
The Case for the Rebellious Students and Their Counterrevolution

By John Fischer

The revolts which boiled up on scores of campuses last spring—and which are once again seething—have a good deal more justification than one might gather from the press and television accounts. Some commentators have put the blame on a handful of romantic New Leftists, playing at revolution; or on clumsy, indecisive academic administrators; or on the malaise of Vietnam; or on the vague epidemic of student unrest which seems to be sweeping the world. All of these elements are in the cauldron, certainly, but they are not the main ingredient. They could not produce such widespread disorders unless a considerable number of ordinary, nonrevolutionary, usually well behaved undergraduates felt a deep sense of grievance. And with good reason.

So it seems to me, anyhow, from what I have observed in the academic community where I live, and from visits during the past year to a good many other campuses, what is going on is not just a passing commotion which can be put down by firmer discipline. Neither is it a revolution. Instead, I believe, it is the beginning of a *counterrevolution* by students—liberal arts undergraduates in particular—against a quiet, almost unremarked revolution which has changed the whole structure of American higher education within the last two or three decades. The main beneficiaries of that revolution were the faculty. The victims were the liberal arts undergraduates. Only recently have these students begun to understand how they are victimized—and their protest is likely to swell until at least some of the results of the earlier revolution are reversed. (Or, perhaps, until the victims desert the conventional colleges and universities for some new kind of educational institution).

During the uproar at Columbia—

and elsewhere—the rioters were almost never students of engineering, medicine, law, journalism, and the physical sciences. Very few of them were graduate students aiming for a career in teaching. The ones who sacked the president's office, burned the professor's manuscripts, and barricaded the library were, typically, undergraduates in the liberal arts. This, as Lenin used to say, is no coincidence.

Some youngsters come to a university with their life-plans already laid out. They know that they want to be doctors or lawyers or professors, and

they are looking for a sound training in their chosen trade. By and large, they are well served. They fit neatly into the structure of the post-revolution university, and—unless their minds begin to roam beyond their narrowly defined professional tracks—they will have no serious complaints. (They probably will have minor complaints, of a kind to be noted in a moment; but these alone seldom lead to riots.)

Other young people (often the brightest) enter the freshman class not yet sure what to do with their lives. They come to college to find out. They want to learn something about the world and about themselves—to make an appraisal of their own capacities and of the dauntingly complex world beyond the campus gates; and to estimate how they might best come to terms with it. They don't want professional training—not yet, anyhow. What they want is understanding, and they hope to pick up at least a smattering of it by talking to wise, mature men; by reading under these men's guidance; and by observing how such men conduct their own lives. In sum, they are after what used to be called "a liberal education." As recently as twenty years ago they might have found it in most good American universities. Today their chances are close to zero.

For, as Irving Kristol pointed out in *Fortune* last May, ". . . in the overwhelming majority of universities, liberal education is extinct." It was destroyed by the academic revolution. Its destruction probably was unintentional, since many professors and administrators don't yet seem to realize it is gone. In their official oratory, at least, they speak of it with pious respect, implying that their institutions still provide it in copious, life-enhancing drafts. The freshman who is drawn to the university because he takes this rhetoric seriously



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quickly discovers that it simply is not true. Hence his accusations of hypocrisy, his disillusionment, and his impulse to throw bricks through classroom windows. He feels that he has been sold a bill of goods under false pretenses; and he is quite right.

What killed liberal education? The best account is set forth by Christopher Jencks and David Riesman in their recent book, *The Academic Revolution*. The revolution began, roughly, at the end of World War II, when the demand for higher education began to grow with explosive speed. The increasing complexity of our technological society required a sharply rising supply of university-trained specialists. As a result, a diploma became an almost indispensable document: a combination meal ticket, union card, and passport to upper-middle-class life.

The only people who could meet this demand—the university teachers—suddenly found themselves in a highly strategic position. Only recently they had been humble pedagogues, on a social and economic par with bank clerks and used-car salesmen. Now they were the sole purveyors of a scarce and precious commodity. Like all monopolists, they used this newfound power to enhance their own wealth, prestige, and authority. Their salaries climbed rapidly, as the expanding universities—and scores of brand-new educational institutions—bid for their services. Today \$50,000 incomes, from salary, government and foundation grants, outside lectures, and consulting fees, are by no means uncommon in academic circles.

