

The Erosion of Humanitas

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The role of higher education is crucial in a world that seems torn apart by cultural, economic, political and social differences, and yet is, at the same time, ever more closely drawn together by technology, travel, social and economic needs. Higher education offers no panacea for the disunity of this complex and confusing world. It should, however, contribute to a kind of understanding that spans the differences among the people of the world, or at least those within one country. In this connection liberal arts education is today in jeopardy, unsure of its competence to serve the ideal of *humanitas* that at one time was conceded to be both the stable ground and the ever elusive goal of higher education.

Two years ago William V. Shannon of the *New York Times* wrote an article, "The New Barbarians," in which he lamented the decay of higher education. Its plight, as he saw it, was due to the surrender of time-honored methods of transmitting knowledge embodied in the traditional curricula of our colleges and universities. With grades, general requirements and tough courses eliminated, with the "design-your-own-education" philosophy let loose, the predictable consequence had arrived. Rarely knowing what was in their best intellectual interest, students had blundered on and graduated as "the new barbarians." At the other end of the spectrum of criticism, Ivan Illich flails away at an educational system that has become a pseudo-religion separating the student from "reality" and "life." Gravely he informs us that a "person grows and learns in the measure in which he interacts with other persons in a meaningful environment." Technology, he solemnly asserts, should be put at the disposal of the majority of the world's peoples "so that each person would be able to heal himself and house himself, to move freely around his

world and to learn what he wants to know" (*Christian Century*, December 15, 1971).

Still in a critical vein, but from a different direction, Myron Bloy joins the game by calling for an end to what he designates as the *détente* between the university and the church. Once more we are invited to castigate the academic ideology which perpetuates a dualism between the active, rational faculties and the passive, affective and spiritual competences. Bloy boldly offers "the biblical view" as a substitute for the rational control he believes the university teaches and exalts in its emphasis upon "delicate, disincarnated observation." The academic ideology, he maintains, offers only a "stingy little model of the self," whereas the biblical version is one of "capacious dimensions" (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 28, 1974). This is the criticism of higher education that Kenneth R. Minoque has identified as regret over the isolation of higher learning and its "monkish erudition" from the real world.

Much of what happened in the 1960's has left wounds in the academic world which we have only begun to recognize and from which we shall be long in recovering. In seeking remedies, educators have rushed into bypaths of improvisation, demonstrating they have lost faith in an education that is aimed at the development of the mind. In this respect, as Adam B. Ulam has pointed out with some exaggeration, the main cause of the cultural crisis of the country was "not any rebellion but the befuddlement of the middle-aged" (*Key Reporter*, Winter, 1973-74).

The campus disturbances of the last decade may or may not have hastened the end of the Vietnam conflict. What seems incontrovertible is that in the midst of shouts about freedom and the appeals to humanity against the inhumanity of the Vietnam slaughter, those elements presumed to be characteristic of *humanitas* were sacrificed or endangered. The "barbarians," it seemed, were at the gates again, this time armed with an instantaneous virtue that

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brooked no compromise with the effete dictates of modulated voices.

"Tear the place down" or "politicize the college" were the slogans of virtue outraged by the wickedness of administrators and faculty who lacked that keenness of moral perception with which youth are uniquely endowed. Key terms such as "confrontation" and "nonnegotiable," bristling with self-righteousness, were freely used to overwhelm recalcitrant or weak-kneed administrators and faculty, producing the befuddlement to which Ulam refers. Insults, threats of violence and violence itself were justified because it was perceived that the whole social system, including colleges and universities, had become corrupt beyond redemption.

In the ethical confusion, apologists for student radicalism, theologians and amateur moralists alike insisted that "this was the most moral generation seen in a long time." Self-flagellation was in vogue when faculty and administrators recognized their lack of courage and moral insight. A new appreciation arose for the leadership of the young in political, social and educational matters. Among educational pundits there grew an abject acceptance of the moral innocence of youth that would have appealed even to Rousseau.

