

University of Silence

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During the early nineteen-fifties America was in the midst of a terrible convulsion. Important segments of the Establishment had sufficiently deluded themselves into thinking that the pillars of our institutional framework were being painted a bright and noticeable red. Of course, in terms of American political dynamics per se, there was nothing especially new about this period. In the course of our relatively brief history there have been numerous occasions when America has deluded itself -- when it has become a victim of its own mythmaking. Rarely has the opportunity for forming a united front between paranoid politics and popular hysteria been missed; the early fifties was no exception. Led and intimidated by the Wisconsin madman, the government began to soap up and scrub down. Unfortunately, it never did become clear who suffered the most in the long run -- the soap or the water. In any case, all those folks who were considered to be less than enthusiastic in their appreciation of apple pie and other American things were to be, in short, eliminated. But, the elimination was to proceed in a democratic way, i.e. the blacklist became a kind of economic firing squad.

America exploded in a fit of red-necked righteous indignation, and began, for the second time within a period of thirty years, a political purification process. It was called McCarthyism. When our perceived enemies engaged in these kinds of socially approved hysterias, we called them purges. Clearly, America, during these early vacuous like years, was badly in need of something. A purgative perhaps; a kind of national enema. Instead, however, the country got a large swallow of political bacteria. It was a time when "Go Out And Get Yourself A Pinko" could have become (in fact, did become) a successful T.V. show. Few areas of American life were left untouched; some were devastated. The less established unions took a beating. So did many of the small publishing houses. Small time actors found their names on blacklists as a result of having signed something or other when they were in school; as a result, the ranks of ladies' shoe salesmen swelled. And, of course, the universities came in "or their share of troubles too. The

American mentality, not noted for its patience with either dates, times, names, or intellectuals, helped to provide the climate in which the cobwebs could be cleaned out of our not so hallowed educational institutions. And it worked, which is to say that jobs were lost by the thousands; some English departments (a suspicious lot anyhow, what with all that fuzzy-minded poetry) came close to disappearing overnight. Nevertheless, the Academy, such as it is, remained intact. But at what price? To be sure, America's political analogue to the Dark Ages has left its clawmark.

Those not-so-very-long-ago years operated on an institutionalized dynamic of wholesale and unmitigated fear. Its immediate legacy was silence. Silence. Everywhere. Now surely the universities did not close down and shut their doors. No -- people still lectured and other people took notes. Stuff like that went on as usual. I mean that... well, that ideas took on a kind of hollow ring. Especially those ideas that had something to say about society and what might be wrong with it. Either nobody was saying anything, or it was said in such a way that nobody, including the sayer, took it seriously. In a very real sense social criticism went on sabbatical leave. And, the commerce in productive dissent ceased. University life, a game like anything else, became a game without meaning; the dimensions of the university situation and the characteristics of the intellectual's life failed to interact. They didn't mesh; gears became twisted. Worse, yet, was the almost wholesale failure of many academics to support one another. They failed themselves and they failed each other, and this failure had more than a little to do with the plain and simple fact that they hadn't been running their institutions. Their realm of responsibility had not included effective control over much of the critical decision-making that affects the very lifeblood of any institution, educational or otherwise. Sad, unfortunate, terrible; but true. One simply

couldn't count on one's colleagues when the chips were down. And if you had just happened to open your mouth the chips came down, and came down hard. Anyway, for one reason or another, the sand that so many heads appeared to be in, began to recede -- gradually, and a few grains at a time. Some changes began to take place. Here and there people got together and backed a "troublemaking" colleague. And here and there a group of faculty members managed to hold out long enough so that, at the least, a tactical victory was achieved. The university began to re-gain (or gain, as the case may be) a measure of self respect -- of dignity. Red-baited academicians started going to the cafeteria again. An over-drawn picture? Perhaps. But fear does funny things, which is to say that it has a rather uncertain effect on what might be otherwise fairly certain people. And, when a university becomes silent, it ceases to be a university. This failure -- the failure to be -- had become, at this time, manifest on three fronts. One, as a place of ideas, criticism, and creative conflict, the old school house just wasn't making it; its entire superstructure had been undermined by a kind of not-so subtle terror that was maintained by mutual crotch-kicking. Two, sizable portions of the faculty displayed a pronounced tendency to become status-defined automatons. And three, students were passively receptive to any and all manipulation. In fact, the quest for competence in the use of (and in being used by) technological manipulanda had become the focal point of one's education for large numbers of students.

