The Academic Depression

David Riesman

Men and women receiving their bachelor's degrees now have for the most part been those who entered college near the end of what has been the greatest boom period in American academic history. With accelerating momentum during the last four years, it can at least be suggested that the academic analogue of the Great Crash of 1929 has occurred. Universities are even more diversified than the securities listed on the stock exchanges; they are not so closely interlinked; hence, what is a depression in some institutions is a mild recession or a plateau in others, and perhaps a pause that refreshes in still others. There are surely some institutions (until recently, the University of Texas was one) so richly supported that they could use the slack market for faculty as a time for academic bargain-hunting. Nevertheless, particularly if we look at the major research-oriented universities, it seems fair to say that there has been a loss of momentum and of morale almost everywhere in American academic life during the last several years; and I would like to try to clarify a bit of this history.

There is a legend widely shared across the political and pedagogic spectrum that at some earlier point the American liberal arts college was an idyllic refuge, uncorrupted by careerism, where students and faculty had close relationships. Like so many of the current nostalgias, this one is of doubtful historical accuracy. It is true that professors were less mobile and that the academic professions had less autonomy, being subject to the local control of (often rather despotic) administrators, Catholic and Protestant religious groups, trustee tycoons, and legislators. Thorstein Veblen memorialized an earlier epoch in *The Higher Learning in America*, subtitled "A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men," published in 1918. No doubt, there were islands of amenity amid the genteel philistinism Veblen described. But what characterized even the Ivy League colleges in the decades before the Second World War, as it has characterized a good many less distinguished institutions since then, was a tacit treaty between most students and most faculty by which each agreed not to interfere with the "real work" of the other. The students came mostly for fun and games, for contacts and matrimony. The term "the gentleman's C" (is it still familiar?) is a legacy of that era, reflecting the level of effort thought appropriate by gentlemanly undergraduates willing to give a kind of Sunday respect to culture and learning. The "real work" of a minority of faculty was scholarship and research, often pedantic and seldom original. Such faculty regarded themselves as neglected in a pragmatic America, and they watched those talented students who wanted more than a baccalaureate degree go on to law or medical school, with only a few redeemed for the life of scholarship and science.

All this was already beginning to change even before the Great Depression of the 1930's shook the complacency and authority of business and political leadership. Colleges began to look better as the rest of society looked worse; and, with deflation, the steady salaries of professors became attractive and colleges seemed ports of call for many who could not find jobs. A further dramatic change came with the end of the Second World War, when returning veterans piled into the colleges with the help of the G.I. Bill of Rights. Loosened from their home towns by the war, the G.I. Bill encouraged them to go wherever they could get in, and it was only at this point that Ivy League and other colleges began to be selective in academic terms rather than homogeneous, thanks to the tilt of the local ethnic, religious, or geographic catch basin. Delayed and matured by

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the war years, the veterans were bored by fun and games and wanted to get on with their work. Many faculty responded excitedly to them, which in turn helped encourage a number of veterans to enter academic life.

While American universities had played almost no part in the First World War, some major ones were involved in important ways in the Second. That war and, after that, Sputnik, boosted support levels for science and technology. And this in turn could be exploited for the general building up of a group of increasingly national universities which exchanged talent with each other and with world-class institutions everywhere. Even the classics prospered, not only as underprivileged claimant for a compensatory share but as part of a quantitative and qualitative rise in academic energy. Not only nationally, but also in many localities, colleges and universities were becoming our secular cathedrals.

Correspondingly, competition for able faculty and students meant that institutions could no longer count on a local market over which they had some monopoly power. I remember very well a student who came to the College at the University of Chicago in the years immediately after the Second World War on one of the national scholarships, I think a Westinghouse Science Talent award. He had attended a small-town high school in Western Wyoming and took it for granted that with his other college-going fellows he would attend the nearest state college. To have wider aspirations would have seemed odd; people would have asked him, in effect, "Who do you think you are?" The national award made it legitimate for him to enter a national orbit; people could understand this even if they could not grasp all the implications, though they probably surmised that he would never return to Wyoming, as indeed he did not. (He became a professor at Columbia.) There were thousands like him, women as well as men, although on the whole women after high school were not encouraged to go so far as men or to pursue postgraduate work in proportion to their talents.

