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PRODIGAL FATHERS & EXISTENTIAL SONS

A Report from Berkeley

A university as politically engaged as the University of California cannot help but become egocentric. Politically involved students automatically become the center of their own universe. The old joke about the Polish scholar who was doing a study of the elephant and the Polish question has a new application at Berkeley. Where others manage to center their concern on the question of Vietnam, here we deal with Vietnam and the Berkeley student movement. We always come back to the students, and the students to the university. If there is a rally on the Vietnam war, the chances are that a speaker will raise the question of university collusion with the Johnson Administration in prosecuting the war effort; if a student civil rights group accuses the Crown Zellerbach corporation of racial discrimination in Bogalusa, it is predictable that the speaker is building up to the point that the university obtains its paper materials from the same corporation. The same is likely to be true for a faculty member, although his emphasis is probably on the effects of the protest movement on the university. We try to talk about Vietnam, or Cuba, or civil rights. We end up by talking about ourselves.

How is this to be explained? There are, of course, justifiable reasons for arguing that certain social and political questions relate back to the university. As President Clark Kerr has emphasized, the modern state university has multiple ties with the society that surrounds it. These ties can be deeply disturbing to members of the academy who yearn for the ideal of a university where knowledge and truth are pursued in peace and calm, and where the only friction is that produced by the conflict of ideas. Those who long for such an ideal—and if my own experience has any relevance, the events of the past year have added to their number—find themselves the most frustrated by the present situation. The politically oriented student, on the other hand, is not in the least disturbed by the fact of university-community ties. His real concern is with the *nature* of those ties.

An idea very much in vogue among partisans of the Free Speech Movement last year was the establishment of a "Free University of California," in opposition to our "unfree" university. Among the goals set for the "free university" was the establishment of classes on such topical questions as the eradication of racial discrimination in neighboring Oakland and the use of civil disobedience as a tactic against the corrupt Oakland power structure. One of the frequently repeated charges against the university administration was that it was subservient to the Oakland power structure, a charge that found some credibility in the university's apparent submission to pressures for prohibiting use of the campus as a point of origin for civil rights demonstrations in Oakland.

The success of the Free Speech Movement was predicated in part on the fact that the politically oriented students (and professors) and those professors who had reservations about the "multiversity" concept insofar as it conflicted with their ideal of the university as an independent center of learning, found themselves united in their distaste for the administration's subservience to extra-university pressures. That this unity was short-lived, was no accident. For in the long run the ideal of the independent center of learning proved to be as incompatible with the "free university" concept as it was with the "multiversity" concept. And while the "free university" plan never got off the ground, the attitude it embodied is still present. For those who see the university as an independent center of learning, the "free university" is little more than the "multiversity" turned on its head. The "free university" partisans accept the "multiversity" concept that the university should be a service institution for the surrounding community; the difference between the two lies in their attitudes toward the political and social status quo. Members of the Vietnam Day Committee denounce the university for countenancing professors who, it is claimed, advise the government on counter-insurgency tactics in Vietnam. If the "free university" were to materialize, however, it would almost certainly include a seminar oriented toward opposing the war.

In a similar vein, it is significant that a leader of last year's Free Speech Movement—which had as one of its cardinal points the belief that the university administration should never interfere with student political activities unless those activities directly impeded normal educational functions—publicly requested that the chancellor use his powers to cancel all classes during Vietnam Day (last October 15) in order to increase attendance at the political protest. Had the chancellor heeded this request, it is doubtful whether a word of protest would have come from the students who staunchly defended the principle of the university's political neutrality during last year's controversy.

Are these apparent contradictions to be seen as tokens of hypocrisy? Nothing could be less accurate. Hypocrisy not only is not involved; revulsion *against* hypocrisy is an essential aspect of the dilemma. The students whom I am describing have made one consistent demand throughout the recent conflicts: that their elders—the faculty in particular—state openly what it is that they believe, and then act upon those beliefs. Their parents' failure to have done this in the past, a failure they extend to all of middle-class America, is a recurrent theme among them. Their professors are viewed as part of this middle-class America, and the slogan that "when the chips are down the professors cannot be trusted" is as common among the students as similar slogans once were about social-democrats.

But this is not the whole story. Without expectations there can be no disappointments; and yet, failures on the part of the faculty to take positions which the students equate with sincerity keep arousing fresh expressions of disappointment. Faith in the faculty seems to be replenished almost as quickly as it is destroyed, and destroyed as quickly as it is replenished. One sometimes has the feeling that an alternately supportive and disappointing faculty is emotionally more acceptable to some of our students than a consistently neutral one, and this may also be true of their attitude toward the university itself.

