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# Higher education in transition

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PART ONE

During the 1960s students in the New Left (and their non-student supporters) attacked American colleges and universities as supporters of the "military industrial complex." The university had to be made more egalitarian, even as it was forced to contribute to changing society.

To be sure, criticism of the university was not new. For many conservatives the American university had some time ago become a bastion of liberalism. Its faculty were teaching students view points that undermined key elements in American life. Not the least of this, as a young William F. Buckley, Jr., argued in God and Man at Yale, was the disdain with which a secular faculty treated organized religion.

In their concern with teaching, conservatives joined with many radicals, though their conceptions of what constituted a proper education differed. Radicals believed that universities should contribute to changing America, in part, by behaving in a democratic and egalitarian manner in the classroom. Many conservatives desired a revival of classical education and reintroduction of a "core" curriculum, both of which were (in the 1950s) disappearing from even the most traditional institutions. They saw the university as an institution whose function was to transmit the classical tradition. To do so involved that the authority of the teacher be maintained, not weakened, something they believed had already occurred.

Today criticism of universities has escalated again. Conservatives and what have come to be called "neoconservatives" are the most vocal critics of higher education, although many persons who regard themselves as educational and political liberals are reacting with alarm. Some recent books, such as Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind, argue that American higher education has gone seriously awry, and may not even be salvageable.

**THE EUROPEAN MODEL**

What is happening in American higher education? Is the situation as bad as its critics claim, or are U.S. universities still, as Harvard dean Henry Rosovsky argues, the best in the world, and on an upward trajectory? The answer to these questions requires a brief historical review of higher education.

The first universities developed in Europe in the 12th century. By 1600 Western Europe boasted 108 institutions of higher learning, many of which had obtained special privileges from existing regimes because of their close association with the church. In most European countries, universities were designed primarily for the sons of nobility and gentry. Scholarly standards were low, but scholarship was irrelevant for most professions. Education for earning a livelihood in, say, medicine or law could be acquired after college by serving as an apprentice. For most students, however, the university served as a confirmation of status rather than a source of social mobility.

By the late 19th century this had begun to change. Children of the lower middle class were entering universities in larger numbers, though attendance was still small. French, Russian, Italian, and many other university systems retained a classical model of education, emphasizing Greek, Latin, philosophy, and history. Such training provided little in the way of contributions to social and economic growth or to preparation for a career. In England, as in the rest of Europe, universities were controlled by either the church or the state. With few exceptions, no network of privately supported secular institutions of higher learning developed.

**GROWTH OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

At its founding, American higher education was patterned after the British system. The ideal was that of small elite colleges and universities located in the country or small towns. Most of the best of these, including Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, were founded by religious denominations. However, by the beginning of the 19th century they were losing their denominational cast, opening themselves to young men (and for a few schools, women) from a variety of backgrounds. They were also quite successful in replacing church support with funds from secular sources, including growing amounts of money contributed by alumni.

As with most European countries, higher education was first limited to the well-to-do. The creation in the mid-19th century of liberalarts state universities and state agricultural colleges, as well as new private universities, eventually revolutionized the American system of higher education. In the Midwest and West, especially, state universities were more likely to emphasize education in practical matters than were the elite private colleges and universities of the East.

After the Civil War, the United States developed a lead in providing higher education for the masses, a lead that it still holds. Between 1870 and 1945 university enrollment in the United States doubled every 15 years. The growth of higher education, however, really came into its own after World War II, when both the "GI Bill of Rights" for veterans and an explosion of funds expended by the states and the federal government contributed to a massive expansion of the university population. today, about half of the college age population enrolls in institutions of higher learning, staffed by more than 500,000 faculty.

In 1899-1900 only 382 doctorates were granted in the United States. By 1982 about 750,000 Americans held doctoral degrees. In 1940 some 3.4 million Americans over 25 had completed 4 years of college, less than 5 per cent of their age group. By 1982 the number had reached 24 million, or almost 18 per cent of the adult population.

This growth was accompanied by massive changes in the system of higher education. First, most private universities lost their religious cast and became purely secular institutions. Second, while some religious and elite private colleges and universities retained something of a traditional curriculum, most

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state and private institutions gradually replaced it, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with a system of elective courses emphasizing the newly emerging social sciences.

