



The following article was originally submitted to the Nova Scotia Royal Commission on Education, Public Services and Provincial-Municipal relations by a group of faculty members at Mount St. Vincent University and was written by Larry Fisk of MSVU's Department of Political Studies. Although some statistics may not apply to all Canadian universities, the attitudes certainly do.

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 enblazened 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 or 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. To them, 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 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 freshman) - "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 programming 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 as 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, 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 Novak, that, "myth and symbol, feeling and fantasy, experience and imagination, sensitivity and sensibility are given an explicit role in the expression of ethical and political perception and action." As advocates of realism we, the faculty have for too long been calling such dimensions of human understanding mere romanticism, irrationality or self-indulgence.

Is Competitive Work Anti-Personal?

Finally, I think the university is viciously anti-personal because of its inordinate emphasis on hard, competitive work. Success, in university circles, is seen as what I achieve in relation to other, what I achieve by stepping over and on my fellow students or faculty members. The emphasis on scientific realism makes all endeavors subject to the criticism of fellow students but its extension in the psychological realm is jealousy for another's achievement, secrecy surrounding a new or previously unexpressed idea, and a hulking pride over a higher grade.

The emphasis on learning about things and activities rules out an appreciation of the inner risks, development and personal growth and enlargement which might better have constituted our definition of success, and in a much less competitive way. Our emphasis on hard work done in seclusion fails miserably to appreciate how work accomplished in private is profoundly indebted to the prior accomplishments of other and the protective and critical environment of our contemporaries.

Politically Reactionary

Our private scholastic endeavors have political significance which we seldom, if ever, recognize. In the first place what we find when we engage in research (our results) may have profound political implications, depending of course on our degree of willingness to publicize our findings, for example the discovery or measurement of an inadequate or poorly administered social service. Secondly, the kinds of questions we research will vary in political significance. If we choose a study, let's say: "A Comparative Analysis of the Longevity of Government-Issued Pencil Erasers as Utilized by a Random Sampling of Halifax Dartmouth Grade One Pupils", our findings are not likely to have too much political importance. Another question related to for example the degree of successful performance of any social or political institution or agency is bound to have more political significance. But our private research is politically relevant not only in what we find and what we question but also in how we investigate. Some forms of investigation (for example participant observation) may lead to an involvement and identification with persons being studied that a distant analysis based on sample surveys, for another example might never risk.

The methodology we employ may narrow the field of questions that we are able to ask since some could never be tackled by certain methods. Again, few researchers consider how the timing of a study may have political relevance. More students are aware of unforeseen conse-