

Robert Theobald Speaks on Student Power and

about this and that. He even has the temerity to call the university a sausage machine

Anyone who does not understand that student power is a very major issue in this country—and will almost certainly be one on the OU campus by the end of this year—is just kidding himself. University years are, in a real sense, pressure cookers. What comes out at the end of them is what was there at the beginning, and the issue that is there at the present time is the student power issue. And, of course, it is being dramatically pushed by the Vietnam issue and by the black power issue, and the result is a pretty explosive mixture.

I wish to discuss two definitions of student power. One of them states that it is necessary for students to produce an organization which can meet faculty and administration on at least equal terms, and I suspect that like them in *Animal Farm* it would be better if they were slightly more equal.

I think the shape that this type of organization will take will be in the form of student unions, and though this is the dominant view of the student power issue, it doesn't happen to be mine.

My definition of student power is the creation of a college or university in which the student has control over his own life. I believe the realization of this definition is a good deal more complex, subtle, and difficult than simply being able to argue with the administration and faculty on approximately equal terms.

These two definitions of student power parallel two themes in the black power movement, one of which could be stated, "We wish to discover ourselves so that we will be able to understand ourselves well enough to be able to control our own lives." This is very similar to the view I wish to put forward in respect to what student power should be about.

Robert Theobald is an English economist, author, and a provocative spokesman on education. He was the first of three speakers which appeared in a special lecture series at OU on "The University: Complete or Obsolete?" sponsored by the Union Activities Board, the Public Lectures Committee, and campus church groups. The other speakers were Dr. J. Herbert Holloman, president-designate of OU, and Dr. John Diekhoff, vice president of Western Reserve University. Presently Theobald is an education consultant in New York City. He has recently worked with the United Christian Movement, planning new forms of teaching and learning in higher education.

Another theme in black power which I believe is developing rapidly says, "We as blacks must discover a method of being as powerful as possible with relation to the establishment." This approach is unlikely to be successful because the hard fact remains that the power remains with the non-black. And similarly, the power remains with the non-student. If one translates black power and student power into an attempt to *force* concession, it seems to me inevitable that they must fail.

Before discussing the reasons for this conclusion, I think it proper to first examine the question of why the issue of man's powerlessness has been reached at all. Why *has* man's powerlessness suddenly become a real issue? After all, most men have been powerless over their lives throughout history. Why suddenly at this point is there a massive and growing movement which centers on man's right to have power over his life? Why this movement to end powerlessness? You can answer in one of two ways. One way is to say that when there is so much power in the world, it is intolerable to be powerless because you can be destroyed. The second way to put it is that our technology has for the first time freed man so that it is conceivable that each human being can make decisions over his own life.

Two things have happened, and practically everyone in college is aware of them, if only superficially and if only in a manner which attempts to deny the existence of them. Students are aware that violence has become impossible. They have grown up in a world dominated by the potential of nuclear energy and the atomic bomb. They are aware that either we will abolish the atomic bomb or the atomic bomb will abolish us.

Secondly, they have grown up recognizing that abundance is a free gift, given to us by our ancestors and for which we can claim no credit. Our high standard of living is not due to our efforts and will not in a real sense *be* due to our efforts. It comes to us from the accumulated labor of the past.

Man, therefore, is able to be free to do what he thinks he wishes to do, and it becomes intolerable for any man to be caught in a situation in which he cannot do what he believes he ought to do.

It is sufficiently intolerable for some groups that they

are quite prepared to destroy our world if we do not meet their demands for power. We must understand, if we are to survive, that the black power movement is leading, has led, and will continue to lead to a new development, which I call, for want of a better term, black nihilism. The black nihilist is a person who has become convinced, unfortunately on the basis of rather good evidence, that no one in the white society is about to do anything serious to deal with the issues he faces. He has decided that the only way to bring the issue to a point where decisions will be made is to confront the society massively, to disrupt this incredibly complex and technological society and force the white world to choose between change and repression. The only problem is that it is clear what the choice will be. The choice will be repression.

The same is true for the student. A growing number of students are willing to force their campuses and the wider community to make that choice. Again, I am convinced that if the choice must be made at this point, the society will choose repression.

The critical thing that has happened is that man is achieving what he has striven for since the beginning of time, which is to manufacture, to tailor, to create an environment to his own specifications. We are not there yet, one might say, but it is clear we are already in control of our own evolution and we are developing our own society.