Many colleges and universities were shown up in all their fragility. They had been revealed to be bulwarks of a training that was "élitish," "white," "establishment-oriented" and "irrelevant." Above all, their professed aim of humanizing their constituents had proved to be sheer farce. *Humanitas*, supposedly at the heart of the enterprise, had proved to be too ghostly a force to hold together under stress the constituent bodies of these institutions. A murder had occurred. It was doubly concocted: by faculties and administrations who had failed to reveal the humanistic quotient and relevance of what they were about, and by the self-deceived youth who praised humanization while assaulting fellow human beings.

Some died at Kent State and Jackson State, not knowing the tragedy in which they were involved. They were demonstrating for the cessation of bombing, for social justice, but they were killed as truly because *humanitas* had already been lost, in both academia and the country. These victims became the heirs of a legacy that had first turned against *humanitas*. Ironically, the use of physical violence, insulting behavior, property damage, thievery and death was justified in the name of what was construed to be the higher level of humanity. The violence and lawless behavior of some students provided, in turn, the opportunity for the coercive powers of government to move in upon innocent and guilty alike.

Out of the turmoil of the 1960's a previously half-hidden notion surfaced with new vigor to challenge the assumption of an educa-

tion based on anything so universal in scope as *humanitas*. The 1960's expressed in rough, practical terms what had long been taught as truth in the classrooms, namely, that all knowledge, and therefore education itself, was ideologically and culturally tainted. This insight was soon translated into the orthodox dogma of cultural and racial relativism which is now increasingly the new basis upon which to build a college education. Since knowledge and education bore the ineffaceable marks of class, race or historical circumstance, the term *humanitas*, if ever indirectly referred to, began to disintegrate. Relativism seemed so obvious a feature of traditional education, why not jettison the whole idea of any overarching concept such as *humanitas*? Why not use the colleges and universities for political and social purposes of which the new generation approved, since hitherto they had been used dishonestly for purposes now distasteful to the new generation of students and faculty?

Thus the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, reflecting upon its proposals for educational reform, helplessly comments: "We recognize that some of these options reduce the chances of a common culture among college graduates within which people communicate, but this has been happening anyway, and we believe the gains will outweigh the losses" (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 9, 1973).

It seems that there is nothing that all human beings as human beings should know or be concerned about. Those things by which we are divided from each other, those things which make us different, now are to be institutionalized as that which separates us from each other. We are increasingly called upon in higher education to give full expression to as much pluralism in different forms as exists in society or among individuals, and to structure education in those terms, thereby giving impressive authority to ethnicity and privatism.*

Among the commentators who have charged that all higher education is already ethnicized, that we therefore need more, not less, recognition of "ethnicity," is Michael Novak. Having rather recently discovered that he is an "ethnic," he has unstintingly shared his enlightenment. He finds ethnicity a controlling element in human knowledge and can even dismiss one of his critics by pointing out that the critic's thought was ethnically flawed!** In addressing the current problems of higher education, Novak finds that the past emphasis upon what is common,

*For the purpose of this article and for simplicity, the term "ethnic" will refer to both racial and cultural identities.

**In *Worldview*, January, 1973. Richard Neuhaus, the object of Novak's criticism, replied: "If I did not know that the aspiration toward universality is, in Novak's ethnic dictionary, the very essence of sin, I would feel complimented."

universal and alike was "a laudable but grievously mistaken impulse What we have in common is that we are diverse."⁹ What in the colleges and universities was alleged to be common to all was actually Western civilization as seen through "English, Protestant, upper-class eyes" and consequently a misshapen notion of what I have called *humanitas* (*American Scholar*, Winter 1973-74). Novak seems to call for a more self-consciously orchestrated ethnicized education, where diversity is given full expression to offset the warped image of humankind still being offered.

It is the fate of American higher education that, when one area of human experience, regardless of its significance, is discovered to be unrepresented or underemphasized, a new course or program is speedily concocted to fill the alleged gap. Beginning with Black Studies, we have now an almost unmanageable list of ethnic study programs. Such programs have been widely publicized and given a prima facie credibility by their tenuous connection with governmental affirmative action legislation. Ironically, proponents of ethnic programs are now charged with the same mistakes that ethnic groups charge against traditional education. Thus we hear of their separatist, divisive impact, the threat of mediocrity in academic achievement, the negative effects on students in these programs and the student body at large, as well as their constrictive influence upon freedom of teaching, research and publication.