The professoriat also used its new clout to seize a big share of power from university trustees and presidents. Within a decade or so, de facto authority to run the university moved from the administration building into the academic departments—just as the governance of France moved during the Merovingian period from the palace into the hands of the great barons. On most campuses the faculty now decides, in fact, who shall be hired and fired, although the president and trustees still give their formal consent. So, too, the new ruling class decides what shall be taught, and to whom. It also controls much of the budget, since an eminent scholar usually hustles up his own research

grants; and if he moves to another university he is likely to take the money with him.

With such leverage, the professoriat soon began to reshape the university to suit its own desires, rather than those of the students or their parents.

For one thing, teachers today are doing less and less teaching. Jencks and Riesman note that “until World War II even senior scholars at leading universities did a good deal of what they defined as scut work: teaching small groups of lower-level students, reading papers and examinations, and the like . . . Today, however, few well-known scholars teach more than six hours a week, and in leading universities many bargain for less . . . The routine problems of mass higher education have therefore fallen by default to graduate students.”

What little teaching the professors do, according to the same authorities, often “is dull and ineffective.” They are never required, at any point in their career, to get any professional training in the art of teaching. And they have no incentive to learn it on their own, because good teaching is “no help in getting a salary increase, moving to a more prestigious campus, or winning their colleagues’ admiration.” It may even be a handicap, because “the able teacher finds students beating a path to his door and leaving him little time for anything else. If he is really committed to research he may well find that the only way to make free time is to remain aloof.”

Research, of course, is what he had better be committed to, for that alone pays off in money and reputation. It doesn’t have to be significant research. Much of it, “at least in the social sciences and the humanities, tends to resemble finger exercises for the piano.” It is not concerned with “answering real questions or solving important problems; it is simply a display of professional narcissism . . . a roller-coaster ride along a well-worn track.” All that is absolutely necessary is that the research be published, so that the senior satraps of the academic realm can measure the scholar’s “productivity” by the column inch.

The standard defense for this emphasis on research is that a man can-

not be a good teacher unless he is constantly learning something new: in theory, research and teaching go hand in hand.

But in practice, they don’t. “Teaching is often adjusted to the exigencies of research, but research almost never is shaped by the experience of teaching,” Messrs. J. & R. observe. “We have almost never encountered a professor, for example, who said he was working on a research problem because year after year his undergraduate students showed an interest in it.”

Indeed, the typical professor could not care less about the interests of undergraduates. As a result of the academic revolution, he can safely ignore them. He is concerned only with graduate students; for, as Kristol noted, “a professor’s status is defined by his relation to the graduate program. If he is active in it, his prestige is high. If he is not, he is viewed as not having ‘made it.’”

This is true not only in the universities but in the small, so-called liberal arts colleges. The prestigious ones, at least, no longer bother with youngsters who merely want four years of liberal education. Since their academic standing depends on the number of students they send on to graduate school, they have become in effect prep schools for the big graduate institutions. The undergraduate who is not aiming for an eventual PhD is considered “unscholarly”; he can be disregarded because “he really does not belong in college” and he may even be encouraged to drop out.

If such an undergraduate hangs on regardless, he will get scant nourishment. The questions he asks—What is the good life? The nature of justice? The remedy for the evils of society?—are a bore and embarrassment to his professors. After all, none of them profess to have answers to such large and unscholarly questions; each professes his own narrow specialty—econometrics, say, or minor British poets of the eighteenth century. The students who expect “a visible relationship between knowledge and action, between the questions asked in the classroom and the lives they live outside it,” get instead “pedantry and alienated erudition.” (Jencks and Riesman again) Is it any wonder that they are “com-

pletely turned off" and convinced that "all systematic and disciplined intellectual effort is a waste of time"?

This tragedy is compounded because they often are "the best students in the best universities"—a Jencks and Riesman conclusion which I can confirm from my own conversations with dozens of them. They have considerable talent for leadership—a talent which they are all too likely to use, in their frustration and disgust, to disrupt the university which has failed them. Frequently they become leaders of the New Left, turning for guidance to gurus such as Paul Goodman and Herbert Marcuse who do profess to have answers to the Big Questions. (The answers may be wrong, as in the case of Marcuse, or ridiculously oversimplified, as with Goodman; but in the absence of anything better they find many buyers.) In other cases they simply drop out—both from the university and from society—turning to drugs, hedonism, and the pathetic private world of the hippies.