I believe there are four reasons for this. One of them is the availability of massive energy sources and our ability to use energy for any desired purpose—whether to mine much lower grade ores than at present, to turn salt water into fresh water, or to manufacture foods through photosynthesis and other methods.

A second source I call alchemy. I could also call it the manipulation of the microstructure of nature. By this I mean that if you have enough money, you are capable of producing a material with any given characteristics. This is the basic lesson of the space program—that there is no shortage of raw materials because you can produce the material you want out of the abundant resources. The reason I call it alchemy is to remind us that a great many of the materials now being alchemized are a great deal more valuable than gold. (It amuses me considerably to think of the chaos of my fellow economists as they try to cope with the fact that gold is not inherently valuable.)

A third reality is the computer. The computer is a logic machine of enormous and rapidly growing power. We still have a computer generation every two or three years. In a generation the power of the computer rises by an inordinate magnitude, a factor of ten at least. The estimate by Herman Kahn of the Hudson Institute for the increase in computer capacity between now and the end of the century is something between one billion- and one trillion-fold.

But the computer, and for the present I'm not willing to enter into the science-fiction aspects of it, is an idiot. Or in psychological jargon, an idiot-savant: somebody who can perform magnificent calculations but who doesn't know what they mean or how he does them. If you ask the computer a stupid question, you will get a stupid answer. This isn't as comforting as it sounds, however, because human beings have never been particularly noted

for their capacity to determine what are stupid questions and what are stupid answers. And we aren't getting any better at it under the impact of a development that can be described as the defining of the computer as the new god.

When the computer has spoken, who shall question the computer? If taken as a god, the computer has some real advantages because value assumptions can be buried in the computer, making it very difficult for the uninformed to challenge them. For example, why is it that in California, for some strange reason, roads always go through redwood forests? It's really very simple. The computer is told to design the best road, then it is informed that the best road means the cheapest road. Low values are churned in for the redwood groves because, after all, they're unimproved land. Next data on other areas are inserted, the question asked, and the computer says the best route—surprise—is through the redwood groves.

The computer is a very good servant and a very poor master. I would suggest that it is being the master in all too many areas. I speculate, and I admit that it is speculation, that one of the reasons for the Vietnam mess is that buried deep in most of the war gaming is an assumption about the implication of bombing on people. The assumption is that if you bomb people enough, they give up. I have reason to be suspicious of this assumption. I happen to be British.

The fourth reason that we have the possibility of doing what we want is that we have more time to devote to education. It is no longer necessary for most people to spend almost all of their lives producing goods and services; therefore, people can stay in school and go to universities. Indeed if we had not managed to invent the university, if it did not exist, we would certainly at this point be forced to invent it to keep the young people off the labor market.

The only trouble with our education is that it is designed to produce not human beings but surrogate computers, because what students are taught to do is substantially what computers can do. They are taught how to carry through structured reasoning, which is exactly the definition of the computer.

The university is a sausage machine. It is designed to turn out people capable of holding jobs. The definition that most employers have of a desirable employee is somebody who got good grades in school. To get good grades in school, you must in general know how to answer multiple choice questions effectively. In order to answer multiple choice questions effectively, you must not think. Thinking confuses the beautiful boxes into which you put the facts so that you can answer multiple choice questions.

Assume for a moment that students decide to break out of the pattern of ingurgitating data and regurgitating it. They decide they are going to think. This is, of course, a disastrous decision. Thinking leads to confusion. The first implication of serious thought is confusion. If you are confused at the end of the semester, which would be very probable if you took on any serious subject, your exam would not be neatly structured and well designed and you would end up with an F. If you end up with Fs,

you get thrown out of the university and you go to Vietnam. A very effective way method of making it impossible to think at the university. In my more cynical moments I wonder if somebody has not carefully planned all this to ensure that the status quo is not disturbed, because we do know one thing about creativity. We know creativity occurs when the brain is playing. It happens when data have time to move around one's brain and get into random contact. Then one finds that something has connected and he can work out what is going on.

But the amount of time for thought in the university, time for creation, time to sit and think, is terribly limited. I said last year, and I was more optimistic then than I am now, that we might get a movement to change from having five courses a semester to having three. I still believe this might be one of the more significant reforms on the university campus.

