Strange Bedfellows: Academic Freedom and Violence

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Strange Bedfellows:
Academic Freedom and Violence

The crisis of misunderstanding still reigns in academia! The more responsive the public has been in providing and expanding educational opportunities the more the universities seem to be threatened by hostile forces and instability. It is paradoxical that the more universities attempt to ward off these hostilities, the more they tend to perpetuate them.

Although we are at the present time experiencing some relief from the violence of student unrest, the American society, especially the most formally educated part of it, seems to be even more confused than usual. On practically every campus in America, learned professors who vociferously decried the student's use of strikes as a means of gaining power are arguing in the same breath for the use of collective bargaining and the threat of strikes as a means of gaining power for themselves. More than ever, professors, college administrators and trustees are paying lip service to the idea of academic freedom, but are simultaneously surrendering without conscience the functions which are inseparable from academic freedom. The ideal of finding truth is being matched, and perhaps overmatched, by the practice of exercising power, and the ideal of seeking truth is not only being paralleled by the practice of seeking power but it is also being mocked by the malpractice of seeking money. Never has one had better cause to appreciate the cogency of Russell Kirk's observation that academic freedom is really desired only by a few men, and that a considerable part of the modern clerisy has neither the true desire for it, nor the true right to it.

His statement is harsh, yet truth is often harsh. Most of us, faculty as well as students, have now and then been struck by the realization
that a great many professors do not want academic freedom for themselves and certainly not for others. Their only interest is in larger salaries, the security of tenure and the right to complacency. These professors become concerned about academic freedom only when there appears to be some threat that their monopoly of indoctrinating students with their own prejudices may be impaired; they have no respect for the student's freedom of mind nor for those of their colleagues who might differ with them.

Is it any wonder then that some observers feel that the previous student unrest was caused by members of the faculty? These same observers contend that we are experiencing a period of relative calm on college campuses today because faculty members are beginning to fear for their jobs. Recent events in the field of higher education tend to bear out these suspicions. The financial crunch, threats against tenure and other pressures, external as well as internal, have created for faculty a climate of fear and this climate of fear is turning faculty members into "cringing automatons" incapable of exercising any aspect of their academic freedom.

Today as the nation becomes more polarized, as our inner tensions grow more desperate, and as our frustrations with our own country and with the world become more embittered, we must exert every effort to protect and strengthen civility against the impulses of destruction.

In this effort a special responsibility rests on the intellectual community. The intellectual community should be the principal custodian of the life of reason. It should be the perennial champion of discipline and restraint. It should be the absolute enemy of violence. Nothing is more dismaying than the way in which a few in the intellectual community have rejected the process of reason and have succumbed to the national susceptibility for violence and have indeed begun themselves to exalt violence.

No one would suggest that the intellectual community is responsible for the atrocities committed at home and abroad. But one can suggest that they have contributed to the atmosphere which has begun to accept and almost legitimize violence. One can suggest that they are reinforcing the assault on civility and hastening the decomposition of the American social process.

Whatever constriction of academic freedom that has come to pass in recent years because of faculty timidity, none can compare with that same faculty's rejection of the process of reason. The freedom to reason and to seek the truth are the basic components of academic freedom. Academic freedom is more than merely the right of the professor to pursue research and teaching. It implies the obligation to promote learning. Aside from pursuing his own learning, the professor must promote learning in an absolute sense. He must protect every-
thing conducive to learning and fight everything detrimental to it. If learning is prevented by violence on the part of the professors, then those professors must be fought. If learning is prevented by violence on the part of the students, then those students must be fought.

The mere requirement that students strictly observe the university order does not preclude student protest. (By definition, universities are places of protest!) Aiming at the discovery of truth and the advancement of learning which are sometimes in opposition to the status quo, universities are places of protest against existing achievement. Student participation in that protest, much as it may be directed toward their professors and administrators, is a prerequisite for a true and effective university. Students can protest if they feel the university does not fulfill its contractual obligations. While this would be difficult to prove because university catalogues often reserve the right to change, there still may be cause for legal protest. It is quite conceivable that once the educational contract has been entered students might want to change it and the university might want to go along. In this case, the university must examine whether the change is desired by all of the students or just a fraction. If a majority of students protest for change, the university must not go along unless the change is agreeable also to the minority of students. Otherwise, the university would not fulfill its contractual obligations to the minority. A protest by the minority should only be followed if the majority approve.

Whether they constitute a minority or a majority of the student body, protesters have no right to impose their will upon their non-protesting fellow students. Whatever student protests there are and for whatever reasons they are undertaken, they must not interfere with learning.

Protests against the university are justified only if they are provoked by the university. No matter how much universities may be involved in war research (something academic freedom entitles them to do), they cannot be blamed for the foreign policy of the President of the United States. The failure of the two major political parties to nominate presidential candidates who are to the liking of the New Left, much as it may justify protest against these parties, does not justify university strikes which deprive fellow students of the instruction to which they are entitled. Failures of the American Federal Government do not justify riots in universities which are not under federal but state control. The independence of American Universities being what it is, such failures would probably not justify action against them even if they were controlled by the Federal Government.

Student protest occupies a minimal although significant part of the multifarious array of societal difficulties. Poverty, racial strife, pollution and the apparent decline in the whole quality of life are equally important and each of these has the potential of provoking in our
society a climate of violence. These problems affect all of society not simply colleges and universities. Yet these institutions must hold our greatest hopes, they must be places of objective inquiry for the solutions of society's problems. In order to accomplish this herculean task, the universities must, through reason, restore internal order. Once order is restored, academic freedom will again blossom. In lieu of riots and a climate of violence that lead youth into confusion, universities must begin to fulfill their ultimate mission and lead youth into clarity.

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