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The Social Question in Liberal Education

By DALE PORTER

"The truth never dies, but it leads a wretched life"

— Jewish proverb

In her book On Revolution (1965) Hannah Arendt makes a distinction between liberation and freedom which I want to relate to the function of liberal education in contemporary American society. The dilemma implied by that relation was developed by my students in a recent class discussion; it is on their behalf that I present it here.

Liberation for Arendt means overcoming the conditions of biological or material necessity that have been the lot of most people throughout history. So long as resources are scarce relative to the community, she argues, people will concern themselves with the satisfaction of needs rather than the pursuit of the just and the good. And throughout history, even where abundance has been temporarily present, oppressive social structures have created conditions of necessity for the many, in favor of the few. Thus the act of liberation has a social as well as a technological goal.

(It may be argued that necessity involves a subjective judgment, and that numerous exceptional people have ignored necessity for the sake of individual freedom. I shall return to this point later on, but the present argument cannot rest upon exceptions).

In a general sense, freedom means self-determination, both individual and collective, in any sphere of life. Thus we may speak of
religious and intellectual as well as political freedom, and we may judge the quality of freedom according to the degree of enlightenment with which it is exercised. But Hannah Arendt, who looked to ancient Athens for the genesis of the concept, defined freedom as participation in public affairs without the conditions of necessity. Freedom may involve a sense of duty, civic pride, piety, intellectual nobility, and the enjoyment of cooperative action. It is always exercised in concert with others, though it may be nurtured in private reflection. It is often discovered in the act of liberation, but cannot survive without the establishment of a "place" or a jurisdiction (e.g. the Athenian agora) that sanctions and facilitates collective self-determination.

The distinction between liberation and freedom raises a "social question" of long tradition: who shall be eligible for participation in public affairs? For Arendt that question has always been answered by the conditions of necessity: in Athens, Rome, and medieval Europe, those who owned enough land, or otherwise controlled the labor of others, were free to participate in public affairs without worrying about the necessities of life. Those who did worry were ineligible. The rise of a capitalistic bourgeoisie, and subsequently of a socialistic laboring class, ensured the continual revival of the social question in even more encompassing terms.

The social question has always infused the tradition of liberal education, which is itself based on the assumption of freedom rather than necessity. The liberal arts were developed as education for free people, that is, for people who would undertake the conduct of public affairs beyond the call of material interests.

In Greece and Rome, education was a training for public affairs intended for the sons of the well-to-do. Similarly in medieval Europe universities were staffed and attended by clergy who served the Church and governmental offices on the assumption that necessities were taken care of—by benefices or livings. The fact of patronage qualifies but does not discredit this basic purpose of education. In early modern times education was proffered to the sons of gentlemen for the same reason—to prepare them for a life of public service beyond the business of getting and spending. Dr. Arnold’s reform of Rugby sought to revive the tradition in the 19th century. All of these arrangements could hold the ideal of freedom through liberal education because their students could usually count on some form of independent income, related to their ownership of the means of production. Obviously in these circumstances freedom, as Arendt defines it, was reserved for the few.

Up to Dr. Arnold’s time in the West and even longer in other parts of the world, social convulsions often combined the goals of escape from necessity and exercise of freedom. But in most cases, even in the great French Revolution, the demand for scarce resources, for
bread for the masses, came to overshadow the demand for freedom; the self-constituted authorities generated in the early phases of the revolts gave way to a centralized control, precisely because resources remained scarce for most people. They would inevitably remain scarce until the technical base for abundance was established. Asked in 1917 what the revolution meant, Lenin replied simply, "Electrification and soviets." That is, a technical approach to overcoming necessity, and a self-constituted authority or arena for public thought and action. Liberation, and then freedom. But the original republican federation of soviets gave way to Stalin's centralized control over material resources.

Only in America did Arendt discover a revolution that realized the true meaning of freedom. Even before 1776 the colonists enjoyed a measure of autonomy and an abundance of resources that fostered participation in public affairs by a large number of people; and their dedication to egalitarian principles made participation not just possible, but attractive. During the Revolution and the making of a constitution, says Arendt, the founding fathers discovered two things: that their power derived from a multitude of lower, local assemblies rather than from control of resources; and that exercising such power was enjoyable beyond the call of duty.

Jefferson had this kind of experience in mind, I think, when he suggested that society ought to have a revolution every generation. He meant that each new generation needs to contribute for itself a social order that not only makes freedom possible, but defines freedom in the very act of its constitution. Only in this way will power remain a function of community.