These grievances, it seems to me, are the underlying reason for the campus rebellions. The nominal issues—whether a Columbia gymnasium or the dismissal of a favorite instructor—are merely triggers, opportune excuses for venting more basic (and often vaguely formulated) discontents. When undergraduates demand "student power" they are really pleading for a partial reversal of the academic revolution which made liberal education extinct. They are protesting against the new kind of university which that revolution created—a university which, in Kristol's words, "is very good at training scholars and specialists" but is "very bad at educating young men and women."

Because they sometimes do not fully understand the nature of the academic revolution, the students' counterrevolution often is aimed at the wrong target. They are inclined to attack the administration, because the ostensible authority still seems to rest with the president and trustees. Few undergraduates yet realize how much of the administration's former power has now shifted into the hands of the faculty. But in time they will. Anyway my guess is that

their rebellion will continue, in one form or another, until the students get a reasonable share of that power for themselves.

Specifically, they want a voice in what is taught, so that at least some courses will be relevant to their lives and interests, rather than to the graduate schools and the research projects of the professors. They also want better teaching, and hope to get it by setting up some kind of procedure for rewarding good teachers and penalizing bad ones. Moreover, they feel they deserve some say in "the general drift of university policy," for reasons which Joel R. Kramer of the Harvard Crimson explained in a brilliant article in *The New York Times Magazine* of May 26. Such as, for example, checking "the incredible growth of graduate education relative to undergraduate education" or finding ways to "devote university man-hours and money to the improvement of the local ghetto."

The struggle for even this modest amount of student power is likely to be long and tough. For the faculty, like any ruling class, will not surrender its privileges easily. After all, few elites have ever had it so good. Once he gets tenure, a teacher is sure of a lifetime job at a cozy salary; he can do pretty much what he likes, with virtually no supervision; distasteful chores such as teaching or administration can easily be scamped or delegated. As Jencks and Riesman put it, "large numbers of PhDs now regard themselves almost as independent professionals, like doctors and lawyers, primarily responsible to themselves and their colleagues rather than their employers, and committed to the advancement of knowledge rather than of any particular institution."

But in this comparison, the authors overlooked a vital point: if a doctor or lawyer does not satisfy his clients, he is soon out of business.

It is not surprising, then, that academics almost invariably are hard-shelled conservatives on questions of university reform, no matter how radical they may be on other issues. Even Herbert Marcuse, the chief sagem of the New Left, recently admonished his disciples not to dream of "destroying the established uni-

versities." They are, he explained, "one of the very rare cases in which I think you can achieve what you want to achieve within the existing institutions." All he wants to destroy are the other institutions of American society, on which the universities depend.

The rebellious students have another set of complaints—relatively minor, although they often are the pretext for campus uprisings and even more frequently make headlines. They are concerned with the house-keeping of the university; its rules about living quarters, food, women, liquor, marijuana, and the like. Historically these rules generally date back to the previous century, when students were regarded as children who were entrusted to the university as a substitute parent. Its chief concern, in those remote years, was supposed to be their moral upbringing; and to this end, parents insisted on regulations like those of the stricter reform schools. What Mama and Papa really feared, of course, were premature pregnancies and shotgun marriages, so they demanded that the college serve as a relentless chap-erone.

Today, as we all know, "moral upbringing" sounds as quaint as *The White Man's Burden*. Children mature so fast nowadays that by eighteen they won't even accept their real parents *in loco parentis*, much less a dean. And for any youngster smart enough to get into college, unwanted pregnancy is no longer a real danger. Yet on many campuses, the old rules remain in force.

Nominally, that is. The administration is afraid to repeal them, lest parents and legislators (who hold the purse strings) suspect that Alma Mater U has become a hotbed of sin. But it knows it can't enforce them, and usually makes only a perfunctory pretense of doing so. Liquor, for instance, is commonly forbidden to minors, by state laws as well as college regulations. Nevertheless, students are well aware that they can drink all they like without serious risk of trouble, so long as they don't fall down in the public streets and block traffic. (So it was even back in the Bonnie-and-Clyde era, when I was an undergraduate, except that dormitory bars then were stocked

with homemade beer and Mason jars of bootleg corn. One enterprising friend of mine, name of Eight-ball Eubanks, went so far as to steal a ten-gallon carboy from the chemistry laboratory to equip the brewery he installed in his fraternity basement. It paid his way through college.)