America developed a pluralistic system of higher education. There were colleges where one could obtain a degree in almost any subject. Thus, the United States boasted a hierarchy of colleges and universities, from the elite schools that confirmed the status of the rich but which were often followed by graduate school for professional training, to technical schools that granted degrees in various "practical subjects."

At the same time, the structure of power in the university began to change. The university presidency declined in power, to be replaced by academic departments, as faculty fought for an institutionalized notion of academic freedom and a tenure system, both of which protected them from arbitrary dismissal. Today, with exceptions, university presidents are far less strong than they once were and often function primarily as fund raisers, while boards of trustees accept the authority of the professoriate in academic matters. On the other hand, new constituencies, including students, have been gaining power at the expense of academic staff.

America lacked an intellectual class comparable to Europe's during most of the 19th century. America did not undergo the wrenching social change from a traditional to a modern society, which in Europe and elsewhere was the source of contrasting world views. Intellectuals thrive during periods of social conflict and fundamental social change.

By the end of the 19th century in America an intellectual stratum had grown in size and in self-awareness, drawing in part upon a growing familiarity with European ideas, especially those of European socialism. This intellectual stratum consisted partly of individuals who made their living as journalists and writers, primarily in a few cities where they could support themselves by publishing journals and engaging in some teaching. It also consisted of academics who supported themselves by teaching but turned most of their attention to the outside world.

The influence of this intellectual stratum grew steadily during the 20th century and reached a peak first during President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal social programs of the 1930s and then during World War II. Despite outcroppings of radicalism at Harvard and other elite institutions, and the role played by some New York intellectuals in the 1930s, intellectuals in general, and university faculties in particular, were until the 1950s relatively conservative.

**THE LIBERAL FACULTY**

The end of World War II produced a significant shift in the character of the professoriate. For one thing, the intellectual and academic communities in the United States tended to become almost one and the same. The nature of the academic community also changed. Traditionally, the academy had been populated largely by middle class and upper-middle-class Protestants. The rapid expansion of college faculties that started in the early 1950s, scholarships for military veterans, the decline of prejudice and quotas, and the insistence upon merit as defined by grades and tests permitted entry into the profession of scholars of lower middle- and working-class backgrounds who saw the academy as a source of social mobility. They could become intellectuals and at the same time earn a living.

The academic community has become increasingly liberal and cosmopolitan as its influence has increased. Whereas in the 1960s universities still contained a remnant of the old Protestant professoriate—who, along with "neoconservative" Jews, managed to block more radical changes—this group has now been eroded by age and retirement. Thus, the faculty today is likely to be more to the left than it was 25 years ago. Increasingly it consists of those who were active in the New Left of the 1960s. While Marxism is not in fashion at the moment, broad cultural and social critiques of American society are.

Today, a substantial segment of the faculty supports a liberal cosmopolitan ideology that consists of three elements. The first can be characterized by the term expressive individualism, coined by University of California, Berkeley, sociologist Robert Bellah and his coauthors in their book Habits of the Heart (1985). It refers to the free expression and satisfaction of individual desires in the pursuit of the good life. The core of this concept is the priority given to free, unfettered expression of impulses, assumed to be good in and of themselves. Expressive individualism is characterized by a shift in the concept of the "individual from a "being" as a part of a great chain, to a "self." Historically, it marks a shift from the traditional Puritan restraint of impulse to its free expression, and the rejection of the traditional for the new and avant-garde.

A second strand, collectivist liberalism (or welfare-state liberalism), emerged from the Depression era. This has been considered to be the major domain of contemporary ideology. Collectivist liberalism rests on the belief that the central government ought to ameliorate the economic inequalities of the capitalist system. It is in opposition to the traditional "rugged individualist" view that economic well-being stems from individual effort and personal achievement. Collectivist liberalism supports the expansion of the welfare state, more government-induced economic equality, and government regulation of business "in the public interest," and holds that those who are economically unsuccessful are not ultimately responsible for improving their own condition.

A third strand of contemporary ideology, system alienation, emerged during the crisis of the 1960s. System alienation rests on the belief that the social order of bourgeoisliberal society is inherently dehumanizing and repressive, and that its structures of authority are inherently suspect. The feelings of system alienation are closely tied to a critique of American capitalism.

To be continued