

Members of the presidential committee which authored the massive Laskin report on rights and responsibilities of members of the York community have admitted that they faced a major problem in their deliberations.

In their discussions they constantly found themselves confronting and being confronted with defining what this university is and what it might or should be.

Unfortunately, some members felt, the terms of reference laid down by president Murray Ross prohibited them from getting into any intensive discussion similar to the University of Toronto's recently-released Commission on University Government.

At the same time, members of the Laskin committee expressed the opinion that it might be wise, and timely, if York launched its own Commission on University Government.

EXCALIBUR shares this view and prints the following discussion below with an eye to starting this dialogue.

Toward a critical university

Everyone is pushing "university reform" these days: Time magazine, student radicals, university administrators. But no one agrees on the directions this "restructuring" is to take.

Most of the proposals, particularly those emanating from Establishment circles, are impractical. Impractical in the sense of unrealizable and not based upon the facts.

Those who would alter the university cannot approach their task in the manner of utopia-building social engineers. The reality of the situation must be taken into account, for the objective nature of the university and society circumscribes and limits what is possible in the realm of reform.

There are two such features which set the relevant framework and delineate the range of alternatives open to us in the area of university reorientation. The first is that the university is necessarily a part of and committed to the outside society in specific ways. The second is that tinkering with educational procedures and the forms of decision-making doesn't inevitably alter the content of these procedures and decisions.

These two propositions are often admitted, but their consequences are rarely drawn out. In fact, everywhere we find deliberate attempts to hide their meaning and obscure their implications. The reason is simple: a penetrating analysis of the facts will lead to critical and radical conclusions. On the first point. The university is not an isolated unit. It is an integral part of the society and that society forces upon the university certain commitments.

To take one example: exams grades and degrees have no intrinsic educational value, but rather serve to limit and warp the student's intellectual self-development. But exams, grades and degrees are nevertheless central to the university's educational process and for a simple reason: outside corporations and governments require them as certificates of skill for certain jobs.

The bulk of the research in Canadian and U.S. universities is done in the service of corporations and government agencies. University economists and engineers don't usually spend their time working for trade unions or the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam or the Red Power movement. And the reason again is that corporations and their subservient governments are the major power-holders and sources of funds in capitalist societies.

In all Canadian universities, boards of governors and their appointed administrations are dominated by members of the corporation elite. Which is one of the reasons they will never accede to basic democratization — should the students and faculty ever assume power, they may decide to orient the university towards other groups and classes in the society than those which the university now serves.

The content of what is taught similarly reflects the university's commitment to the *status quo*. The social sciences for example, essentially obscure and falsify the actual power sources and social relations in advanced neo-capitalist society, and counsel a conservative attitude to social change.

Training in the sciences and engineering, similarly, is narrow, fragmented and specialized, designed to produce a passive worker uncritical of the control and uses of his work. For all kinds of intellectually and technically skilled workers that the university produces, the nature of their education is conditioned by the nature of their jobs in the corporate world.

The above has implications for university reform. That the content of education is slanted one way or another indicates that the reformist emphasis upon teaching methods, classroom size and other aspects of communication is a very solution — the substance of the knowledge disseminated, as well as how it is communicated, has to be challenged and alternatives to bourgeois social science and capitalist job training posed.

The distinction between form and content is also relevant to the question of student representation on committees and governing structures. For the key question is not simply the forms of participation but the substantive decisions that are made. Unless the university is reoriented in a major way, or unless the student movement uses such representation to continually challenge the whole framework of the present university, student representation can only result in participation in a structure whose principles, criteria and direction are set by the internal and external establishment.

We have seen that the university is part of the outside society to the extent that its educational procedures and content, governing structures and research and directed towards the needs and functions of the present economic order.

The multiversity as a mass educational institution and

knowledge factory performs three functions for that society: training a "new working class" of intellectually and technically skilled workers (as well as managers, lawyers, etc); research services for corporations and government; inculcating bourgeois culture and ideology into students. As such, it is an institution vital to the proper functioning of modern neo-capitalism.

The oft-used clichés of "community of scholars" or "institutional neutrality" are nothing but mystifications masking the substantial contributions modern universities make to the ruling interests in the society. Universities are thus politically committed in various ways to specific groups in a conflict-ridden world, whether this political contribution is explicit or implicit (e.g. in the particular way it educates and trains).

It should be evident at this point that the traditional reform solutions of returning the university to a neutral community of scholars in an inadequate and unrealistic response. Firstly, the university necessarily has a connection to and role in the society. Secondly, an "ivory tower" perspective reflects a very narrow parochialism divorcing the university, and its students and faculty, from the lives and struggles of the majority of people in an exploitative society.

The only viable radical alternative is to recognize the committed role of the university and to orient it towards the opposite side of the society in structural social conflict, towards a "critical university".

Such a critical university would commit itself to radical social change and side with the working and exploited peoples of Western and Third World countries. On this basis of radically-altered priorities and alignments, the university would internally develop critical and active minds, radical social theory, and strategies for revolutionary transformation.

It would train in an integrated way and seek to develop workers capable of exerting their creativity and control at the work place. It would do research for trade unions, liberation fronts, etc., and in fact the university as a whole would integrate itself in various ways with such outside groups and ongoing struggles.

The critical university would explicitly take political stands and not hypocritically mask its political commitments as at present. The educational and administrative structure would be democratically organized, members being active participants rather than passive subjects.

The highest governing bodies would include substantial representation from relevant outside groups who have a stake in the critical university. Demands for "student power" or democratization unless placed within such a critical university context, tend to become narrow and corporatist assertions of student self-interest, having no relation to outside struggles and inculcating no broader social consciousness in the student movements. It should be recognized that such a critical university is incompatible with the present social and economic order. It can't exist, if only for lack of funds.

It represents a perspective which can be concretized in various ways to provide a series of demands and alternatives to press for at university. It is a relevant and meaningful program that highlights and attacks the critical points of the university's social role and provides a context where individual demands can acquire a radical meaning in virtue of global attack and challenge to the *status quo*. Some of them, when implemented, can lead to rising expectations and levels of demands.

In fact, the critical university is an integrated program at various levels providing the context for genuinely radical education and escalating political campaigns. Finally, it is a way of making student demands and the student movement relevant to social issues and other existing movements.

But the condition for radically altering the university being a radical social transformation, the student movement must ally itself with the working class. There are various ways such alliances can and have taken place:

- * individual students as student groups can work with local unions and support their struggles.

- * there can be a broad alliance between a student power movement and a workers' movement, at the political or economic level.

- * the model of "exemplary actions", as in France, May, 1968.

Finally, in the perspective of a critical university strategy the student movement can be making demands on the university relevant to its role in the outside society, e.g. how it specifically aids corporations against working class interests, and forges links in action between students and workers in these demands as well as broader ones of interest to both.

Ultimately, of course, the alliance must become one effective political movement.

— STAN GRAY
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