

The University and the Community / By C. G. THAYER

Universities are often the playthings of ignorance, cynicism, and misunderstanding

THE FUNCTION of the university has largely eroded in twentieth-century American society; the only universities that can carry on their proper functions unimpeded are those with immense prestige, long tradition, and limitless financial resources. American colleges and universities are often the unwilling playthings of ignorance, cynicism, and simple misunderstanding. The wonder is not that we have so few genuinely great universities but that we have so many that, struggling against enormous odds, are at least adequate for the tasks they set for themselves.

The American university is an outgrowth of American society. All societies, great and not-so-great, are characterized by tensions and cross-purposes. Every age of change and discovery is necessarily an age of perplexity and convulsion. The condition of convulsive change occurs just sufficiently often in human history to be theoretically familiar, and just infrequently enough to be totally at variance with the wishes, the condition, the adaptability of man. Needless to say, we have lived for more than 50 years now in an age of accelerating and convulsive change, and the end is nowhere in sight. Such traumatic change is the result largely, but not exclusively, of new knowledge, new ideas, new responsibilities, and now, of a frightening increase in population. In every area of experience we live in a time of greater and more trying change than men have ever experienced before. It should be both cau-

tionary and very mildly encouraging to reflect that, in the past, societies have fallen under the impact of changes in many ways less far-reaching than those which now confront us, and that our own society, though scarcely healthy, is still, with however much doubt and confusion, consciously attempting to rise to the problems that confront it. Whether or not we will finally be successful is of course not entirely in our own hands.

Briefly, the ordeal of change, to use the suggestive title of Eric Hoffer's wonderfully illuminating book, is the most trying and the most traumatic ordeal to which society can be subjected. It is an ordeal at every point fraught with danger. It is an ordeal ordinarily resisted, often until the resisting society is itself destroyed. And, in a nutshell (small), men resist change with the intellectual and spiritual tools previously devised to adapt to the consequences of earlier changes. This resistance is caused by the conservatism of the human organism. Paradoxically, perhaps, the more we know about the past and the more studious we are to avoid its errors, the more likely we are to be appalled by the future. Maybe this is why brilliant societies of relatively short life have been dominated by intellectuals, while much more enduring societies have survived through a marriage of the intellectual and the managerial classes. It is only through a fusion of the idealist and intellectual, who understand change, and the practical man, who is less likely to be afraid of it, that a society can survive the ordeal of change.

AS A SOCIETY becomes increasingly perplexed and frustrated by the ordeal of change, it tends to do two things: it resists, and longs, often violently, for a return to simplicity and sometimes to simple-mindedness; and it looks for scapegoats, the unorthodox or the eccentric who must somehow

be responsible for all the trouble. These tendencies are very understandable and extremely dangerous, understandable because change is indeed an ordeal, dangerous because one does not survive an ordeal by wishing that it would go away.

I would suggest that the very fact that the moral rights of students is now a subject of discussion is at least a left-handed tribute to the ability of the university in a state of siege to maintain some of the conditions for the life of the mind. The society that attacks the university also deserves a tentative left-handed compliment; it does not attack the university for what it thinks is really wrong with it—it is just a trifle too sophisticated for that—but for what it *wishes* were wrong with it, something simple: long hair, beards, radicalism, drugs, and sexual activity that would have appalled the imaginations of the most debauched denizens of the Cities on the Plain.

Note a frightening paradox: civilized society assumes almost automatically that war is not a natural condition of man (although it may be); but civilized society has been at war, hot and cold, for more than 50 years, and it has been engaged in *continuous* if limited war for over 15 years; limited war: war we can live with, that is, even though people always die in war. For Americans particularly, one assumes that the casualties incurred in Korea and now in Vietnam constitute a reasonable price to pay for the avoidance of something worse, war that we can't live with, although the fanatically and inveterately optimistic assure us that the enemy can be bombed back into the Stone Age, the ultimate and mindless response to the ordeal of change; and what a change it would be! What seems to have happened is that many of us, for very complex reasons, have come to accept war as a natural condition. Thus stu-

Continued on page 28

This article is a revision of a talk given at the Wesley Foundation in Norman in January, 1966, as part of a panel discussion on the subject of "The Legal and Moral Rights of Students." The discussion was occasioned by the arrest of several University students on charges of possession of narcotics and by what many regarded as distorted treatment of the event by the press and public. The "University" referred to in the title, is of course, any large American state university.