Many of these criticisms resound in the blunt words of the president of California State University at San Jose. "At their worst, many ethnic studies and affirmative action programs have encouraged the growth of an infatuation with ethnicity that is socially divisive, frequently bewildering in its actual demands on institutions, and harmful to the commitment of the university to the principle of reward based on individual merit." Emergent factionalism "seems intent on dividing the university into special groups based on race or ethnic origins (or, indeed, on sex), which amounts to nothing less than a regressive sundering of the unity and objective character of knowledge" (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 14, 1974). Speaking of Black Studies programs in particular, Martin Kilson of Harvard asserts that the tension between black loyalty to a subcommunity and loyalty to the university in general had produced "a nearly disastrous impact on the academic achievement and intellectual growth of Negro students" (*New York Times Magazine*, September 2, 1973). Kilson was, of course, speedily taken to task by black students and others, but he yielded little ground in his replies. Describing oppressed minorities of the past, historian Joel Hurtsfield comments: "Isolation at first imposed from without in due course was perpetuated from within."

Practical problems attendant on ethnic study programs soon appeared. Insofar as they do stress a humanistic component they do so in a compartmentalized fashion. It is not uncommon, because of the influence exercised by students and institutionalized by the colleges, that separate living quarters or gathering places have to be set up for various ethnic groups. Neither is it uncommon that, either by social pressure or by explicit policy, "outsiders" are not welcome in these enclaves or even in the courses offered in the ethnic programs, although this practice varies with the degree of ethnic intensity and isolation. The argument in defense of this practice, which actually has no bearing on the issue before us, is that WASPs have also been prone to "hive" off. If we are to have ethnic programs, all students should be entitled and encouraged to participate in them, so that there might be an opening up of the dimensions of *humanitas*. If the idea of *humanitas* has indeed been narrowed by a white, upper-class orientation, it needs to be rescued, broadened and deepened, not subverted by the enthusiasms of the present. There is little point in talking about humanizing education if we are talking of nothing more universal than our particular ethnic identities. It is the task of the universities and colleges, among other institutions, to provide an understanding of ethnic diversity without institutionalizing and certifying cultural relativism as ultimate truth.

We have enough experience now to know the danger that ethnic programs may pose for student learning and for the ethos of the colleges and universities. A recent study of the objectives of freshmen entering colleges in the fall of 1973 indicates that in approximately 244 four-year colleges the principal objective of the students was to develop a philosophy of life.¹⁰ Even allowing for a degree of youthful idealism, the high percentage of those answering the questionnaires shows a yearning for an enrichment and broadening of outlook that can be developed through later life. Certainly this admirable aim should not be frustrated by siphoning students into compartmentalized education. Presumably these students neither desire nor expect to be herded off into areas that may simply reenforce their inevitable provincialisms. No one has a right to be as small as his own past, certainly not if that

⁹The delightful irony of Novak's insistence on ethnicity is brought out by Charles E. Cobb's blaming "the establishment" for foisting ethnicity upon the nation. "The establishment has found a vehicle for fragmenting the nation: ethnicity" (*Christian Century*, January 29, 1974).

¹⁰The study was made by the American Council on Education, Cooperative Institutional Research Program. The national average indicating that the development of a philosophy of life was essential or very important was 72.5 per cent of the responses to the sample questions.

past includes only his limited ethnic background. One does not develop a satisfying philosophy of life within the isolation of one's tribe unless he is prepared to live his entire life within the tribe—an increasingly unlikely prospect in our world. It is tragic that some students should be pressured by their peers into a form of education that increasingly separates them from other students and from the wider educational opportunity available in most colleges. The idea of fitting into one's ethnic group is too narrow a goal for a liberalizing education.

Another much discussed result of the preeminence of ethnic programs is the fear of lowering academic standards, or the introduction of criteria of performance previously deemed inappropriate in evaluating student achievement. Opinions vary widely as to these dangers, but even within a particular college different programs may maintain different standards of accomplishment. The threat is most often sensed, if not proved beyond doubt, when "high-risk" or "disadvantaged" students are involved. Inability to cope with the fundamental skills of reading, mathematics and writing intelligibly affects some programs, with the result that accommodations are made to meet the level of such students.