High grades, more so than ever, had become identified with and had passed for intelligence. And the whole bureaucratic mess worked, i.e. the wheels turned, and twinkle-eyed dolts, bent on mediocrity, succeeded in raising their eyes only as high as had been required by their other-defined ultimate vision, which, in this case, turned out to be the height of the garage door on the longed-for split-level box. Again, perhaps, an overdrawn picture. But others have also stated the case in not terribly different fashion. For example, Clark Kerr (who seems to have rather dramatically and belatedly discovered that at least some students have changed just a wee bit in recent years) has commented upon the effects of passive participation in the university of silence. In talking of the "un-generation" of the fifties, he stated (1959) that, "... the employer will love this generation. They aren't going to press many grievances. They are going to be easy to handle. There aren't going to be any riots." Kerr's comments about students of the fifties are well taken. His language is a little different from mine, but I suspect that we're both talking about the same thing; that much we have in common. The quest for security (whatever that is), like the operation of fear, does strange things to relatively straight-laced people. And, is it really a coincidence that the two tend to reinforce each other in feedback-like fashion? I think not. I would suggest, in fact, that the notion of security is basically incompatible with the educational enterprise, one means wholesale traffic in ideas -- and ideas,

whatever else they may be, are inherently "dangerous." So what? Well, the point is that creative dissent and productive criticism do not function satisfactorily, if at all, within a framework that is designed to encourage this quest for security. At its bedrock base, this kind of "desire" rests upon the not-to-be-offended sensitivities and sensibilities that make up the psychological defense structures of middle-class aspirations. Unfortunately, this makes for a bad scene all the way around...the campus. Bluntly put, uncertainty is absolutely necessary in order to keep some sort of fire going. The security bit, because it maximizes the absurd redundancies by which the system functions, makes for an assembly line of marketable products, i.e. manipulable students. The university then takes on the characteristics of a giant status distribution machine.

Have things changed? Yes and no. That is, there are places where students are no longer so easy to handle. At the present time, for example, there are undoubtedly a few administrators at Berkeley who have become, in their infinite wisdom, sufficiently sensitized to a rather remarkable and recent fact -- to wit, one must exercise a certain amount of caution, of restraint, before one tells students what they can say and where. In other words, they're running scared. Further, a few of those plane-crazy smug academicians who never bothered preparing lectures have been doing a little homework lately (and maybe they're not quite so smug). So, some changes have occurred at some places; but not enough -- not nearly enough. And, if not now; when? Many of our schools are little more than centers of marketability, i.e. centers geared to the distribution of status, and, more often than not, the distribution is skewed in the direction of that which is most marketable at the moment. Dissent, among other "items," is a poor buy in such a system.

Universities, like the people that make them up, must exercise the right to be. This is not optional -- it is a requirement. This business of being means, quite simply, that a university must be what a university should be, and that, first and foremost, is a community of scholars. In turn, this is achieved when people behave like scholars; and if they believe it; so much the better. In other words, academicians (students and faculty) would be taken in by their own propaganda, i.e. they would be "sincere"

Now in a sense, I'm begging the critical question here. After all, what is the SINE QUA NON of the scholar? Operationally, it is to be (or at least to look like) one who does scholarship. Fine. But what beyond this? To dwell at length on this would carry us too far afield from the intent of this paper. Let me merely indicate that extending beyond the commitment to productive knowledge gathering and information distributing is a more profound, and perhaps more covert, commitment to a more than passing interest in the affairs of the institution itself. And, this would include both the desire and ability to translate high sound-

ing ideas, derived in large measure from classroom experience, into action committed at the institutional level. (e.g. It's fine to talk about Krupp armaments and Nuremberg and all that; but what about the use of campus facilities to recruit future napalm-making executives for the Dow Chemical Company?) If this kind of concern is not realized, i.e. put to some pragmatic test, then one can expect to exercise but minimal control over the stuff and substance of institutional life itself. Self-preservation as well as more altruistic concerns for one's colleagues require this kind of catholicity of interest. The absence of such interest will necessarily make for a situation in which, at best, nobody knows what's going on, and, at worst, nobody gives a damn either. Given, however, the kind of interest that I've posited that must exist in an academic community where the word scholar is understood in its broadest sense, then that community will keep itself going on a measure of self-respect that is, in turn, maintained by self-interest. The end result is that selling out becomes an unendurable piece of behavior.