Man has power because despite the fact that we are surrogate computers we still have the ability to solve structured problems. And this ability has moved us into three traps, all of which I believe to be immediate. By immediate I don't mean the next twenty years; I mean the next twelve months.

The first of them is what I define as the War Trap. The War Trap says that it is essential for any country to be able to defend itself against any potential attack, and it is therefore necessary for any country to install any weaponry system it can discover, because if it does not, it becomes vulnerable. That is precisely what the Secretary of Defense said to us recently about the anti-ballistic missile system. Mr. McNamara said in effect that this is about the most stupid thing I have ever done in my life, but it's necessary. Of course, we don't go on beyond this, he said. We will have the thin missile defense, but we won't progress to the thick one. McNamara was ignoring the realities. We will undoubtedly move very rapidly from the thin screen to the massive screen because that's where we are being taken. President Johnson said in his State of the Union message that if the Russians continue to build an anti-ballistic missile system, we will be forced to build one, too. That's what has happened. But no one really cares to come right out and say what this means, which is that in our present world the foreign policy of the United States is made in Russia. And vice versa.

There is only one way out of this trap, and it is by the same conceptual leap that happened when we abolished dueling. Dueling was a statement that affairs of personal honor could be resolved by violence. At some point we decided that affairs of personal honor did not get decided by violence. I was taught when I was young that we did this because we became more humane. I've since decided this is not true. I think we simply decided that dueling was not fun. Something that we all know but do not really take into account is that dueling with machine guns and atomic weapons isn't any fun either. The only way out of the War Trap is by a conceptual leap which says that affairs of national honor are not settled by violence.

The second trap is the Job Trap. The reason why universities are organized to find everybody jobs is because in our society anyone who wishes to survive must find a job. So long as this is true, the educational system will

be designed to turn out people who can hold jobs. So long as this is true, we must, in the charming words of Walter Heller, the recent chairman of the federal government's Council of Economic Advisers, "retread" human beings. He didn't seem to realize that his language might be slightly destructive of the dignity of man.

And then, in the next step we will move into something called the government as the Employer of Last Resort. That's big in Washington. What that means is that if you can't find a job anywhere else, then you go to the government and the government finds you a job. That's fine until you start to analyze it, because who are you going to get in that group? You are going to get everybody who doesn't have an adequate education, everybody who doesn't have adequate skills, and everybody who has none of the qualities required to make him stick at a job. You confront a bunch of federal bureaucrats with a few million people like this, and if any of you have been watching what has been happening to the poverty program, I don't think you need any imagination to know what's going to happen. We will start to make rules such as anybody who is 15 minutes late for work will not receive a day's pay. Then we'll go on to say that because everybody says he doesn't like his job and everybody keeps on bothering us about changing jobs, nobody may change jobs more than once every six months. Then I would like to define the system we would have by a very blunt and old-fashioned word: slavery.

The only way out of this trap is also through a conceptual leap, a conceptual leap which says that we must move to a society in which everybody must receive his resources as a right and must make decisions about what he should do for himself and his society. The long-run result of such a decision would be the guaranteed income and something I call committed spending, which is an income maintenance plan for those middle income people who lose their jobs. Basically one is talking about a new form of society when one talks about guaranteed income, based on a new view of the nature of man, not on the view anymore that it is necessary to whip people into activity through monetary incentives but that people provided with a monetary base will make intelligent decisions. This is the difference between Skinnerian psychology and Maslowian psychology—Skinnerian psychology which says that people do not move unless pushed by positive and negative sanctions and Maslowian psychology which says that people rise to challenge.

The problem is that you can't straddle the issue, because if you believe in Skinner, it is indeed necessary that you make life as unpleasant as possible for those people on welfare in the hope that they might be moved to get off welfare. On the other hand, if you believe in Maslow, the very fact that we keep people poor is the precise reason they remain unable to help themselves.

The third trap is the Consumption Trap, which says that in our society because everybody must have a job, it is essential that we consume everything that the society is capable of producing. This suggests that in the future, if we continue the way we are going, it will be the people of high economic standing who will be allowed to consume very little and the mark of the peon will be the person who has to consume an enormous amount each year.

