. It must be cautioned in the face of such activities that public approval is not worth the cost of giving quiet implicit support to the insanity of an arms race. Surely we have a right to expect that those who represent our universities publicly are also developing an astute political sense. As a wise United Church minister used to advise me: "If you don't stand for something, you may fall for anything."

If we refuse to clearly commit ourselves to stand for and against particular political values, attitudes, and directions there is naught to associate us with but that which appears to be or already thrives — the status quo. By our silence we consent to what goes on in the classroom, to oppression in the existing school structures rather than the promise of any newborn alternatives; to what goes on at Colorado Springs, the Defence Research Board, or across the sales counters for international arms.

Yet, all of these pitfalls may be turned to positive challenges if we so choose. The once oppressive classroom could become the training ground for a new consciousness of our formerly unquestioned political postures. Our profound disillusionment with our corporate society and its unwanted directions can prompt us to seek a totally new lifestyle in all its dimensions. And the smallness and once narrow emphases of many small campuses can, paradoxically, facilitate our spirited involvement in the issues of our community; since those issues are increasingly within the prerogative of colleges dedicated to the immediate community.

Once we were purchased and claimed by the old mother university as her own — branded with her cautiousness, fenced in by her guarded support of established ways of learning and behaving. Now the time has come to bound over the stockade and cease forever to be a part of her castrated herd.

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