During those years academic careers became attractive to many able undergraduates. Not only did the brightest no longer go almost automatically to law or medical school, but those who did seemed often to be taking out a kind of insurance policy, sometimes to please anxious parents, sometimes out of fear on the student's own part that he could not become a really great scientist or scholar; thus the practice of law or medicine was regarded as a second-choice career. (Indeed, I recall talking to a group of honors seniors at Harvard Medical School in those years, members of AOA, of whom a third at least were going on for the Ph.D. after medical school, their insurance policy, so to speak, already purchased.)

Naturally, these new undergraduate constituencies were gratifying to professors. In the major universities, the faculty demanded and got increasingly abler and better prepared students. Trustees and alumni generously or grudgingly surrendered the gatekeeping function in what they had regarded as their own institutions for their own kind, accepting the faculty's preference for bright students from all strata of the society plus some compensatory benefits for the more deprived. While faculty members continued to complain that alumni sons and athletes were favored, this practice became more and more marginal, and there was often less favoritism for these categories than for faculty children.

The gentleman's C began at this time a precipitous decline at the more selective colleges. At my own institution, eighty-nine per cent of the Radcliffe students and over two-thirds of the Harvard students have been undertaking honors programs. The Harvard admissions people discuss the problem of recruiting a "happy bottom quarter" who could be satisfied to stay at Harvard while *not* doing honors work. But during these boom years, very few careers at a highly competitive and selective undergraduate college could remain a clearly unambivalent substitute for adequacy of undergraduate performance; at Harvard College, for example, *Crimson* editors increasingly felt that they also had to graduate magna cum laude, and even theatre and film buffs and star athletes felt under comparable pressure.

Before the Second World War, many of the most eminent intellectuals had at most peripheral connections with universities. But for the last two decades, most intellectuals have been centered in the universities, as have many poets, writers, artists, and musicians. Many of the great theologians such as Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr also became affiliated with universities. Educated men and women no longer looked to businessmen for leadership; and preachers and pastors (modified in the latter case by developments in post-conciliar Catholicism) have had to be content with provincial followings in small-town and rural America and in the ethnic "provinces" of major cities. Indeed, people in universities came to be thought of as mentors who could make sense of a complicated and threatening universe.

For people like myself, obsessed with the dangers of nuclear destruction, hope for progress and for the future has been muted ever since Hiroshima. But in comparison with the present mood of apocalyptic despair, the several decades after the Second World War were a period of relative optimism. It was widely believed by increasingly better educated businessmen and government leaders that science and research could help solve the world's problems. Academicians did little to discourage and much to buoy such hopes. And, along with a few government-sponsored research institutes such as RAND, the national universities became the major instrumentalities

for this quest. Today, the student and faculty Left commonly see this as a corruption, seducing professors into imperialist or reactionary outlooks, but a recent large study by S. M. Lipset and Martin Trow of faculty attitudes (supported by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education) demonstrates—and comparable findings appear in other studies, too—that those professors who have been consultants to government are more liberal or radical on the war and other issues than those who have not. This, the authors suggest, is not only because they know more of what is going on and are more alert, but because those who are consultants tend to be in those leading universities which have also been the foci of opposition to American foreign and domestic policies.

It was in this same period that the more social among the social sciences began their phenomenal rise in influence, attracting many undergraduates by their promise of understanding and others by their promise of power. Some social science boosters have claimed that if Manhattan Project amounts of money were put into the social sciences, questions of underdevelopment, overpopulation, racial conflict, and even war could be resolved. Federal and foundation money flowed in that direction, too, thus making it unnecessary for administrators to divert money from physics or history to give it to sociology or clinical psychology.

Had universities continued to absorb human and material resources at the growth rate of the 1950's and early 1960's, we would have been turning all Canadian forests into pulp for journal articles, and universities would have become so large as to dwarf General Motors or the Army! Indeed, in many cities in America the university is the largest single plant, bringing more people together and having a larger payroll than any other.

Those payrolls kept climbing right along to near the end of the 1960's, both absolutely and relatively to the rise of the Gross National Product. They kept rising despite the difficulty of showing comparable increases of productivity by an institution that has no clear measure of what it does "produce." It was enough that people believed universities were a good thing, good for their children, good for their community, good for America—and that America itself was on the whole potentially good. It was in these boom years an enormous honor to be a trustee or regent of a university—consider whether public universities would have been so warmly supported had involvement with them been comparable to involvement with a mental hospital or orphanage or some other agency coping with nonacademic clients.