The social question revived in America, however, because we did not remain a community of yeoman farmers united in close settlements on the Eastern seaboard. We spread across the continent, we developed slavery and racial prejudice, we took in millions of new refugees from older worlds. And we embraced the industrial revolution. Out of a potential for abundance, we produced a social-economic-political system based on an assumption of scarcity.

Industrial capitalism is a system for overcoming conditions of necessity by concentrating on those conditions to the exclusion of most everything else. In its time it was very effective in exploiting resources, both natural and human, to produce abundance. Yet very early in its growth, critics were already asking whether it would solve the social question of poverty and necessity related to the structure of society. Granted, the system produced enormous quantities of things—but how were these things to be distributed?

We are still worrying about the problem of distribution in the last half of the twentieth century, when technically it is possible to relieve every member of our society from the conditions of necessity.
As Arendt maintained, the act of liberation has a social element too. My students saw the social element as an insurmountable obstacle to freedom, and I must admit their arguments made sense to me. Let me try to recall what they said.

Every society has one or more paradigms, which are ways to approach problems based on some successful example. Paradigms tell us what kinds of problems, methods, and solutions are legitimate; the paradigmatic assumptions are highly resistant to change, even when applied to wholly new situations. The major American paradigm might be termed "competitive individualism." It is based on the twin assumptions of scarce resources and unlimited wants. Now, the assumption of scarcity was a valid assumption at one time. Coupled with the capitalistic system of competitive individualism, it led us, as I said before, to concentrate on the production of enormous quantities of things to the point that we overcame the technical problems of liberation.

At this point, however, we encounter a paradox. Just as we overcame scarcity by assuming scarcity, now we tend to create scarcity in order to justify the original assumption. The more successful we are at producing abundance, the more we cling to an illusion of necessity, a kind of pioneer image. Our consumer economy and our competitive character might collapse if we ever admitted to being satisfied.

Philip Slater has described this paradox, in *The Pursuit of Loneliness* (1970), as basic to American culture. Its most extreme expression is found in the advertising industry, which does its best to make us dissatisfied with what we already have. Because the products we buy are advertised in association with symbols of emotional satisfaction (e.g. Salem cigarettes give you romance in a springtime meadow), we can buy forever and still feel deprived.

The assumption of scarcity may be translated as a condition of necessity, whether that condition is illusory or not. So long as American society perpetuates the assumption, it will never be able to exercise the kind of freedom that Arendt was describing. Our public affairs will remain subject to material interests, and even our reform movements will go astray.

Environmental concerns are a case in point. The environmentalists, while trying to reduce the effects of competitive exploitation, share the prevailing assumption that resources are scarce. In fact they raise the assumption to crisis level. This is not to say that environmental concern is mistaken. But there are two implications of such concern that relate to our discussion of freedom. One, that minority group leaders have been quick to point out, is that conditions of necessity have once again overshadowed concern for the exercise of freedom. It was through participation in public affairs that minority groups hoped to change the socio-economic structure so that conditions of
necessity would disappear. The assumptions of Black, Brown, and Red Power fit Arendt's description of a revolutionary act of liberation which, rejecting scarcity, began to constitute jurisdictional and attitudinal "spaces" where freedom could happen. Is it any wonder that minority groups are apathetic about environmental movements that revive and strengthen the illusion of necessity?

The other implication of environmental concern is that scarcity is a self-fulfilling prophecy. If the proper approach to scarce resources is competition and exploitation (and this has been our approach), we now know that competition and exploitation produce scarcity. From Adam Smith to John Galbraith, we have valued those things which were scarce. Hence we must perpetuate scarcity if we are to have anything of value. And that is what we do. By the same logic, if we assumed a condition of abundance, we would have little need for competition and exploitation. We would be free from conditions of necessity which prevent us from reforming our social order.

Unfortunately, we have little evidence that the assumption of scarcity will die in the near future. But what I have said about it relates directly to the social question in our universities. If our students assume scarcity and necessity as part of their fundamental culture, how can they ever appreciate, or take advantage of, a liberal education? If American participation in public affairs seldom transcends the motivations of competition and exploitation, how can our students benefit from lessons in free thought and action?

Two small anecdotes may illustrate the problem. In a humanities class we discussed Oedipus' courageous (or foolhardy) search for the truth about the fate which had been prophesied for him. Upon hearing that the search for truth was considered by some Greeks to be man's only source of dignity in the face of destiny, a freshman raised her hand to exclaim, "But that won't bring you happiness, will it?"

