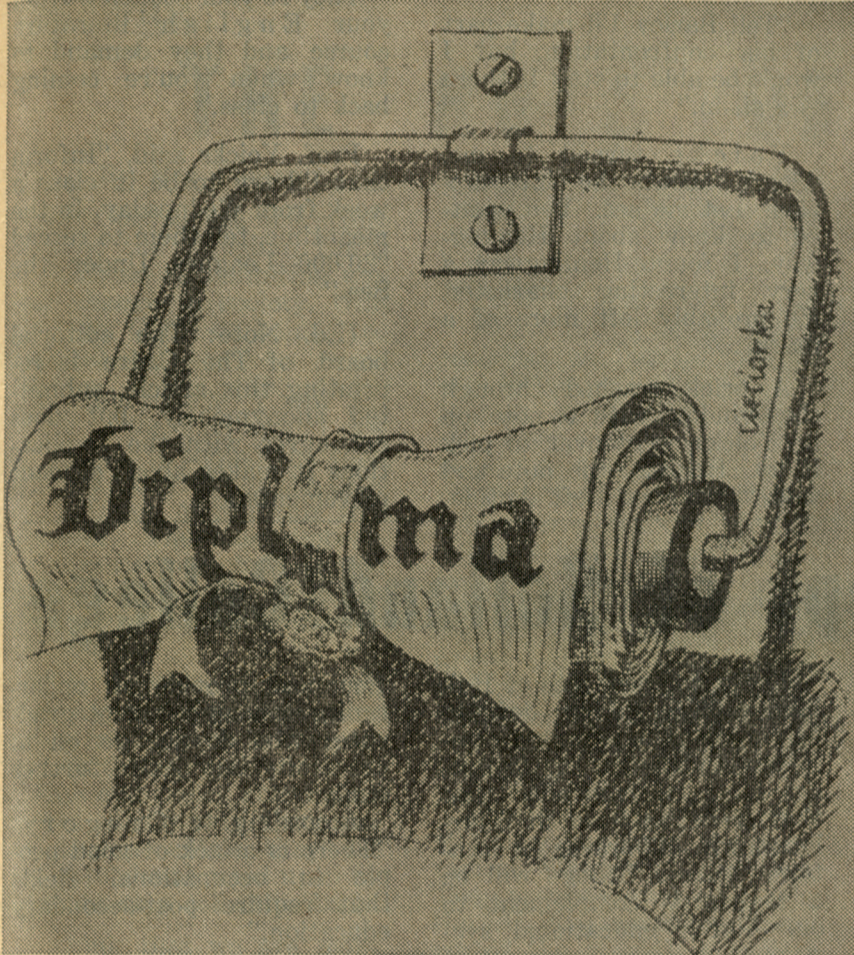


SCRATCH A PROFESSOR AND YOU'LL FIND A COP.

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patrol I have never spotted candidates communicating in any manner whatever, and would quickly turn away from such a scene. Half-way through someone raises his hand and asks to be escorted to the men's washroom. I tell him he is old enough to go by himself thereby contravening Rule 7: "No candidate shall be permitted to leave the hall except under supervision." Scratch a professor, as Jerry Rubin says, and you'll find a cop. That is the most mordant remark heard in Convocation Hall this year.

To be required to take part in such a travesty of intellect is to be filled with a loathing for examinations so intense that one forgets that in their time they were a great reform. Essentially they serve society as a device for divying up its spoils — jobs, prizes, preferment, power. Divying up has to be done one way or another, and other ways of doing it are few and far from fine.

The most democratic is to run a lottery. When your number comes up, you're the boss — of the bank, of the gag, of the land. The least democratic is to run an aristocracy. When you're born into the right family, you've got it made. The trouble with lottery democracy, as with blueblood aristocracy and the varieties of cronyism in between, is that its top people tend to be incompetent. So, for the sake of efficiency if not of justice, you run a meritocracy. The spoils go to the ablest, as picked — how else? by competitive examination.

Empires offer most incentives for efficiency: they have more to lose. Hence the route to power via examination was opened first in China, 20 centuries ago. The quality of the Imperial Civil Service being thought to reside in the rigor and impartiality of tier upon tier of tests as the power of the Empire was believed to derive from the quality of Service, social criticism in China revolved around the ritual of the examination chamber.

Wank An-shih writes in 1058 about the tricks played by candidates: "Unworthy ones, by virtue of having learned petty devices of composition, advance to positions of high officials." The traditional system buckled under the weight of a millenium of accumulated criticism, but only when Red Guards rampaged through the academies 60 years later did Chinese meritocracy collapse.

Blueblood Aristocracy
Britain also had an empire

but, until the 19th century, no mandarin state to make it run on merit. Instead a blueblood aristocracy glided through her colleges, torpid with port and corruption. In 1776, when 13 of her colonies declared their independence, the Earl of Eldon came down from Oxford: "What is the Hebrew?" he asked, "for the place of a skull?" I replied: 'Golgotha.' 'Who founded University College?' I stated (though, by the way, the point is something doubted) that King Alfred founded it, 'Very good,' said the examiner, 'you are competent for your degree.' But not for running empires. Jefferson, who saw nepotism as a cause of the revolution, determined it should not persist within the new republic. He proposed to recruit in ruling class through examinations by which "twenty of the best geniuses will be raked from the rubbish annually." In the event, the British got the merit system; American got Tammany.