Ever since the late 1960's, however, the rewards of being a trustee are not at all clear, while the penalties in terms of pressure and responsibility and antagonism can be quite clear. It is similarly unclear what the rewards are of being a university president. And what surprises me in the light of ever mounting costs and relatively shrinking assets is that more university presidents have not become receivers in bankruptcy. The new styles of teaching are expensive. Although there is no persuasive evidence that students learn more in one kind of setting than another, the combined cults of intimacy and of participation have led students to insist on smaller classes, on seminars, tutorials, independent study, etc.; and most faculty members, not liking captive audiences anyway, share similar preferences. Students want, and often need, other expensive accessories: counseling and psychiatric help; day care centers; and courses in all the new areas of social concern, even while the natural sciences, the language and area studies departments, including the English department, lose customers without being able to relinquish tenured faculty.

Many kinds of local groups see the universities as a resource to serve them. While previously groups such as farmers and businessmen needed help, they could often pay for it; but the newer nonaffluent groups which cannot pay have many friends inside the university who add to their leverage in making demands. The institutions most vulnerable to these combined pressures are, on the one hand, those private colleges and universities which depend for support almost entirely on tuition and, on the other hand, the national centers of research and scholarship, both public and private, which have depended on philanthropy and on state and federal support for their expensive graduate and professional programs. (For the last few years, I have been inclined to think that something like the Federal Educational Opportunity Bank, comparable on a national scale to the plan Yale is pursuing, offers the best chance of mobilizing resources to meet the heightened expectations and the relatively declining support of the major centers of scholarship.)

However, my main concern now is not the financial but the moral crash or Great Academic Depression. It is not that university intellectuals have been succeeded by a new priesthood, but rather a disbelief that any exists. This is part of a larger loss of faith in the very idea of progress. This loss of faith is endemic to all the industrial countries, even while the nonindustrial ones seek to catch up, to overtake and surpass. The disillusionment has, however, hit America and its universities particularly hard. One reason is that America has from the beginning been a country with a greater sense of mission than most, a potential utopia with strong evangelical elements. I have often in fantasy wondered what states like Pennsylvania or New York would be like had not our supposedly manifest destiny helped pull us into the Mexican War, and had the North not fought the South to keep it in the Union in the Civil War. A noncontinental America might perhaps have been

less dangerous to itself and to other countries. Comparable misgivings have been voiced throughout our history; there have always been prophets who regarded America as an already ruined opportunity, already doomed, although seldom without offering one last chance for redemption. The Vietnam war has enormously intensified this endemic sense of American corruption, and has extended it to a judgment that all American contacts with the rest of the world are inevitably damaging to other peoples. Now we tend to exchange earlier complacencies for a new vanity of believing that America is the worst among nations, and we search to locate the worst villains within that worst America. Failed evangelism turns into guilt.

I can illustrate one consequence by reference to what was for me a haunting conversation with a group of seniors at Cal. Tech several years ago. One of them declared: "I am an astronomer. I love astronomy. I admire my teachers, and I can do the work. I would like to become an astronomer, but have I the right?" I asked him whether he thought Pierre Boulez had the right—the right to be an esoteric composer. He responded that Pierre Boulez gave more pleasure to people than an astronomer could. But that was not the heart of it, as I knew; the heart of it was his feeling that astronomy was a luxury and that he was privileged, and that he ought somehow to expiate society's miseries by devoting himself directly to their remedy. I suggested to him that he might enter VISTA or the Peace Corps or in some similar fashion pay the tax he regarded as owing to society, not perhaps for a lifetime but at least for a down payment on a spell of astronomy. But he and some of his fellow students were not content with this. To put their views most dramatically, they were tempted to pull down the heights of culture in the hope of filling up the abysses. In human terms, this social concern is attractive, especially in contrast with the boyish gamesmanship of many other, less self-conscious scientists. And I do not think these Cal. Tech students were running away from meritocratic pressures, unlike many students I see from more affluent backgrounds for whom one of the uses of guilt for privilege is to escape from the pressure to test themselves against their own standards of performance.

In any event, I do not believe that denying ourselves the luxury of astronomy and other "irrelevant" pursuits will even marginally alleviate the misery of the world. I have already suggested my own view that science is one of the liberal arts. I believe we should pursue it, among other reasons, the way people climb mountains, because it is there, because it is often exhilarating, because it makes us all more alive and stretches our capacities. Yet only a fool fails to see the harm that applied science can do, or the harm that rationalism can do.