I have one horror story and one analytical statement

to illustrate this. The horror story is the decision of the Department of Agriculture to produce a film on the joys of smoking. *For export only*. The analytical statement—a horror story, too, really—is what we do to kids from 1 to 5. Children this age, in many cases, have television as the prime parent. As a prime parent it basically inculcates two values: frenetic consumerism and permanent debt. When I last said this, on television, one of my fellow panelists turned to me and said it really isn't that serious because by the time children are ten they have realized that everything people tell them on television through advertising is false. I said that might well be true and perhaps that explains to me for the first time why it is that young people have such little respect for the adult society. It's because the basic sets of messages that reach them are entirely false and designed to manipulate them into doing things which are not desirable.

I think the only way out of this trap is another conceptual leap which says the classical American dream reinforced by the economist's statement that tastes are insatiable and in the language that enough is a thousand dollars more than you presently have has to go. One has to realize that too much is worse than enough.

I think this will happen. First because we are becoming aware of the reality of sensory overload, the fact that if you try to take in more than a certain amount of sensory input, your brain blacks out. If, however, you take in just less than the blacking out stage but more than you need, you become unable to benefit and enjoy sensations. I would suspect that in this country at this point in time most people are suffering from sensory overload, and most people are going to get a great deal further overloaded when they feel bored and stale by stopping rather than trying to do yet another thing. Secondly, I think we are beginning to realize that we cannot tolerate waste. If you've noticed, there's a slew of articles beginning to appear which say essentially that we will drown in our own garbage within the next 20 years. We're going to have to look at the issue of forced obsolescence, of building products for infinitely less than their maximally favored life. We must look at what we mean by quality. We must eliminate our throw-away culture because we can't handle it anymore.

These traps require change, for the reason I gave in discussing where people are in black power movements, and because of our understanding of cybernetics.

Cybernetics states that four qualities are necessary in a functioning society. The first of them is that the information moving in society be accurate. If it is not accurate, intelligent decisions are impossible. We have a society which has sanctioned more dishonesty than any other society in history. We call it "management of the news" in government and "public relations" when we're doing it for business and the university. But it is the same thing. Those terms are both synonyms for lying.

The second requirement for a functioning society is responsibility, which says people will make decisions when there is a divergence between the desirable norm and the actuality. We have a society where fewer and fewer people are responsible for anything. I'm surprised that Kafka isn't read more by students today because he seems clearly to express the world we live in. There just isn't any

reason for anything that happens. Try to get somebody to explain why something is going on and he says I only work here. Try to get somebody to change something and he says I don't make the decisions around here.

The third requirement for a functioning society is that a subsystem doesn't try to take over the system. Gregory Bateson puts it roughly. He says the worst thing that can happen to a parasite is to find a perfect host. The parasite then multiplies so exceedingly that it destroys the host. Mankind at this point is very busily acting as a parasite on a rather perfect host, his environment. He doesn't have very much time on this issue.

The fourth requirement and perhaps the most surprising one of all is that there must be play in a given system to cope with unexpected situations. There must be a willingness on the parts of the system to adapt to situations. If you want to turn that into human phraseology, it translates into "love." I believe we need to take this seriously.

Toynbee says that when cultures become unsuitable to the environment the culture collapses and usually becomes paranoid. Our culture is certainly becoming unsuitable to the environment, and the evidence that it is becoming paranoid is clear cut. The problem is that instead of just being able to wipe out a fair amount of a continent, as was Genghis Khan, we can wipe out the world. That is why we must change now. But in order to change, we must do something that has never been done. We must invent a new society. We must pull ourselves up by our cultural bootstraps and change a society so that it does not collapse.

Unfortunately, our education doesn't work for this purpose. I refer again to Gregory Bateson, who has developed theories about learning. He says there are several levels. One is the understanding of a fact—somebody comes in the door. Another has to do with the relationship of two facts together—when the bell rings, I go to lunch. A third level is the improvement of a performance within a structured situation—if I go to lunch half an hour before the bell rings, the line will be long and I will have to wait but the food will still be there; if I go to lunch half an hour after the bell rings, there won't be any line but there won't be any food either. That's what education is about today.

And it is ineffective when you don't need simply to change or improve your performance within a given environment but desire instead to discover the environment. This requires a totally different set of techniques. McLuhan says that man has always lived looking in the rear-view mirror because environments are invisible. The last thing to ask about water is a fish. To the fish water is invisible. So it is with us and our environment. Yet we must discover our environment because we must plan for the future.