It is not uncommon that the students themselves become aware that they have fallen into second-class status. The result is a loss of a sense of personal worth. If the student graduates with a large number of ethnic courses in his record, he soon realizes that graduate and professional schools will look askance at the degree. While in college the student may also discover that her incompetencies, acceptable in some ethnic programs, have effectively walled her off from participating in courses which would enrich her life outside the domain of the ethnic program in which she is enrolled. Since failure, by whatever name or grade, is the eventual result, the college can be convicted of shortchanging its students. Ronald Berman may have overstated the case when he says that life on campus has become tolerant of failure, but not of disagreement (*New York Times Magazine*, February 10, 1972).

The question of standards of success and failure is a vexing one under the best of circumstances, but it has taken on a new urgency. The question has now been framed in terms of whether standards are by definition rigged against "disadvantaged minorities." Thus Professor Roger L. Shinn: "The definitions of excellence and mediocrity are themselves often the result of prejudice" (*Christianity and Crisis*, October 30, 1972). The answer to Shinn's implied criticism must be "yes"—to a point. The standards of our better colleges and universities do militate against "disadvantaged minorities" because they automatically militate against the incompetence of anyone unprepared for college-level work. Whether such unpreparedness is caused by prejudice is a tendentious supposition, not proven fact. Even if Shinn's

total statement were supportable, it would still not be obviously incumbent on colleges and universities to lower standards of achievement to the level of mediocrity. Nor is it clear that even the "disadvantaged" would be helped by a lowering of standards in any field of study.

The causes of disadvantage must be rectified in our society. But educational or social deprivation should not be employed as an excuse for lower standards. Identifiable causes are not to be equated with a cast-iron moral necessity or psychological compulsion. R.S. Peters notes: "The practical effect of treating all causes as excuses is a witness to the power of social beliefs to beget social realities" (*Authority, Responsibility, and Education*, 1959). When causes are admitted as excuses to determine what shall designate success or failure, we are on a disastrous course. As factors in good or poor performance they are part of the understanding of the problem, but they cannot become normative for achievement.

Yet another problem is that in some ethnic programs open-minded analysis and criticism of one's culture is precluded because the actual purpose of the program is to encourage a search for, and commitment to, the distinctive ideologies of the ethnic group. In that case, critical analysis is the last thing in the world to be nurtured. Of course, interest in one's heritage is commendable. However, in too many instances we give academic credibility to a defensive particularism entirely out of keeping with the college's presumed aim to offer a broad and carefully assessed insight into the manifold forms of *humanitas*. Orthodoxy of ideology transmitted by indoctrination is no more acceptable in ethnic programs than in any other department. It is particularly distasteful when the contributions of ethnic groups other than one's own are held up to criticism, but one's own is exempted from such evaluation. Nothing but distrust and mischievous misunderstanding are bred by the distortions of cultures other than one's own. Such distortions are frequently present in traditional curricula. Indeed, that is the very problem that gave rise to ethnic programs in the first place.

Then there is the problem of qualifying instructors. The competence of the instructor is often assumed to depend upon his or her experience within the ethnic group to be studied. The question is not whether such experience, coupled with adequate training, equips a person for teaching. The more exasperating question is whether such experience provides sufficient grounds for appointment. The problem comes down to the issue of whether experience is to be identified with knowledge and academic competence. In most fields, distance from, as well as immersion in, certain kinds of experience is needed. Experience, ambiguous as that term is, without the disciplines of conceptualization is nowhere acceptable as the sole justification

for admission to a good faculty. Many people experience religion, but without study no one is regarded as competent to teach religious studies. We all experience the economic life of this country, but relatively few are qualified to teach economics. As long as education is held to be distinct from indoctrination, theory and study rather than political, economic, religious or ethnic affiliation and experience determine an instructor's rights to be part of the academic community. Without the breadth such studies presuppose, we shall find so-called academicians explaining away opposing viewpoints by reference to their source on such ideological grounds as Marxism, class or economic status, psychological, genetic or racial backgrounds. Thus intelligible communication comes to a halt at the very centers where communication is most necessary. There are many philosophical problems concerning the proper relation between experience and knowledge, but the distinction is a valid one that should not be denigrated. We do, after all, undergo every day many experiences after which we are not a whit the wiser, unless disciplined reflection is applied to them.