The Victorians used examinations as a lash for learning, as they used the whip of hunger for production. "Without examination all efforts are useless," a board of commissioners at Oxford was told in 1852, "and no scheme of instruction has any perceptible effect." This proposition, then regarded as an axiom, has been under attack ever since.

Every educator can tick off points in the case against competitive examinations, many believing in conclusive. First, their notorious unreliability. Second their obvious unfairness. The facile, the neat, the complaint, the unflappable are advantaged at the expense of candidates whose thoughts, not necessarily less worthy, tend to come more slowly, whose handwriting is sloppy, whose heart and mind rebel, whose nervous systems tend to let them down rather than pep them up. Third, their suffocation of inquiry.

All these are criticisms of, for and by examiners. They may want to change the system but they do not want to end it, no more than policemen want an end to prison. Abolition would deprive them of their power. "When the results or placed on the notice board," writes a young British redbrick radical, "there is no doubt where the real power lies. Examinations are the control centre for the manipulation of the lives of the students."

That being so, why did not students seize the control centre? Peasants rise against oppressive taxes, religious

minorities against persecution, women against being denied the vote. But examinees did not denounce their examiners, for fear of being failed.

That fear no longer frightens as it used to. The prizes seem less alluring now. There is a movement offering an alternative life-style to cushion the shock of alienation. University rhetoric and university reality draw daily more apart. A year ago the defiant ones surfaced at last. The student council at the University of British Columbia questioned "the educational value of competition for marks, written examinations as a basis for grades, and ultimately the utility of any grading system." A student at the University of Toronto ripped up his diploma before the startled gaze of convocation — a deed more dramatic than self-destructive as his degree remained intact even if his diploma did not. But at the same time a student at the University of Hull ripped up his examination. It was like Luther at the doors of Wittenberg, Lenin at the Finland Station. The examinees' revolt was under way.

Choice Is Two-Fold

And how shall we examiners react, those of us who brand the cattle on their way to market? The choice is not multiple but two-fold. Jacques Barzun has stated one: "We must stop blathering about sensitivity to the needs of others, and say instead: 'I want a pupil who can read Burke's Speech on Conciliation and solve problems in trigonometry. I want young men and women who can read French prose and write English.' And having said these or similar things we must pass judgment on performance and let accomplishment be known, quite as if it had the importance of a record in a track meet."

David Hoffman states the other:

...All my students
Adams, Bixler, Brown,
The total roll...so many
Pretty girls, the lads
All promising! I've given them
For grades the letter Yogh
(My favorite letter).
Wonderful kids — All Yoghs.
Good man Hoffman. Yogh plus.

The setting as for a Kafka trial, surrealistic and forbidding. A cavernous gymnasium, its flooring sheathed in plastic, basketball nets lifted on high by gantries. In pour several hundred young men and women, many feigning exuberance, some pale and withdrawn. They fan out as sappers cross a minefield, obeying with remarkable precision a sign telling candidates in English to face the front of the hall, candidates in Psychology the rear.

It's examination time again.

On tables "placed at least five feet apart" (Regulations for the province of Ontario, section 7, sub-section 37) the young people deposit their personal effects — a watch, a packet of Kleenex, an array of T-Ball Jotters, a roll of Wild Cherry Lifesavers and other talismans in time of trouble. Complying with No. 5 of the "Rules for the Conduct of Examinations, University of Toronto," the ladies "dispose of their purses by placing them on the floor underneath their chairs." The chief presiding officer, in whom there lurks a regimental sergeant-major struggling to escape, shouts for silence, which at first he does not get. "If I had a microphone," he bawls, "I'd blast you all from the room." The candidates are quiet now. The papers are distributed.

English 100 is an essay-type examination. It requires discussions of how the storm scenes in King Lear show the development of its protagonist, of the character of Ish-

mael, of the teaser, "If man was created perfect, how could he fall?" Psychology 120, striving after scientific respectability is an objective-type examination. "TAKE TIME NOW, ONE MORE TIME," it enjoins the candidate in capitals, "TO CAREFULLY REREAD AND CARRY OUT THE INSTRUCTIONS BELOW," of which there follow 10. No. 4 says: "At all times when using your special pencil be sure to press firmly and to make all marks distinct, heavy and black. Marks that do not register could well result in lowered exam scores. There is small chance of this being detected." Having familiarized himself with forms, cards, codes, special pencils and the rest of the apparatus of higher education, as the pilot of a 707 checks out its controls before taking to the air, the candidate confronts the first of his multiple choices. He may or may not be unsettled by preliminary instruction No. 5: "You are to choose the ONE BEST answer to each question, even if other alternatives may have some truth in them."

For the next couple of hours there is little for an assistant presiding officer to do apart from thinking impure thoughts as he strolls among the miniskirts. He is present to ensure, as commanded by his orders for the day, that "candidates shall not communicate with one another by writing signs or words or in any manner whatever" (Rule 10).

In 20 years on this hateful