The demand that the students are really making upon the university, a demand that transcends all the specific programs of the FSM and other organizations, is that it *be like them*, that it fashion itself in their image.

When I was an undergraduate at Princeton some ten years ago, things were just the opposite. Then the university subtly demanded of its students that they be like *it*, fashioning themselves in its image. The style of Princeton and many of its professors drew the students like a magnet. The "multiversity" of the 1960s, on the other hand, finds it impossible to play this kind of role. To be a mediator among the conflicting interests of the community is no goal for idealistic youth, and arguments that such a role is essential for the functioning of the university within the body politic are unpersuasive. Even if the university really were what many faculty members wish it was, a self-contained community of scholars and apprentices, I doubt that it would prove very attractive to the students.

In any case, the present situation at Berkeley is that instead of the university setting standards for the students, the students are attempting to set standards for the university. When the university manages to meet these standards—as it does on occasion—there is elation; when it fails to

meet these standards—as is more often true—it produces depression and in extreme cases revolt. In either case, the university, particularly the faculty, finds itself under constant scrutiny of the students, much as the students at Princeton found themselves under the constant scrutiny of the University. In the classroom we still give the examinations, but the moment we set foot outside the classroom the examinations are given to us. When Washington fails the test in foreign policy, so do we; when Oakland, California fails the test in civil rights, so do we. The burden is excessive, to say the least. For it is not the abandonment of the old concept of the university acting *in loco parentis* that is really being sought by the students, as some of them claimed last year. It is rather the transformation of the parent from the role of restrictor to the role of leader. To put it another way: the thesis is the students in the streets; the antithesis is the faculty attempting to keep the students off the streets; and the synthesis demanded is the faculty leading the students down the streets. When the demand is not met—as it probably never will be—the reaction is to rub the nose of the university in the mud of Vietnam, Oakland, and Bogalusa. The university either gives ground—as it did last year when the issue was such as to make its own guilt clearly apparent—or it fights back. If it fights back, the situation only becomes further exacerbated, and the university finds itself directly involved against its will. The accusation of university complicity then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, the more so in that outside pressures never fail to limit its flexibility. Seen from the vantage point of the students, if the university is not man enough (the anthropomorphism is deliberate) to take on General Ky, or President Johnson, it should at least be man enough to throw down the gauntlet to the local power structure. The alternative is a direct conflict between the prodigal father and the existential son.

This cycle will continue, on a greater or lesser scale, until such time as the students abandon their emotional involvement with the university, that is, until they cease to expect it to be like them. The precondition for this is the integration of student protest into university life (combined, perhaps, with an admixture of exhaustion).* This integration will probably be completed when a set of permanent regulations governing campus political activity is established (providing that they are based on the principles of the Free Speech Movement and the faculty resolution of December 8, 1964), and when student government obtains the right to take positions on controversial political and social questions. These and other measures currently under discussion would have the effect of insti-

* There are, at present, concrete signs of both these developments.

tutionalizing student political activity as an integral aspect of university life, thus eliminating certain important areas of conflict. The relationship of the students to the university would then cease to be personal and existential, and instead become coldly political and hopefully, at least luke-warmly educational. Everyone's life would be easier, and the students' demands on the university would be substantially reduced.

If and when this happens, is it possible that we will have lost more than we have gained? This is obviously a matter of personal preference, but at least a brief case should be made in favor of the status quo, by which I mean the continued existence of a healthy tension between student moralists and the university. I believe that the attitude of the present generation of students toward the university represents in microcosm a broader attitude towards the country as a whole. More students are protesting the war in Vietnam than protested the Korean War not only because the case against it is much clearer, but also because the students of today have a much clearer image of the standards they want their country to live up to than did the students of the previous decade. Defenders of the war who argue that *all* wars produce atrocities, that the foreign policies of all major powers must be based on *Realpolitik* rather than on Christian or secular humanism, make little headway among the students because the students have a vision of America that corresponds to their image, however self-righteous, of themselves. Critics of the students have accused them of not taking the textbook version of American values seriously, and this may be true in some cases. But in most cases they are taking it very seriously indeed, one might almost say dogmatically; and their seriousness is an important measure of the difficulties encountered by persons who, like myself, have attempted to channel their protests in a more political and pragmatic direction. America, like the university, has something to gain from being morally informed by the voice of what one writer has called its "unkempt prophets." But while the university has reacted by assimilating some of the important lessons that the students have taught it, while rejecting some of the excesses, the government is in a position to close its ears. This is why their voices have grown increasingly shrill and sometimes unbearable. If the students ever stop complaining about the university, it may well be a sign that they have abandoned hope. If they stop protesting about American politics, the situation will indeed be hopeless. As regards the university, there is reason to be optimistic.