Why don't we interrogate ourselves about our environment? It doesn't work because in some very strange ways environments are self-validating. Reality has a strange way of being what you think it is.

The only way to discover a world is to compare your reality with somebody else's reality. That isn't easy. It sounds easy but the trouble is that when you tell somebody about your reality, you have to tell them about you.

To tell them about you, you become vulnerable because you have said who you are and people can then be immensely destructive. That's where we are, and we need to be able to trust each other so we can discover reality and work to bring about social change. But we're caught up in our inability to trust anybody enough. This is why I'm against confrontation politics. It gets us even further from discovering where other people are. If you can't discover where they are, you can't bring about change.

I believe the issue is how to get people sufficiently un-hung-up to be able to discover their reality and how to help everybody out of their boxes. I think the answer is through dialogue, a genuine willingness to open yourself up to other people. I have seen some extraordinary things happen when this is done.

If the establishment is evil rather than stupid and ill informed, then we'd better give up—we haven't any chance of bringing about change peacefully. I don't believe this to be the case. I don't believe that the establishment is evil; I believe it is ill informed. To put it at the highest level, President Johnson is one of the most ill informed men in this country, and this is an inevitable consequence of being President because nobody is going to bring him bad news.

If you're dependent on someone for your livelihood and your survival, you don't bring him bad news. I spoke to one of the leaders of this nation, in terms of financial power, about three years ago, just before the first riots. Two things startled me and made me see how true this is. The first was his ignorance of the term "cybernation." He was completely outside the mainstream of the new debates which were emerging. Secondly, and more startling, he was totally unaware of the possibility of rioting that summer, whereas everyone who was understanding of what was going on in America knew that there would be serious rioting.

I suppose the real issue is whether or not confrontation works. Confrontation is certainly the dominant style among the activists of today. I believe that it must be dialogue or nothing, however. It is inevitable that the people in control of our society will be very uptight, and what makes them more uptight, like confrontation, is

extremely dangerous and makes intelligent change unlikely.

People in charge of our society are generally male between 45 and 65, and they are under several areas of profound personal threat. They are beginning to realize that young people know a great deal more in many areas than older people do. They are beginning to perceive that feminine values are a great deal more relevant to the future than masculine values. I don't mean this in terms of fundamental masculine and feminine values because I don't know what that means. I mean in terms of what Western society has defined as masculine and feminine values.

Also, the goal for which they have striven, to have power, doesn't work anymore. They wanted to get to the top where they could push buttons and everybody would jump. Only people don't jump anymore. The people you need to get things done are the very people you can't reach that way. They simply tell you they aren't interested, they'll go somewhere else.

We have a society in which people like this and many others are devoting practically all of their time convincing themselves the world is in fine shape. Almost all their psychic energy is expended building a statement that the evidence of social disillusion is not real, that things are really, all in all, perfectly good, perfectly fine, perfectly satisfactory. As the world continues to fall apart, as it is, the amount of energy needed to do this becomes greater, and the amount of energy available to bring about any change becomes less. A vague malaise is the result, a reluctance to take action.

Let me conclude with quotations from two rather divergent sources, Pogo and Goethe. Pogo said, "We have met the enemy, and we are they." Goethe said, "If we take man as he is, we keep him what he is. If we imagine man as he might be, we create what he might be." We have not imagined man as he might be and unless and until we do, he will not be what he might be.

Therefore, if you are going to be able to get those in power to analyze calmly and dispassionately the world in which they live, they are going to need help. If people are going to see reality, they are going to need help. Confrontation, when used in the student power movement or in any other situation, will not succeed in allowing this to happen. Dialogue, I believe, will. END

When a University Fails to Lead

By Dr. Norton E. Long

While one could haggle over the comparative merits of universities, I don't think anyone would have much doubt that the University of California at Berkeley was in the top five or ten universities of this country. Certain-

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ly it had, and still does have, a first-class faculty, well-known for its research, if not for its teaching. It was well supported and able to attract very good students. It seemed to be reasonably well off in terms of the estimation of the people of California and the state legislature. It had a president of national and international renown.

Yet this institution fell on days of internal disruption and it opened itself up, I think, to a considerable extent