The ethnicizing of higher education touches also on publication and research. It has become necessary to correct and amplify textbooks that have omitted the ethnic quotient. Specialized scholarly studies are required to meet the need for a more richly humanistic education. Ethnicity, as Andrew M. Greeley has said, is part of the social structure and should be dealt with. But specialized studies are necessary interim means to that end. We are instead being treated to a kind of revisionist history that fails to weave together the components of the human story. While the rewriting of history is never finished once and for all, there is a species of revisionism that outruns evidence in order to correct what one believes to be past misapprehensions. There is a thin line between conscious or unconscious slanting and propaganda. The omission of material that raises questions about the image the group wants to have of itself may be edifying, but the reinforcement of group myths and tribal "image management" are not the purpose of higher education.

Probably no universal history can ever be written, but in the "meantime" gross error can be eliminated, interlocking stories can be related to each other by a scrupulous honesty that acknowledges all the effects, both good and bad. The human story must constantly be corrected and expanded as it is set before the generations who will have to live together on this planet. The canons of responsible scholarship, where evidence is carefully weighed and terms are used with a high degree of clarity and consistency, can alone tell that story in all its variety and vividness. In this serious business, racist, ethnic and sexist biases have no place.

We are in dangerous territory when we begin to restrict the limits of research. When ethnic enclaves

become pressure groups we have again lost *humanitas*. Although I do not profess to know with certainty what limits should be placed on certain types of research, I am concerned about the ways in which views unpopular with some minorities are being treated. The whole problem of *humanitas* is at stake when the weighing and analyzing of evidence gives way to picketing, blacklisting and threats of physical violence aimed at discouraging certain research and teaching. We have in the past year witnessed student demonstrators breaking up meetings, denying the right of unpopular speakers to express themselves. We have been down that road before, with dire consequences both here and abroad. Commitment to civilized discourse about evidence, methodology and presuppositions is essential to *humanitas*.

It is equally depressing to hear, for example, that as eminent a scholar as Kenneth Clark has recently turned his back on the canons of scholarship when "evidence" comes to public notice suggesting that education may not be a vehicle for upward economic mobility for minorities. He once felt that social science research had a role to play in policy decisions. Now he is reported to believe that social scientists are actually politicians in disguise, whose class and race biases distort their interpretations (see David Singer's "Kenneth Clark's Reconsideration" in *Worldview*, March, 1974). Certainly social scientists are not above suspicion of ideological bias; they carry no certificates of infallibility. However, once we accept the notion that distressing results of research can be dismissed by referring to the ethnic or class status of the researcher, all hope for some measure of objective knowledge falls prey to the relativism now gnawing at the root of higher education. Objectivity is a rare and difficult achievement; we should not strangle it in the cradle.

If we interpret *humanitas* only in the classic style once popular, in which only the noblest creations of the human mind are identified with *humanitas*, we simply flatter ourselves by selective perception. The broader concept of *humanitas* includes the heights and the depths; it includes the experiences, insights and behavior of being human—whether we are black, red, yellow, white, Scottish, English, German, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Jew or Muslim. We shall have reason for a more modest estimate of humanity if we continue to strive for a more balanced picture afforded us by the most responsible use of what knowledge we can command. It is doubtful that the maximizing of cultural diversity and relativism that is embodied in ethnic programs, and is spawning pressure groups to promote only specifically ethnic goals, will advance that prospect.

All these problems emerge, I believe, from a prevailing dogma that higher education must demonstrate its immediate utility in remedying the social and psychic ills of our society.

The dogma is well expressed in the words of the

mayor of Washington, D.C. (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 11, 1974). Speaking to an audience concerned with the relation of the universities to urban problems, the Mayor charged: "You cannot remain isolated in an ivory tower while all around you there are pressing problems of housing, drug abuse, unemployment, and poverty . . . Philosophy and Elizabethan literature alone won't help to raise the standard of living for our disadvantaged. Our institutions of higher learning must, in my opinion, reassess the courses of study offered to see if they are meaningful to potential students. I believe we must set aside, for a time at least, the luxury of only a classical education for our young people."

