

“Universities seem to us to be increasingly anti-personal, politically reactionary and morally bankrupt”

from the muse

We live in a time of such social awareness that even the graffiti scribbled on washroom walls has taken on moral and political significance. One such popular scrawl reminds us that Frederick Nietzsche was probably the first to coin the "God is dead" phrase. It reads "God is Dead — Fred" and below it are emblazoned the words "Fred is Dead! — God."

A group of students at the University of Alberta were recently addressed by a speaker who entitled his talk: "The University is dead — God."

Some of us would be prepared to argue that in terms of matters that really count the university, if it isn't dead, is at least under the serious and critical scrutiny of experts in the intensive care unit and the present prognosis is none too favorable. For, whatever else we may wish to say about the youth culture (or however we define the long term significance of a counter-culture or cultural revolution) a profound questioning and dissatisfaction is in fact being expressed and changes demanded within the university environment. Perhaps Peter Berger's simple explanation helps us to understand. The dominant spirit of childhood: — the happy childhood that most middle class children share is confronting the second most dominant spirit, in technological societies: — the spirit of bureaucratization common to all institutions. The carefree, protected and highly personal life of childhood confronts the highly regulated and impersonal life of bureaucracy first of all in educational institutions.

Social institutions like the church of the family, or political institutions like political parties may once have been the most logical object of youthful attack but their significance in defining social reality seems very much to be replaced by the universities. Hence, the attack zeroes in on the more recently uncovered enemy.

Berger's notion of these two dominant spirits leaves much unexplained: — for example, why should this present generation act so determinedly when some of us sat so passively in lecture halls only a decade ago? Nevertheless the above comments do open at least, the question as to how the university defines social reality and what myths are operative as the university engages in this vital task. The problem, as we understand it, is not so much that the university has the power to define social reality for us but, rather, that it does so on the basis of very particular, if not narrow, assumptions rooted in its present faculty and administration and their own professional training; most of whom fail to recognize the particularities of their own myth-making.

We see three evil tendencies in university education in Canada. Universities seem to us to be increasingly antipersonal, politically reactionary and morally bankrupt. We describe these evils as tendencies because we do not believe all universities harbour them to the same extent although all halls of learning are subjected to the forces which foster their unwelcome growth. These forces include, we're convinced, tightly rationalized academic traditions, the social status of the university — trained, the effect of large buildings and the maintenance of them, the sheer size of most modern campuses and their concomittant administrative needs, and the increased importance and power of universities in social and political life. Emanations arising from the above sources inevitably push the university in the undesirable directions which we now wish to describe more fully.

ANTI-PERSONAL

First we said the university tends to be anti-personal. We deliberately chose to say "anti-personal" rather than "impersonal" because of first expression intimates that university life is consciously against people rather than quietly indifferent. Let us explain.

It is obvious now to most of us that the university is increasingly anti-personal when we consider the bureaucratization of the institution. Scores of introductory classes across the country have enrollments of 800 to 1,000 where the only advantage for the student is that his or her anonymity ensures an uninterrupted 50 minute nap. Or we might consider computerized registration which makes number 100667 more significant than my signature, or library regulations

The evils of



designed to keep books on the shelf; a library check-out service which dispenses more feelings of criminality than it catches stolen books; the profusion of faculty lounges which protect professors from unwittingly revealing their humanity to students over coffee; whatever the regulation, whatever the practice; the size, maintenance and development of the total physical plant in effect says (in the words of the bewildered freshmen): — "screw the individual student!"

One of our number remembers one summer working at Queen's University where most persons employed by that august institution were flat broke at the end of the spring term. Most students usually are. Not only was the university in no position to anticipate the needs of its own student employees by issuing an advance or at least an early paycheque but a computer payroll system ensured that no one would be paid until summer's end. This person remembers asking the computer (or one of its executive assistants) if he could pick up his pay cheque on the last day as he was moving out of town. The answer received was that the computer was programmed to print the cheques, feed them to envelopes and mail them to each employee at his or her summer address. It was a cardinal rule that there would be no interference in this programmed process. He would have to move to Toronto on the same threadbare shoestring that he had worn all summer and wait for the post office to forward his desperately needed funds.

There is a second and much more serious level of "inhumanity" in the universities and that is in the way the academic pursuits engaged in emphasize behaviour rather than experience. In the humanities and social sciences the observable behaviour of people is studied to the exclusion the introspective view of the one who is experiencing the behavior. But experience is every bit as real as the behavior that we observe that reflects it.

R. D. Laing, the provocative British psychiatrist has shown us that experience is but one side of reality and behavior another. There is no inner and outer in human experience save what we give those names. In order to understand persons we need to appreciate the total reality about them. We need to take seriously the experience which gives rise to behavior. As R. D. Laing says: "Our behavior is a function of our experience. We act according to the way we see things. If our experience is destroyed our behavior will be destructive. If our experience is destroyed, we have lost our own selves."

I submit that it is just this over-emphasis on outward actions on behavior and deemphasis of experience which fosters the lack of appreciation on the part of the student for his or her own experience. In other words, a university education teaches students to "learn about the world rather than to learn from the world" as Ivan Illich puts it. Lectures, reading lists, term papers and examinations all pressure the student to see social realities as something to be learned about, observed and memorized. There is little to match these activities which would assist students in appreciating their environment, sharing and extending their talents, accepting and critically weighing their own experience, improving their activities by practice and developing their own wisdom and morality. Is it any wonder university teachers complain that students are inexperienced and non-reflective? Students are so because their training circumvents such self-reflection.

To use an example from the field of political studies: we teach students about political institutions and political events but we do not attempt to practice political action or responsible citizenship and critically evaluate our own performance.

IS SCIENTIFIC REALISM ANTI-PERSONAL?

There is a further difficulty in this over-emphasis on observable behavior. Academics call this approach of understanding the world around us scientific realism. It is a realism which critically analyzes and scientifically or systematically re-orders reality. What many of the young, or those who think young, hunger for is a new theory of human intelligence, a new conception of human knowing, and a new definition of reason. The young Catholic theologian, Michael Novak writes that the university faculty (and not the administration) is the real enemy of the student in this struggle for a new understanding. He says that "the faculty is the guardian of the prevailing myth by which reality is to be perceived; the prevailing definition of reason, method, argumentation and even perception. What the faculty says is important exists; what the faculty ignores does not exist. Realism is what one learns in college." To paraphrase Novak: — where all experience, and especially that of the student, is denegated social reality is what the professor leads students to read and observe and by the methodology which he advocates. Critics of this realism are joined by young students in calling for a replacement of analytical reason by consciousness which maintains, again as does Michael