The University and the Community

Continued from page 20

dent protests against the Vietnam war are bitterly resented not so much on purely rational grounds, where there may well be room for objection, but because they seem, somehow, to raise the ugly and disquieting spectre of more change, an alternative to a way of life to which we have become accustomed.

A GAIN, I THINK it was predictable that when a totally insignificant handful of students were arrested for possessing narcotics, and were coincidentally found also to possess anti-war literature, a flood of abuse, wholly unwarranted by the nature of the offense and the minute number of the offenders, should suddenly be unleashed, aided by what I would frankly have to call distorted news coverage, unfair editorial commentary (some of it quite dreadful), and angry letters to the editors by aroused and perplexed citizens. Here was something that did not seem to defy the understanding; here was something comprehensible (even a sportswriter got into the act). What happened, it seems to me, was that public resentment of the mysterious ways of the intellectual, a resentment necessarily incapable of expression except in terms too crude for our modest sophistication, could now be verbalized and mobilized against something seemingly very concrete: immorality on the campus. In the cold light of reason one would, I think, have to say that illicit sex and the use of narcotics are scarcely confined to college campuses. How then can we explain the phenomenon of newspapers deploring with such eager malice the unfortunate and deplorable activities of a few students while carrying with breathless detail the sagas of Debbie and Eddie, of Liz and Dick, and noting with indulgent amusement the capers of Frankie and the mob? The latter have no part whatever in the intellectual life of the community; the university is at the center of that life, and unquestionably the university is under attack.

This should not surprise us. The ordeal of change, combined with the nature of the modern university,

makes such attacks inevitable. When the university curriculum was restricted to grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, music, and theology, it was to be expected that university students would learn things that did not constitute part of the general knowledge of society at large. But when, to give a mere handful of examples, the university curriculum expanded in the direction of the practical, when business management and literature were placed cheek by jowl, along with animal husbandry and epistemology, industrial education and Hebrew, journalism and Greek, what could be more natural than that ingenuous youth, sent off to the university to learn how to manage the family business, should, to fill out his class schedule or to fulfill requirements, have a go at philosophy or literature or art and come away corrupted for life? When the university became secular, it began to teach secular subjects; but it could never quite let go of its earlier curriculum, and, for some people at least, the combination was apparently disastrous, particularly when the universities of Western Europe and the United States came out of the long doldrums of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Society at large expects graduates to learn practical and professional skills, and it is often puzzled and annoyed when they develop an interest in puzzling out abstract problems and moral issues, issues that appear simple, or simply non-existent, for too many members of an older generation but which, thank heaven, are often exciting to young people. Our whole society is curiously schizophrenic on this matter, as evidenced by the popularity of westerns and other simple-minded confrontations of bad guys versus good guys, combined with a relatively new interest in the moral ambiguities implicit in James Bond sternly doing battle against the rampaging agents of Smersh and Spectre and getting as his temporal reward the rampant acquiescence of 14,000 of the most pneumatic girls in the world.

In an intensely pragmatic society confronted with problems that may or may not be solved by purely practical

means, the university, committed as it is now both to the practical and to the theoretical, will surely come under attack whenever it appears that the practical is on a collision course with the theoretical.

It is therefore essential that the university deploy all of its resources to protect its prerogatives. Its prerogatives are to scrutinize, with no commitment but a passion for truth, the almost universal knowledge that constitutes its curriculum, to insist that its function is education, not mere training, although training is always a part of education, to demand the respect due a free institution in a free society. These things are *never* easy to do, but it is absolutely essential for every university to resist with all its strength those pressures from the community that are so frequently at cross-purposes with the function of the university itself. A university excessively sensitive to community pressures loses its self-respect, loses stature, and, I suspect, finally loses even the respect of the community.

THE MORAL RIGHTS of students are the moral rights of all members of free and open societies. When society is successful in curtailing those rights it damages not only the student and the university, it damages itself, and this it can certainly not afford to do. That university students should be responsible citizens goes without saying; but that society has its own responsibilities will bear repetition. Perhaps society will be better when university students look with increasing skepticism on what society expects of them and when universities accept with increasing vigor what was once their universally acknowledged trust: not to turn out clever models of real people, but to turn out real people to transform the models. If perfection is not to be achieved, success will be measured by how close we came, by whether we really tried. If achieving the ideals of a university seems to imply heavy responsibilities for students and professors, particularly in these days of limited facilities and crowded classes, it is perhaps worth remembering that, as one wit put it, "the greatest Teacher who ever lived had only twelve students, and one of them flunked." Not a bad average. END