The statement reflects a point of view that has won increasing influence in higher education, and with a large segment of the public. Higher education is summoned to get to work in the "real" world. From this perspective, ethnic programs as well as other types of "practical" programs are to be seen as addressing "real problems."

There are those who have dared to challenge this view. Michael Oakeshott asserts that "to set about adjusting universities to a world in chaos will make certain that they will be approximated to all that is most trivial in our tradition Proposals for change which spring directly from emergency must of themselves be temporary, transitory, and accidental" (cf. George F. Kneller, *Higher Learning in Britain*, 1955). Eugene V. Rostow also defends the much maligned "ivory tower": "The universities are still linked by a surviving faith in the old idea of a transnational fraternity of professors and students beyond the direct reach of the states, and not quite their servants Until we come to consider the advance of knowledge and the writing of books as the first and only job of the scholar, American scholarship cannot fulfill its promise. When we accept such work not as a means to an end, but as an end in itself, and the sufficient goal of a great career, only then can we expect to fulfill the American potential for innovative thought" (*Yale Alumni Magazine*, June, 1972).

There is something lofty and almost unfeeling in the remarks of Oakeshott and Rostow, although I sympathize with their resistance to the idea that our colleges and universities should be confused and confusing reproductions of the society outside the campus. The Mayor's comments lead to a surrender of *raison d'être* of academia, the training of the mind, the enlarging and vivifying of the social, aesthetic and spiritual imagination and the pursuit of knowledge; Oakeshott's and Rostow's I find too narrow and abstract to do justice to the concept of *humanitas*.

A far more defensible understanding of the utility of education is expressed by Adam Ulam: "Until some fifteen years ago, those who ran our education felt no need to question or to apologize for the assumption that the university can best promote

democracy and combat inequality and intolerance by diffusing knowledge, that it advances general welfare by training competent specialists, that it contributes to desirable social change by the very process of enlarging its students' horizons and furnishing their minds with information about their country and the world, in other words, by being an institution of learning, by teaching and not indoctrinating, by producing enlightenment and reflection, and not policies or agitation" (*Key Reporter*, *op. cit.*).

Knowledge of chemistry, physics, penal theory, of political power, history, economic theory and fact, ethics, psychology, languages, religion, combined with the techniques of vigorous thought, will in the long run prove more useful in remedying the ills of the ghettos, ethnic enclaves and society generally than will ad hoc programs designed to demonstrate relevance. Academia can only pursue these goals, however, if it asserts itself against the social experimenters, pressure groups, foundations, administrators and faculties that have never entertained the thought that change can be regressive as well as progressive.

We return to the theme of *humanitas*. II. Richard Niebuhr's treatment of historical relativism is invoked in support of the idea that it is impossible for human beings to escape from their cultural bondage. Niebuhr wrote: "The image of the universal in our mind is not a universal image." But Niebuhr was too subtle a thinker to leave that jejune observation unqualified. He also wrote: "It is not apparent that one who knows that his concepts are not universal must also doubt that they are concepts of the universal, or that one who understands how all his experience is historically mediated must believe that nothing is mediated through history" (*The Meaning of Revelation*, 1941). Although our conception of *humanitas* may be conditioned and even narrowed by the limitations of our own cultural experience, we should not deny the measure of universality in that conception, nor elevate cultural conditionedness to the status of an educational philosophy.

In our diverse histories we give content to *humanitas*, enrich it or debase it. We appeal to no elitist view of humanity, but to a common and highly valued quality of existence as our last moral refuge when we are mistreated and suffer. The prisoners of Attica, in calling out "We are men," appealed to *humanitas*, not to their ethnicity. Our laws presuppose *humanitas* for their ultimate ethical justification, even if they fail to embody it totally. Even when we decry the universality of *humanitas* in the name of ethnic concreteness, we assume that those who disagree with us can understand what we are saying. Thereby we refute at one level what we assert at another level. Without the universality of *humanitas* we could not disagree, not even about ethnicity.