As I have mentioned, my own chief concern has been the nuclear danger, the danger of vast destruction extending to great portions of human, animal and vegetable life. Most Americans and the vast majority of non-Americans seem now to have grown accustomed to this danger, and it worries even Americans less than the war in Indochina, though the dangers of that war and of the Middle East for me always have nuclear overtones. Nevertheless, I continue to believe that one must live with part of one's being as if there were progress, as if the planet could escape destruction, as if America could avoid not the corruption of the world but the corruption of our worst and often evangelical excesses. For me this means that we must conduct university affairs in such a fashion as to prepare for a potentially better life at a time not now visible when the gravest hazards to our common life may be moderated.

The loss of faith in progress and the concomitant revolt against reason have had uneven impacts across the American academic landscape. A vast amount has been written about the impact on students, a number of whom have taken the universities seriously enough to be disillusioned by them and to turn against them, at times violently. Rather less has been said about faculty, especially senior faculty, yet I think that the loss of faith in their own disciplines, their own way of life, by some of the most distinguished men and women in the universities has been one of the most significant long-run consequences of the academic depression. Some of these professors have been told by their radical students and colleagues that they have been irrelevant or complicitous, and that their interest in scholarship is simply a vested interest like any other, one which has made them upwardly mobile and successful. (And it is a vested interest, because academic motives are not more pure and single than are political movements. Yet as in the law we rely on vested interests to protect basic human rights through litigation, so we must with due caution rely on men with a vested interest in intellectual life to protect scholarship and high culture.) Furthermore, intellectual careers are difficult at best. For example, the mathematician or the natural scientist, even the economist, today often finds himself obsolete while still quite young; without further study, he would soon be unable to pass the general examination that his graduate students must take. In the humanities and some of the social sciences, obsolescence is rather more opaque and complicated. It is often an obsolescence of topic rather than of procedure, so that a man teaching eighteenth-century English literature or even the sociology of small groups may come to feel that it is not terribly important. Such a loss of morale is contagious, and faculty can easily take to berating each other for not being sufficiently pure as scholars or pure as citizens.

When these moral controversies are coupled, as is increasingly common, with a reduction in relative levels of financial support, the arguments over priorities can become savage. Here the business cycle and the moral cycle coincide. In some institutions, we see a preoccupation with power rather than with influence, and with governance and participation rather than with ideas. It seems probable that the major intellectual centers have been more severely shaken than the less distinguished ones. In some places, there has been a genuine re-examination of purpose, a greater concern with undergraduate teaching, and a becoming modesty as to what universities can contribute to the instant solution of the changing roster of problems. But in others the tacit treaties among faculty and among university constituencies have been shattered with no such redeeming features. While leadership is often blamed for these outcomes, luck seems to me at least equally involved.

However, the nonélite colleges, and especially the commuter ones, seem to have been surviving the present depression, though with considerable variation, rather better than the élite ones, not only because they are less expensive on a *per capita* basis, but also because their students have seldom taken the leadership in protest movements and their faculties have been less visible as targets for envy and less involved in politics, old and new. It will be interesting to see whether some of these institutions alter their goals in terms of what they see happening to the academic leaders. For until the other day, there were several hundred Avis institutions trying to become Hertz, trying to add doctoral programs and to expand post-baccalaureate programs, often at the expense of their undergraduate mission. Is it possible that some of these will catch on to the fact that the leaders are themselves now in doubt as to what directions to pursue? Will they notice the shift toward a concern with undergraduate teaching in many of the vanguard, highly selective institutions? Or will they continue as in the past to follow the direction in which the leaders used to point?

One aspect of the answer to these questions depends on what is happening in the graduate schools of the major institutions where the faculties are being trained for the wider academic terrain. A minority of these graduate students have turned against research altogether, regarding it as at best a form of co-optation to a dehydrated rationalism, and at worst to a vicious programming into a destructive social élite. These young people avow that they will be teachers and advocates, and some have been not unwilling to carry their sense of mission with them to the less favored institutions. It remains to be seen what will occur when their avant-garde outlook, skeptical of personal ambition and of upward mobility, encounters the more conventional ambitions of entrenched faculty and "first generation" student bodies. It is conceivable, though at the moment unlikely, that they will be able to invent new missions acceptable to the new constituencies.