And in the class which was examining Arendt's idea of freedom, a senior asked, "If conditions of necessity were absent, whatever would you talk about?"

Well, what would we talk about? By and large, students at this midwestern university seem to appreciate the humanistic tradition while they are in class. But their casual interest is always tempered by a pragmatic sense of the job market. Many are working their way through college. Almost all are enrolled in employment-related curricula. Thus it is not, for them, a matter of enjoying freedom now and losing it upon graduation. It is a matter of accepting or rejecting the dominant cultural values. Nevertheless, there are some who seem tentatively to have realized Arendt's idea of freedom. They may be engaged in extra-curricular activities or, more privately, refuse to abide by curricular requirements. They are not always members of a
“counter-culture,” and they do not realize freedom all the time. But I think my colleagues are excited when they do.

While we may not be able to “liberate” liberal education from the scarcity assumptions of American society, we may yet be able to widen its sphere of influence by identifying and nurturing the conditions in which freedom seems to appear. I can only make a guess at those conditions here, and the guessing is not very optimistic.

One condition for freedom is the old independent income, stemming not so much from inherited wealth as from scholarships and the G.I. Bill. Indulgent fathers don’t count because their largesse comes wrapped in expectations. One of my veterans is using the G.I. Bill to promote radical social change, with proper disdain for curricular regulations. And I know from personal experience the liberating effects of a scholarship. Nevertheless, independent income is not likely to be extended to the majority of students.

A second condition may be socio-economic status. Students from high-status backgrounds tend to assume from past experience that participation in public affairs will be a normal adjunct of their future employment. But a regional midwestern university has few students in this condition. Nor is status sufficient for the exercise of freedom: the scarcity assumption may simply operate to a higher degree. In fact, many student leaders tend to see their “public” work as an investment for employability, rather than the reverse.

Third, many students achieve a measure of liberation by temporarily repressing their awareness of future demands. They get caught up in a movement or even in intellectual inquiry (!). They seem determinedly ignorant about career options. In the past, there was something called “campus life,” an arena of roughly equal participation that sustained temporary excursions into free activity. But as universities grew to accommodate necessity-conscious crowds of students, this arena seems to have dissolved. What’s left is located under centralized “student services” units, the kind of structure designed to control scarce resources. No university administration can re-constitute an arena of community participation; it has to be done by students themselves. But with the trend toward employment considerations in curricular planning, students will increasingly achieve a measure of freedom only by ignoring the university.

A fourth condition for liberation, alluded to above, entails a reduction in the scope of perceived necessity. This is an oriental idea embraced by parts of the youth counter-culture and labelled un-American by their parents. If “necessary” is perceived as “whatever is available,” then the question of liberation becomes irrelevant. I have an economics text written by a Brahmin from central India. It argues that the way to overcome scarcity is not to increase resources, but to reduce wants. The eight-fold path of Buddhism leads to the same end. How
many students are willing to take that path? And how many faculty are willing to follow?

None of the four conditions for freedom outlined above are very visible in American universities today. Perhaps my discussion has done no more than update the traditional dilemma of liberal education. If that were all, then I would conclude that the dignity of liberal education will be upheld, as always, in the search for truth despite an unhappy fate. But I refuse to be washed up by a wave of rhetoric. There is one more possibility.

The Hindu tradition that advocates a reduction in wants is also very practical about the proper time to start. Youth is the worst time for liberation. Only after a person has raised a family and made a career should he begin the arduous search for truth; only then can he hope to overcome desire and therefore, necessity. Americans, on the other hand, bring masses of oversexed adolescents together on one campus, lock the girl's dormitory, bombard everyone with career anxieties, and give them a 45-minute videotape lecture on the noble death of Socrates. That they do concern themselves with truth and justice in spite of it all is a tribute to humanity.

At the other end of the generation spectrum is a large group of middle-age career employees, housewives and retired people who are asking the same question my student asked, only in a different tense: "Whatever do we talk about now?" Suppose these people were our students. Would they be more susceptible to liberal education and exercise of freedom than their sons and daughters? Could they more easily be seduced from their sexual hangups, their career anxieties and their obsession with the acquisition of things? Wouldn't they be in a better position to overcome the conditions, or the illusions, of necessity?

I am not entirely optimistic about the answers to those questions, especially after watching the disintegration of an affluent American family on television. But we have made an unholy mess of bringing liberal education to the young. Perhaps it is time to start over with the elderly, and then work back down the scale of generations.