In the kind of community referred to above, a given individual's fear of x (and x can be anything that has some substantive reference point) would remain unaltered. But institutionalized fear would either not exist, or would potentially exist only within some clearly perceived range of probability. Therefore, the quest for security, undoubtedly still there, would fail to qualify as a major hang-up. Hence, there remains no institutional supports for the bolstering-up of those forces that create an aura of socially accepted intimidation. The essence, then, of the academic situation becomes that of responsibility; one is, ipso facto, RESPONSIBLE TO BE FINE. It is a freedom that would not have prevented McCarthyism; but it probably would have gone a long way towards shortening the tentacles of hysteria that managed to shut up so many in so short a time. Slaughter along the academic avenues might not have taken place.

McCarthy's legacy is still around. Maybe the button industry should come out with something that says: "Joe Lives!" I have purposely overstated the case for this legacy, because the early fifties provide us with a kind of watershed in the history of American universities. Why a watershed? Surely not because most schools were fundamentally different prior to this time, and certainly not because most schools have radically changed since that time. Our educational institutions have traditionally been the proving grounds for much of the pragmatic opportunism that pervades the American character; as such, the schools can't help but function, to a large extent, as the archetype of the status distribution machine. The reason why I think this period can be profitably viewed as a watershed is because it suggested what can be negatively possible when what is positively probable is allowed to occur. The result is the hollow thing known as the university of silence. If the academicians fail to acknowledge his commitment -- not role, but commitment -- to the concept of the university as a community of scholars, then history may very well repeat itself. Santayana stated the case beautifully when he suggested that 'those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it'.

That university which fails to be responsive to the demands of its raison d'etre -- fails the first test of what a university is all about. It also opens the way for traditionally conservative and/or reactionary trustees and state legislators to block the fundamental right of a professor -- namely, the right to profess. Students, likewise, are muffled because a set of narrowly defined rules of action are invariably generated when a university succeeds in falling itself. These rules of other-defined acceptable action have the stiff-

Homecoming. This malaise which is particularly tragic in those areas of the country where resistance to much needed social change has become institutionalized, i.e. a top to bottom shared way of thinking and living. In such an area the university has an even greater responsibility -- to be. And yet, it is often precisely in those areas of marginal cultural existence that the university will fail to come to grips with this central problem of defining its being. Such a failure is critical in the sense that it helps sustain the community's mythology about itself. And, the failure is absolutely crushing in that it virtually guarantees the university a place within the spectrum of the existential failure of the community as a whole.

The convulsion of the early fifties may or may not be repeated. Actually, it would appear that a variety of factors and events are operating against such a renewal of some kind of McCarthyism-like specter. Witness, for example, the growing intensity of Vietnam dissent in all corners of American life. In any case, the possibility of a repeat performance remains a debatable point. But, is such an encore even necessary? That is, is it the case that a university, tied down to fat government research contracts, and tied down to the demands of equally fat trustees, creates and sustains its own package of fear through the workings of its Parkinsonian bureaucratic machinery alone? I'm suggesting that the very weight of the thing itself is all that is necessary to remove the university out of itself. The reality of institutional obesity would act so as to force the university away from its central task -- the task of defining its being and living accordingly. Perhaps the sheer crush of numbers in the schools, a major characteristic of the post-McCarthy period, tends to produce large numbers of note-taking spectators (skilled only at playing exams). But neither lecture-giving nor lecture-taking spectators can find the appropriate substitute for the experience of attempting to be. There is no substitute. And mass spectatorism arises whenever academics, students and faculty alike, allow themselves to be nothing more than pre-packaged goods in a chromium-plated marketplace. At that point, talk about responsibility becomes empty and foolish and commitment to non-selling items like serious dissent becomes absurd. The end products, again, are fear and silence. They find their origin in the academic's refusal to run his own show.

ADJUSTMENT

The failure to exercise the courage to be rests upon, and is predicated by, the passive acquiescence which characterizes so much of the life style of the modern day university inhabitants. It is a life style which makes freedom a bad joke. People operate as if pulled by strings; it's as though a good tug on those strings absolves one of the responsibility that I've been discussing. Hence, the freedom to be never even becomes an issue. Only adjustment becomes a hotly debated point; it also becomes a major preoccupation. Yet, the barren quality of this aspect of the system becomes potentially exposable by one single, solitary, devastating question. Adjust -- to what?