The impulses that lead these young faculty members to seek out rather than to reject (or accept *faute de mieux*) a position in a provincial institution shows its other, less benign side in the tendency of many of our most sensitive and idealistic young people to cut themselves off from the rest of the world under the shadow of the judgment that American contacts with that world are inevitably imperialist and damaging. For example, I am reminded of a recent episode reported to me by a former Peace Corps Volunteer in Ethiopia. American Volunteers have provided substantial cadres for Ethiopian secondary schools, and in earlier years many were anxious lest they were not doing much for Ethiopia even while enjoying their sojourn there. But when recently a study was done which showed that Volunteers had had a considerable impact, with the result that in schools where Volunteers had taught, Ethiopian students had learned more than before even of their native language, and even without direct contact with Volunteers, many former Volunteers were dismayed. For the study showed that they had been "imperialists" after all, albeit soft ones. They had intruded upon the authentic native culture. This sensitive reaction blotted from view the eagerness of many Ethiopians to get out from under the traditional culture of their dominant strata and ethnic groups. Similar judgments elsewhere have blotted from view the fact that the Peace Corps Volunteers have often protected indigenous cultures from both native and colonial rapacity and intrusion. These former Volunteers, like many other idealistic Americans, in a reversal of earlier mindless boosterism, have become convinced that the touch of our culture is only destructive, never emancipating.

When non-American student radicals come to visit their American counterparts, they are often astonished by the latter's despair and loss of hope. Paradoxically, America is still a magnet for many non-Americans who share our American criticisms of the Southeast Asian war and of racism. In my own field, I have talked this last year with young officials from the Ministries of Education in the Netherlands and Germany, and also with someone from Sweden, all of them hoping to expand and democratize their own countries' universities, and looking to American mass education as a model. They come here to find a blast of cynicism about what good education does, a growing interest in Ivan Illich's concept of "deschooling" society, much as if a rich man should tell a poor man, "Why do you want my ulcers?"

I do not believe we can understand America's problems only by introspection. If Americans became more familiar with the linguistic and cultural divisions of Belgium or Yugoslavia, Quebec or In-

donesia or Nigeria, we might gain a greater intellectual grasp of American problems of race and class. We can never understand something if we know only that thing.

There is similar truncation in the sense of time. Several years ago, I was talking in a seminar in the humanities of thoughtful, affluent, white, upper-middle-class students who were characteristically critical of their whiteness and their affluence. Some said that they wished they could share "the black experience," under the illusion that there was only a single experience of ghetto misery on the one side and joyful naturalness on the other. I suggested that as part of their university life they should try to share the experience of King Lear, and that they would find this equally difficult. This attempt might even be of some help in the task of widening their empathy across racial and cultural boundaries.

The attitude reflected in these student comments goes along with an attractive tendency to reject intellectual game-playing and rivalry, and a notable interest of talented young men and women in service careers to the deprived, the handicapped, the troubled, the very young, and sometimes even the very old. Yet, somewhat hidden in these new outlooks on work and career, one can find some paradoxical links to the collegiate era in which I myself grew up. The "gentleman's C" has, to be sure, become attenuated. But we now find instead what might be called the "anti-gentleman's B." There is a tendency to assume that any stretching and testing of one's powers, whether against the damned thingmanship of the clarinet or the bewilderment of trying to find out what is going on in the world, is identical with egocentric, competitive display. And bestowal of the grade of B for modest effort may bespeak the faculty's doubts about its own legitimacy and about the validity of standards which by their nature are not egalitarian.

It is a tragedy for particular individuals but not for the country as a whole that the complacencies of many faculty members in an earlier academic era have ended with something of a crash. What matters for the country is what happens now. It seems clear to me that the golden era of the fifties and sixties will not return, nor, of course, will the vanished collegiate era. I think it would be damaging for the country and the world if major centers of recondite, "irrelevant" science and scholarship did not survive and prosper. The resources of high culture are precarious: and I am thinking of our museums, our libraries, our conservatories of music, as well as of our great public and private universities. It would diminish our diversity if able young people who are capable of enjoying astronomy or other forms of discovery, people who have curiosity about themselves and the world, should abandon the universities because of a temporary drop in the market. I see no better cathedral than the university, with all its limitations and rigidities, its dilemmas and conflicts, its human waste and impending bankruptcies. Yet at the very moment when these cathedrals have been competitively built, and staffed and even overstaffed, the never wholly unambivalent spirit that supported them has been deflated. I do not see any near prospect of a consensus arising out of which new tacit treaties could grow among the various constituencies concerned with academic life. Indeed, the effort to achieve such consensus is, in many universities, more problematic than acceptance of its absence. It may be that we are in for a stoical time when some people will continue to believe that university life can be lived with intensity even in a time of troubles. I rather hope that some graduates of the class of 1972 find such an unrosy legacy an attractive challenge.