

"The student as a nigger"

The line between free will and slavery

Forward by Vicki Grant

"The Student as a Nigger" by Cal State English professor Gerald Ferber was well-known by the youth of the 1960's. An irreverent and somewhat sensationalist analysis of university politics, it portrayed students as yet another oppressed minority and incited them to rebel the Establishment's antiquated system of education.

Although dated by its naughty language and simplistic understanding of problems, this article is not without relevance in 1982. If Dalhousie can be taken as a norm, many of the politics Ferber railed against 15 years ago remain commonplace today.

It is unlikely, however, that a reprint of "The Student as a Nigger" will have the same effect on the current student body as the original publication had on its predecessors. The student of the 1980's lacks the innocence which convinced young people of the 1960's that they could change the system and, more importantly, the luxury that allowed them to try. Today's harsh economic reality has dwarfed any problems in the educational system. Now the prime concern of most students must necessarily be to make themselves marketable after university. Student anti-establishmentarian activism such as Ferber aimed to encourage has died because it simply does not look good on a resume.

The Student As a Nigger
by Gerald Ferber, Cal State, L.A.

Students are niggers. When you get that straight, our schools begin to make sense. It's more important, though, to understand why they're niggers. If we follow that question seriously enough, it will lead us past the zone of academic bullshit, where educated teachers pass their knowledge on to a new generation, and into the nitty-gritty of human needs and hang-ups. And from there we can go on to consider whether it might ever be possible for students to come up from slavery.

First, let's see what's happening now. Let's look at the role students play in what we like to call education.

At Cal State L.A., where I teach, the students have separate and unequal dining facilities. If I take them to the faculty room, my colleagues get uncomfortable, as though there were a bad smell. If I eat in the student cafeteria, I become known as an educational equivalent of a nigger-lover. In at least one building there are even rest rooms which students may not use. At Cal State, there is an unwritten law barring student-faculty love-making. Fortunately, this anti-miscogena-

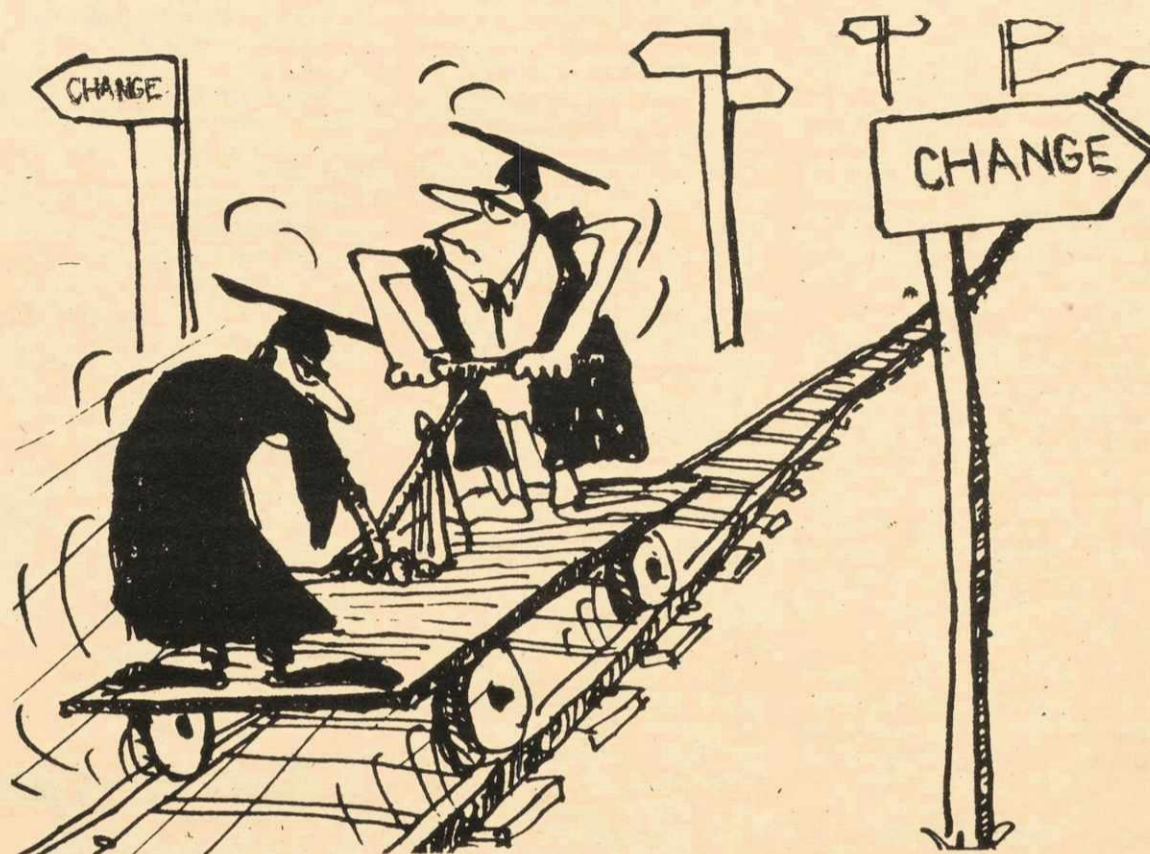
tion law, like its Southern counterpart, is not 100% effective.