Policing the sex lives of students is, of course, equally impractical; boys and girls manage to get together, as they have since Eden, regardless of parietal rules. The pretense that it is an Argus-eyed chaperone merely makes the university look both silly and hypocritical, as Barnard did last spring when one of its girls set up housekeeping off campus with her boyfriend. After pondering for weeks, the Judicial Council composed of faculty and students "punished" her by withdrawing her right to eat in the school cafeteria.

Most students would consider that a nonpunishment, since the typical college dining hall serves the kind of food that causes riots in badly managed jails. (I have, in fact, eaten better in the Pennsylvania Eastern State

Penitentiary than in some of the Harvard houses.) At an age when food is nearly as important as sex, undergraduates find university catering a perennial cause for complaint.

A sensible solution, as some of the more venturesome academic administrators are beginning to realize, is to hand over to the students a major share of responsibility for housing, feeding, discipline, and similar quartermaster operations. When given the chance, student organizations usually handle such responsibilities pretty well. In routine disciplinary matters, student courts often have proved more strict than the deans would have been. And the undergraduate approach to such matters is refreshingly realistic. The Yale Daily News, for example, recently suggested that in view of the overcrowding in residential colleges, any student who found it necessary to keep a motor bike, a large dog, or a female in his room overnight really should be encouraged to seek quarters off campus.

In the handling of money and related managerial problems, the stu-

dent organizations naturally need (and generally welcome) adult help. Serious law violations, such as drug peddling, can be handled by city and state police. Insurrectionary outrages, such as sacking college offices and burning professors' manuscripts, obviously have to be put down swiftly and decisively by whatever police action may be necessary. Outrages may become a little less likely, however, if students are given a substantial measure of control over their own living arrangements. That kind of student power not only could reduce many exasperations, frustrations, and petty conflicts between the generations; it might also be the quickest way to teach adult responsibility.

Moreover, if the administration and faculty could get rid of most of their present Aunt Nannie functions, they should then have more time to work on their big problem: how to restructure the university to make it once more a center of liberal education, rather than a mere training camp for professional specialists. Until they solve that one, they will have no peace.

THE PROFESSORS RESPOND:

Geoffrey Marshall

The victims are those who think nothing is wrong

FISCHER'S ARGUMENT that current student dissatisfaction is a counterrevolution has a very attractive look about it. He is unquestionably right when he says that in the past thirty years faculty power has increased geometrically and that the current academic world reflects faculty desires more than those of any other group. But student dissatisfaction with the current academic world represents a much deeper human dissatisfaction than Fischer reveals. He has probed beneath the surface of where gymnasiums should be built and whether or not students should stay out beyond 11 p.m., but he has not kept probing.

Fischer thinks the students are uniquely dissatisfied with the current state of affairs. I do not. I could only accept his argument that the dissatis-

faction is somehow uniquely the outgrowth of faculty control if I were convinced that some earlier or different situation were free from the faults described. Fischer, like many protestors, seems to have no sense of history. Without suggesting for a moment that the current situation is free from manifold problems, it is still only just to note that even a cursory examination of college catalogues shows that the current examples seem to offer a vastly more relevant education than did the fixed curricula of the past. By mentioning counterrevolution, Fischer implies a golden pre-revolutionary era when students wandered beneath the oaks with berobed sages, deep in serious conversation about the essence of essence or how epistemology is relevant to the Civil War. But no such era

has ever existed, the Peripatetics possibly excluded.

In fact, rather than seeing the current liberal arts students as "victims" of the faculty-oriented university, I find them marvelous examples of the successes, however limited, of the system. It is the student who does not know that something is wrong who is the victim. It is the student who believes all is right with the world whose education is distorted. It is the student for whom competence is more important than value who has been trained rather than educated.

After all, the fact that the faculty is the "ruling class" (Fischer is a very effective writer) is not the problem, is it? The problem is to determine where and where not it is ruling wisely, where it should give up and where increase its power. The fact that \$50,000 incomes are "by no means uncommon" is not the issue. The issue is whether that is too much or too little to pay for something. (And, by the way, Fischer must live in a wonderful world, indeed, because I do not know personal-