The Role of the Undergraduate College in Social Change

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The Role of the Undergraduate College in Social Change

All social change, without exception, involves a process in human learning. Social change, indeed, is an evolutionary process in the field of the “noosphere,” especially if we include in this those human artifacts which are the result of imprinting human knowledge on the material and social world.

There are many sources of learning, most of which, however, can be put into one of three groups. One source is *experience*, that is, inputs of information into the human nervous system from the outside world through the senses. We know some things because we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch them. Experience is a pretty good teacher in the small, but a very bad teacher in the large. It can teach us about the world with which we are in immediate contact, with considerable accuracy. Otherwise, we could not find our way around town. But it is a poor teacher when we come to large systems, either physical, biological, or social. Generalizing from personal experience, indeed, is one of the major sources of fallacious thinking, especially in social systems, producing such things as the theory of the flat earth and beliefs in balanced budgets and national defense.

*Language* is another important source of human learning, especially *gossip*, that is, verbal communication from peers. This method of learning is rapid and quite often produces truth, though not always. It is particularly useful because it uses the human nervous system as an information filter, which is absolutely necessary if we are not to be overwhelmed by the input-overload of information. Knowledge of any kind usually has to be obtained by an orderly loss of information input through some filtering process. We see this even in perception, where
there is, for instance, loss of information all the way from the eye to the brain.

The third source of human learning consists of teachers, who, again, rely mainly on language, both oral and written, but whose main function is to guide a student towards the great information deposits of mankind—in the written word, in pictures, records of speech and music, and so on. The results of formal education, as we know, are varied. We must be doing something right or we would never have succeeded in transmitting as much of the past culture as we do. It is a never-ending miracle that we do succeed in transmitting most of past cultures to the next generation. Nevertheless, there is no cause for great satisfaction about formal education. It is probably more wasteful than it need be, we know very little about it or about the process of human learning, and we are always in real danger of cultural loss through the failure to transmit to the next generation. We should always remember that the growth of knowledge is the difference between its production and its consumption through aging and death. This consumption is very large and the more knowledge there is the more it is consumed. Furthermore, the more elaborate the knowledge structure becomes the more important teaching and formal education become in proportion to the other means of learning.

There are two major processes in human learning. One is imprinting or rote learning, which in formal education has become the principle "from textbook to bluebook untouched in mind." Nevertheless, we must not underestimate the importance of rote learning and the importance of doing it efficiently. A great deal of language learning has to be rote learning, and even in the arts and sciences the learning of names is a crucial part of formal education. One of the most important distinctions between the learned and the unlearned is precisely the greater capacity of the learned for name-dropping. If you think Plato, or even Pluto, is merely a character in a comic strip, this is a clear sign of not having much formal education.

The other process for learning might be called revisionism. This is the essence of the scientific method, but it is also important in what we might call folk learning. This process operates through the formation of images of the future by inference from total image of the world, and then the comparison of our image of the future, as we had it in the past, with our image of the same event when the future becomes the present. If the two images do not correspond there is disappointment, and it is disappointment that forces revision. If the process is to lead to knowledge, however, the revision must take place in the image of the world and we must be protected against failures of inference or observation. This is, incidentally, why mathematics has been so important to the sciences as a safeguard against false inference, and why instrumentation has been so important as a safeguard against false observation.
As long as imprinting or rote learning is the principal method of knowledge transmission social change comes mainly by differential fertility of different human cultures, assuming that the transmission of the culture is by imprinting from one generation to the next. Under these circumstances, it is fertile cultures in the population sense that survive. Even under these circumstances, there may be phenomena like conversion from one culture to another. In this case, we should probably describe the process as that of differential information fertility or image fertility.

Social change through revisionism is apt to be more rapid and more fundamental. It takes place when there is a failure of transmission of the culture from one generation to the next because of disappointment. Cultures which stress revisionism rather than imprinting are, therefore, likely to have a more rapid rate of social change than traditional cultures, which rely on the authority of the older generation to imprint its patterns on the next.

What, then, in this process is the role of the undergraduate college? We have to face the fact that a good deal of what goes on in the undergraduate college is imprinting, the learning not only of languages and of names for things, but also the values of the prevailing culture. One object, whether avowed or not, of the undergraduate college is the production of adults who quite strongly resemble their parents. This function is not altogether to be despised, for if children are too different from their parents, society will fall apart. There is simply not time to invent the wheel and all the other elements in the great deposit of accumulated human knowledge and technology in every generation. It is perhaps the reasonably literate, reasonably docile, name-dropping, organization man who holds the world together and we certainly produce a reasonable quantity of such men.

