

In Defense of Ideas

by Robert McClintock

Remember *The Silent Generation*? It was a piece of pop scholarship done in the late 1950's serialized in *Life*. The interviews it comprised were with seniors at the campus, Princeton, where I was then a freshman or sophomore. The piece struck many of us as somewhat amusing, somewhat aggravating—we recognized the picture it conveyed, but identified with it not at all. We were at that point where the conformist mood of the 50's was beginning to shift to the radical mood of the 60's. We weren't yet radical—the change hadn't yet come to the point of positive self-definition. We were busy at first primarily with negation, separating ourselves from what seemed to be. The most influential book on campus then I think was William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man*; it had an astonishing emotional effect on us for a work of sociological description—such a life as it described we did not want.

When I speak here of "we," I must confess that I do not know exactly who it denotes. The reality of the feelings I describe I can attest to for myself, and I am sure that something very analogous moved many of my friends and acquaintances, and I strongly suspect that the same kind of thing was perceptible on other campuses. And the feelings are important because the academic boom of the 1960's started as a portion of us, early in that decade, started to turn away from other careers, careers that according to the then dominant pattern we might be expected to pursue, and to look instead to the intellectual life. We were the beginning of the boom, or so I think, yet we did not then know that, and our rather groping commitment was not to those things normally associated with the academic boom. And that, precisely, is why it is important to relive our experience, our mood. The academic boom is normally described as an era of rising salaries, rising budgets, rising enrollments, abundant jobs, and the present hard times are generally seen as stasis in all these things that formerly were on the steady upswing. Yet I don't think that if one returns to the state of mind in the early 1960's, among the students at any rate, that these gross measures of academic expansion or contraction were particularly significant.

Take the matter of jobs, for instance. In the early 60's we did not turn towards academic careers because of rosy job prospects. At the time we decided on work in the university, faculty salaries were still very low. We were not responding primarily to the lure of fellowships, a lusty job market, and the promise of tenure at a comfortable salary—those prospects weren't yet apparent and when they emerged they struck us as rather happy accidents. When we turned towards an academic career, we were turning, rather, against the then dominant corporate job market, for it was structured on values that had lost their appeal. It is hard to recapture this phenomenon,

for the ideological fervor of the late 60's rather blots it from view. But in the early 60's it was not a matter of pickets and organized boycotts; it was not a matter of politics, but of personal values—having been raised in security and affluence, we wanted something else, yet the corporate recruiting brochures could talk only of security and depicted the company as the great warm womb. Not wanting that, we turned elsewhere, many of us to the university.

Why? That's a tough question. We've become highly inured to explaining behavior through tangible reinforcements, positive and negative. We've come to interpret the course of higher education by assessing the state of these tangibles, enrollments, budgets, jobs. They are important, but not everything. When we first turned to the university, it was not, I say, with primary attention to these tangibles. The move was much more subtle, the motivation more intangible. There had been a lot of social criticism of a fairly undocctrinaire sort: Camus was big and he conveyed a sense of humane hope, critical clarity, a care for the quality of human relationships. The great era of trans-Atlantic tourism had started and we had become aware that American life was limited; Sputnik had punctured our technological complacency; Galbraith's *Affluent Society* made us wonder what human values our material wealth should serve; a growing civil rights movement reminded us that the American dream was not yet embodied. Kennedy seemed to capture this yearning idealism in his campaign against Nixon, and many of us, raised Republicans, have voted Democratic ever since. The searching examination of weakness in American education during the late 1950's had come at a time when we were old enough to internalize the sense that our culture could be much improved. "Let's get America moving again"—to that we responded, and many of us responded with the sense that the way to do it was somehow through education.

Yet the question still remains, why did so many of us turn to the university, to higher education, not as an episode, but as a career, as a commitment? We did not have a clear and distinct vision—no one really did then. That was part of the charm, the excitement of the time. A few years later, when visions got clear and distinct, that's when conflict developed and everything in a sense turned inauthentic as the visible groups, no matter what their position on the spectrum, seemed to become less concerned with higher education for itself, than with how they could use it for one or another ulterior purpose. Clark Kerr's *Uses of the University* was a true sign of those times and the radical effort to use the university against society a simple inversion of controlling policy. But opportunists, whose commitment to higher education goes no deeper than the intent to use it for this or that, positive or negative, are, however prominent, necessarily transient. If there was anything permanent behind the move towards higher education in the early 60's, it was not merely based on a calculation that the university could be used for this or that; rather, it was based on a sense, not necessarily clear and distinct, of what the university is and on a conviction that what it is, is important.

What then is the university? I don't want to try to answer that question in the abstract. Rather, I want to keep with that time in the early 60's when I and many others felt strongly drawn to a life working in

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higher education, and I want to keep trying to recapture that attraction. I think that what this somewhat indeterminate "we" were drawn to might best be described as a "community of aspiration." As we thought about our lives, too many possibilities seemed too well charted and too much seemed to be like the corporate recruitment brochures, promising snug security provided one sublimated one's personal aspirations into the corporate personality. We did not pay much attention to such aspects of higher education—promotion steps, career lines, the reification of disciplines. Rather we projected into our image of a life committed to higher education the intellectual and personal excitement that we had experienced as undergraduates, the sense of widening horizons, personal growth, of social betterment and the possibility of continually raising aspirations. We had entered higher education at a point of transition. There we had been moved by a new hope. We had felt the sting of criticism. We had experienced a sense of fulfillment of exerting honest effort. These qualities of hope, criticism, and effort we saw, inarticulately but intuitively, as the characteristics marking communities of aspiration, and we felt drawn to helping make higher education, all educational institutions, into forces, moral and intellectual, that would imbue American life with these qualities, with a sense of hope, with an openness to criticism, and a capacity for effort.

To be sure, there is something terribly idealistic about these views, and they have been sorely tried during the past ten years or so. But, however idealistic, there is a certain rockbed realism to them, namely the realism that they are views that do move people, sometimes very strongly. And although I have drawn these views out of very particular historical circumstances, I have done so intentionally as a prelude to suggesting that if each of us who is seriously involved in higher education will examine his or her commitment carefully, something rather similar will come to

the surface. And if some such variant of these ideals are at bottom the ground of the commitment to higher education that we share, it tells us something important about what needs to be in an adequate agenda for the future. If we ourselves find ourselves working in higher education because we have at one time or another been moved by a vision of it as a fount of community of aspiration, we had better realize that is the real source of its influence, its power to attract interest, involvement, commitment from students and the public. And if such intangibles are important, perhaps then we should re-examine the current crisis, perhaps we should ask again whether its real source is in demographics, enrollment declines, research cut-backs, and a tight job-market. Perhaps instead the real crisis is the loss of a sense that higher education is, and should be, a community of aspiration.

What is the source of a community of aspiration? I have spoken of hope, criticism, and effort. These are important; these are what people experience in a community of aspiration, but they do not alone quite define such a community. When people aspire, they direct their attention to the non-existent, to that which is present merely as an intimation of potentiality. Ideas define these intimations of potentiality, and it is in the pursuit of ideas, thoughts, principles, hypotheses, that communities of aspiration form. What is lacking in higher education today is a compelling set of leading ideas. Too many people in higher education are worrying, not thinking. Very few fields in the past ten years or so have been galvanized with new ideas, moving ideas. Without ideas the community of aspiration atrophies; its vestiges become communities of ritual, of certification, of vested interests. What ideas now being articulated can inspire hope, generate criticism, merit effort and how can those ideas best be nurtured into a renewed community of aspiration? As we answer those questions with effect, we will put our present problems behind us.