Students at Cal State are politically disenfranchised. They are in an academic Lowndes County. Most of them can vote in a national election - their average age is about 26. But, they have no vote in the decisions which affect their academic lives. The students are, it is true, allowed to have a toy government of their own. It is a government run for the most part by Uncle Toms and concerned with trivia. The faculty and administrators decide what courses will be offered; the students get to choose their own Home Coming Queen. Occasionally, when student leaders get uppity and rebellious, they're either ignored, put off with trivial concessions, or maneuvered expertly out of position.

A student at Cal State is expected to know his place. He calls faculty members "Sir" or "Director" or "Professor" and he smiles and shuffles some as he stands outside the professor's office waiting for permission to enter. The faculty tells him which courses to take (in my department, English, electives have to be approved by a faculty member); they tell him what to read, what to write, and frequently where to set the margins on his typewriter. They tell him what's true and what isn't. Some teachers insist that they encourage dissent but they're almost always jiving and every student knows it. Tell the man what he wants to hear or he'll fail your ass out of the course.

When a teacher says "JUMP", students jump. I know of one professor who refused to take up his class time for exams and required students to show up for tests at 6:30 a.m. in the morning. And they did, by God! Another, at exam time, provides answer cards to be filled out - each one enclosed in a paper bag with a hole cut in the top to see through. Students stick their writing hands in the bags while taking the test. The teacher isn't a pro; I wish he were. He does it to prevent cheating. Another colleague once caught a student reading during one of his lectures and threw her book against the wall. Still another lectures his students into stupor and then screams at them in a rage when they fall asleep.

Just last week, during the first meeting of a class, one girl got up to leave after about ten minutes had gone by. The teacher rushed over, grabbed her by the arm, saying, "This class is NOT dismissed!" and led her back to her seat. On the same day another teacher began by informing his class that he does not like beards, mustaches, long hair on boys, or capri pants on girls, and will not tolerate any of that in his class. The class, incidentally, consisted mostly of high school teachers.



Even more discouraging than this Auschwitz approach to education is the fact that the students take it. They haven't gone through twelve years of public schooling for nothing. They've learned one thing and perhaps only one thing during those twelve years. They've forgotten their algebra. They're hopelessly vague about chemistry and physics. They've grown to fear and resent literature. They write like they've been lobotomized. But, Jesus, can they follow orders! Freshmen come up to see me with an essay and ask if I want it folded and whether their name should be in the upper right hand corner. And I want to cry and kiss them and caress their poor tortured heads.

TWO TRUTHS

Students don't ask that orders make sense. They give up expecting things to make sense long before they leave elementary school. Things are true because the teachers say they're true. At a very early age we all learn to accept "two truths" as did certain medieval churchmen. Outside of class, things are true to your tongue, your fingers, your stomach, your heart. Inside class things are true by reason of authority. And that's just fine because you don't care anyway. Miss Weidmeyer tells you a noun is a person, place or thing. So let it be. You don't give a rat's ass; she doesn't give a rat's ass.

The important thing is to please her. Back in kindergarten, you found out that teachers only love children who stand in straight lines. And that's where it's been ever since.

What school accounts to, then, for white and black kids alike, is a 12 year course in how to be slaves. What else could explain what I see in a freshman class? They've got that slave mentality: obliging and ingratiating on the surface but hostile and resistant underneath.

As do black slaves, students vary in their awareness of what's going on. Some recognize their own put on for what it is and even let their rebellion break through to the surface every now and then. Others -- including most of the "good students" -- have been more deeply brainwashed. They swallow the bullshit with greedy mouths. They're pathetically eager to be pushed around. They're like those greyheaded house niggers you can still find in the South who don't see what all the fuss is about, because "Mr. Charlio treats us real good."

College entrance requirements tend to favor the Toms and screen out the rebels. Not entirely, of course. Some students at Cal State, L.A. are expert con artists who know perfectly well what's happening. They want the degree or the 2-S and spend their years on the old plantation alternately laughing and cursing as they play the game. If their egos are strong, they cheat a lot. And, of course, even the Toms are angry down deep somewhere. But it comes out in passive rather than active aggression. They misread simple questions. They spend their nights mechanically outlining history chapters while meticulously failing to comprehend a word of what's in front of them. The saddest cases among both black slaves and student slaves are the ones who have so thoroughly introjected their mas-

ters' value system that their anger is all turned inward. At Cal State these are the kids for whom every low grade is torture, who stammer and shake when they speak to a professor, who go through an emotional crisis everytime they are called upon during class.

They are easily recognized at finals time. Their faces are festooned with fresh pimples; their bowels boil audibly across the room. If there really is a Last Judgement, the parents and teachers who created these wrecks are going to burn in Hell.

So students are niggers. It's time to find out why, and to do this, we have to take a long look at Mr. Charlie.

TIMID TEACHERS

The teachers I know best are college professors. Outside the classroom and taken as a group, their most striking characteristic is timidity. They're SHORT ON BALLS.

Just look at their working conditions. At a time when even migrant workers have begun to fight and win, college professors are still afraid to make more than a token effort to improve their pitiful economic status. In California state colleges the faculties are screwed regularly and vigorously by the Governor and Legislature and yet they still won't offer any solid resistance. They lie flat on their stomachs with their pants down, mumbling catch phrases like "professional dignity" and "meaningful dialogue."

Professors were no different when I was an undergraduate at

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