On the other hand, we do find that educational systems in general, and the undergraduate college in particular, are being increasingly challenged to produce revisionist knowledge based on what might almost be called sophisticated experience. The very fact that the undergraduate college is a major link between the world of folk knowledge and folk culture and the world of what I have called the "superculture" of science and technology means that it has to introduce the student to the scientific revisionist method. There then arises an almost inevitable conflict between the revisionism, skepticism, and universalism of the superculture and the more traditional believing and parochial subcultures and national cultures, which, for the most part, pay the bills. It is not surprising, therefore, that the college becomes an agency of social change so vigorous as to embarrass its finance officers. This dilemma, however, I cannot resolve in this paper.
The institution in which we are meeting is a striking example of what I am trying to say. When I was an instructor here in the late thirties, the transmission of the traditional football culture, which I am afraid I once described as “colinanity,” and the worldly wise culture of the fraternities, was a dominant part of the student experience. Today, I am immensely struck with the change in the appearance and indeed the whole culture of the student body. While there are strong elements of imprinting and fashion even in the culture of youthful dissent, nevertheless, a great deal of social change which is taking place, and of which the colleges are an important focus, arises out of revisionist learning, and especially that most tricky of all processes, the revisionist learning of values. This again would carry us far beyond the purposes in this paper.

Kenneth E. Boulding

We ought to be clear at the start that the academic disciplines and the undergraduate college have not had any great impact on social change. Historically, social change in our culture has been brought about by broad economic movements (industrialization), by massive technological changes (bureaucracies, new technologies), and by what one might call powerful forces in popular psychology (nationalism, liberalism). In any such listing it is difficult to perceive any extensive impact of general ideas or humanistic education as it is received in the college.

Ideas and ideologies do, of course, have a mighty impact on social change. But in our culture, ideas and ideologies have played a major role only if they have been taken up and given power by sizable social classes and groups who find them appropriate to their economic interests, political power needs, or general sense of values. Thus classical liberalism gained force in England because it fit the interests of the commercial, industrial, and professional middle classes. European socialism—another complex body of ideas—gained influence because the working classes of northern Europe found such ideas compatible with their economic interests. Finally, conservative ideologies and ideas have been supported by upper class social groups because of their wish to defend their power and interests. Ideas and ideologies, in short, have affected social change only when they have been “picked up” by groups and classes engaged in competition for political and economic power. What is taught in college has no significant role to play in any direct way.

There is another important reason why the academic disciplines have played only a minimal role in the various transformations of our culture. The intellectual structure of our academic disciplines since their inception in the early nineteenth century has been observa-
tional and not critical or pragmatic. Economists, historians, sociologists, and political scientists have created and practiced their disciplines so as to understand and explain, rather than to criticize and change. Thus the crucial science of economics derived, in Western culture, from Newtonian science and deist theology. From the time of Adam Smith until just recently, therefore, economists have sought for the natural laws (earlier "the invisible hand" or "the laws of God") of economics which allegedly regulate economic behavior in such ways as to make rational planning on a large scale foolish and dangerous. In all areas, in fact, the liberal intellect has overwhelmingly denied as despotic, naive, or utopian any notion that the intellect can plan, direct, and manage in any forceful way the growth and change of society in preconceived directions. And it is preeminently the liberal intellect or, even more suspicious of planning, the conservative intellect which guides, controls, and gives content to our undergraduate education. At best the liberal intellect still clings to what one can only describe as "tinkering" when it comes to the resolution of our seemingly ever-present social problems.

What, in view of all this, does the college actually accomplish with regard to social change? Almost nothing except that it turns out people who, whatever their vocation, have a smattering of ignorance about some subjects outside of their regular vocations. Indeed, the college is, excluding a few experimental units, an advanced form of trade or vocational school. People are trained in the techniques of a profession or calling, but those techniques are set by those in the profession and outside the college. Lawyers, physicians, teachers, businessmen, and labor leaders are prepared to play the accepted roles of their future professions. In spite of the vaguely reformist rhetoric often communicated by academic people—their own social activists—there is little done to reshape, reconstitute and re-form the existing ways of the world.

It could be argued we do change society by educating a vast collection of liberal artists in the enlightened and useful knowledge known to those who teach the study of history, society, politics, and the arts. But whatever these studies may have been in the past, today, alas, they are nothing if not vocational. My meaning is quite specific. The Professor of History, Sociology, Political Science or whatever, is not out to communicate whatever his field can to the creation of an educated lay public aware of the need for social reform and some expert ways of going about it. No, the Professor is on the lookout—even in his freshman classes—for future majors, i.e., potential vocational specialists in his discipline. Like higher trade school functionaries, your historians, for example, measure their teaching success by the number and quality of the undergraduates they send on to graduate departments of history. Historians are really not interested in
teaching whatever it is in the past that throws most light on present
culture and contemporary needs. They are on the lookout for
students who, as future historians, will devote themselves to ever
smaller segments of the past and write, in the main, not for an en-
lighted, literate, and potentially activist public but for fellow profes-
sionals in similar segments of the discipline.

Thus social change in our culture has not been affected in any
independent or forceful way by the college. And until we can get
the college out of the grip of the graduate school professionals, we
will not be able to redirect our colleges toward the creation of the
kind of public we need. It is not a question of publishing and re-
search versus teaching. Rather, it is simply that the kind of publica-
tion and research that graduate schools reward is not intended for
public consumption and contemporary cultural needs. And it is the
graduate faculties which pass out the cash, prestige, and grants which
attract the ambitious and talented among scholars. As long as this
is true, the colleges of America will simply not put much effort into
the creation of a massive public of functioning intellectuals.

I can suggest no way to weaken the graduate school’s domination
of undergraduate education. Yet more than ever we need the power
of a conscious and sizable public intellect to grapple with our social
problems. One need only think of our slums, the world’s poverty and
population explosion, and the ever-mounting threat of biological and
nuclear war to envision the kinds of possibilities before us. Yet pover-
ty, population, and the origins of wars are eminently teachable sub-
jects, and ever-increasing millions of students enter our colleges to be
taught.

As I said, I can suggest no strategy which will dramatically alter
the role of the college in furthering rational and humane social change.
But I do think I can suggest some fairly well-known ways in which we
should change if opportunities come our way. We must totally revise
the content of undergraduate courses in the social sciences and dras-
tically change our teaching methods. Above all we must remove the
single greatest obstacle to such reforms: faculty reluctance to innovate
and to re-shape the professional system of prestige and promotion.

There are a wide variety of ways to improve the undergraduate
experience through teaching and course content curriculum.* I have
time for only one suggestion. Course content is now decided almost
completely by the traditional divisions and contents of the disciplines
as determined by the guild of graduate school professors. We ought
to focus instead on our current cultural needs and student interest.

*For a discussion of some of these see: John Weiss, “The University as Corpo-
ration,” Radical Perspectives on Social Problems, Frank Lindenfeld (Ed.)
To cite one glaring example—one hesitates to call it a burning issue—Vietnam. We have been fighting in Vietnam for fifteen years, and the war has been the single most important national concern. But courses of study about Indochina, let alone Vietnam, have found no place in the undergraduate curriculum. Nor am I merely speaking of a course of study concerning “America in Vietnam.” To understand why our policies there have been nothing but absurd and atrocious from the start, we have to study the history and society of Vietnam since at least the time of the original French conquests and the guerrilla resistance—i.e., since roughly the 1850’s. Then, whether one is against or for the ugly disaster there, one would have known from the study of Vietnamese history that our military solution would solve nothing, and that it could only end in blood, retreat, and terror for the Vietnamese. However, though our scholars have found a place in the curriculum for the Greeks, the Romans, the Europeans, and endless segments of Americana, no place has been provided in the college catalog for the Vietnamese.

If disciplined scholarship does not constantly feed into the curriculum such crucial matters for scholarly study and communication, why then is it any wonder that the debate on Vietnam, pro and con, has been mindless and uninformed? Only now are we beginning to teach the history of Vietnam—at perhaps a dozen institutions of higher learning. Fabulous. At this rate, one can expect many courses in the origins of wars the day after World War III takes place! If disciplined scholarship does not put our political and social problems into the curriculum, then the uninformed will picket, protest, and ignore our claim that scholarship and learning are important in the life of man.

Finally, allow me to point out that those subjects that are now in the college catalog were not always there and should not be taken to be absolute, fixed, and final standards of what ought to be known.

Intellectuals, with or without Ph.D.’s, have always forced the academy to take account of those subjects that the new generation finds relevant to its life. Thus, we ought not to object to the current demands for black studies and history in our colleges. Educational and scholarly advances have often come through the militant demands of nationalists, black or otherwise, who wanted to establish a cultural and historical identity for their brothers.

German history, perhaps the most orthodox of “legitimate and established” objects of academic orthodoxy was in fact put in the college catalogs in much the same way as is now happening to black history. The invasion of the Germanies by Napoleon led to a war of national liberation, which brought to a head a decade’s agitation by young intellectuals for German unity. After the defeat of the French, academic studies of German history were established, the German language and the German “spirit”, i.e., its cultural identity, were for
the first time legitimate objects of academic concern. Until then, German history was not part of the accepted program of studies.

This general search for national self-consciousness, this sense of the need for contemporary relevance in academic studies, led to the establishment of that most orthodox of academic institutions, the University of Berlin (1809), and the formal beginning of German historical studies. Above all, out of this came the creation of a marvelous educational system, scholarly, disciplined, and relevant, which awakened in Germans a sense of their cultural identity and national pride. (Those who mistakenly believe that this in any way led to the success of the Nazis in our time should see: John Weiss, The Fascist Tradition: Radical Right Wing Extremists in Modern Europe, Harper and Row, 1967.)

There is, in short, no reason to be suspicious of the legitimacy and value of black studies as ultimately leading to the same unity of disciplined scholarship and contemporary importance. In matters of course content alone we must shake off the traditional discipline divisions which reflect the sense of relevance of past generations and look at that which involves the needs and the spirit of today. That, in fact, is why we study the liberal arts: so that they will liberate us.

John Weiss