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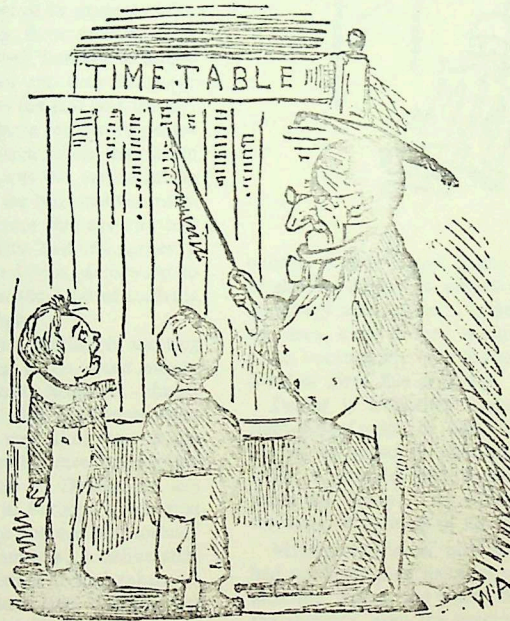
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THE LAYING ON OF CULTURE



JOHN McDERMOTT

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THE LAYING ON OF CULTURE

JOHN McDERMOTT

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I

About a year ago I accepted an invitation to speak "against the war," at, let's call it, the University of Dexter. It is located in the city of that name, one of the major manufacturing towns of the Midwestern industrial belt. Since Dexter is somewhat off the main circuit for anti-war speech-making, I read up on the university and the town, and what I found made me look forward to my visit.

The university tended to draw most of its students from the town itself. They came heavily from working-class families and were often the first in their families to attend college. Frequently English was not the only language spoken at home. More significant was the fact that the city itself had at one time considerable fame for working-class militancy. One of the great early strikes of the depression was fought in Dexter, and the issue was not settled in the workers' favor until they had fought the National Guard to a draw in pitched street battles. Before that the city had been a center of Socialist Party activity, and still earlier, a stronghold of IWW sentiment. Thus I looked forward to my visit as an opportunity to talk to the kind of students seldom reached by Movement speakers.

It wasn't. Attendance at the well-publicized meeting was spotty; those who came tended to be about evenly divided between faculty and graduate students, almost all of whom were from outside the state. And there were no students at the party to which I was taken later in the evening, though they had helped plan the meeting, for student segregation is the campus rule at Dexter, no less within the Movement than outside it. Perhaps it was that or perhaps my disappointment at the absence of "normal" students at the evening's meeting; anyhow, I deliberately forced the party to become a meeting. It had taken no great powers of observation to note that the anti-war movement at Dexter, and, by extension, its Left, was largely a preserve of the faculty and some fellow-traveling graduate students, and I was interested to discover why that was so. In particular, I wanted to explore the role these teachers had adopted to their "normal" students and to examine with them the contradiction between that professional role and their wider political aspirations. I have taught in several universities, I've suffered the same contradiction and was unable to overcome it.

The most prominent feature of the discussion which followed, and of all the subsequent ones I've started on the same subject in similar situations, was that the faculty, to a man, still aspired to teach in elite schools. Dexter, after all, is what is popularly known as a "cow"



college. A state school, it gets those students who, for lack of skill or money or interest, don't go to the main state university and couldn't "make" the liberal arts colleges in the area, even if they wanted to. Its students are very much vocationally oriented and still tied to their families. Most of them live at home.

Dexter is frequently under nuisance attack by some right-wing faction or other. It pays rather badly and is not in an attractive metropolitan area. Its library is inferior, it provides little research money, and the teaching loads are heavy. The administration is fusty and conservative, as is much of the faculty.

My faculty friends, obviously talented men and women, had not reconciled themselves to this exile. They depreciated the region, the town, the university and, especially, the students, even the graduate students. Loyalty and affection they reserved for the graduate schools from which they had come, and they reflected this feeling in their teaching and counseling by relating only to that one student in a hundred who might go on to one of those prestigious graduate schools. Those were the students who shared with them the culture of books and civility—and scorn for Dexter; who might by their success at a "good" graduate school justify the faculty's exile in Dexter.

Of course they didn't put it that way, and neither did I when I taught in similar places. They saw themselves as embattled missionaries to the culturally Philistine. They worked hard and creatively with the students who merited hope. As for the others, these men and women, in spite of their expressed scorn, nourished a vision, hesitantly ex-

pressed, of a society in which no student would be oppressed by cultural bondage to ignorance, vocationalism, anti-intellectualism and provincialism. In fact, that attitude and hope gave rise to and was expressed in their left-wing politics.

The guests at the party were woefully ignorant of the background of their "normal" students. They were vaguely aware that most of them came from working-class families, though what that might mean aside from greater resistance to formal education they had no idea. They had no knowledge either of Dexter's militant labor traditions. This was sad, for it penalized the faculty in a number of ways. To cite an apparently trivial instance, most of the faculty present were concerned over attacks made on the university by the right wingers in town. Respect for free speech and expression had an important place in their scale of values, and they tried to convey it to their classes, using all the familiar academic examples, from HUAC witch hunting and Joe McCarthy, to Stuart Mill, Milton and Sophocles.

Yet that they might relate the principle of free expression to the problems of Wobbly agitators in the 1910s or of CIO organizers in the 1930s (or of white-collar workers in the 1970s)—in short, relate it to the actual cultural history (or future) of their own students—never occurred to them. Instead, they were put off when the students responded to the alien and seemingly irrelevant world of HUAC and Milton and academic freedom with either passive unconcern or active hostility.

I believe this example successfully characterizes how the great majority of faculty behave in schools like Dexter, including, especially, the left wing of the faculty. Socialized like all their fellows into a rigid professional role by their university, graduate school and early professional experiences, they have neither the information nor the inclination to break out of that role and relate openly and positively to the majority of their students who cannot accept the culture of the university world as their own.

University professors as a group seem exceptionally un-critical of the limited value—and values—of a university education and the acculturation it represents. In their view, a student who is really open to his classroom and other cultural experiences at the university will, as a rule, turn out to be more sophisticated, more interested in good literature, more sensitive morally than one who is less open or who has not had the benefit of college. The student will also be free of the more provincial ties of home, home town, region and class. In short, most academics take it as an article of faith that a student benefits by exchanging his own culture for that of the university. It is by far the most common campus prejudice.

And it would be harmless enough if it were limited in its sanction to those students who allow their university education to "take," who do well at university work and will go on to graduate school and then to a place within the university world or, perhaps, into some other related profession. University attitudes and values are appropriate to that world. But what about the others, the cultural red-necks, the "normal" boy and girl at a place like Dexter? Do they really profit from acquiring the attitudes, values,

life style, and so forth of the peculiar culture whose institutional base is the university? One way of attacking this question is to ask to what extent those values, attitudes and life style may be usefully transferred to other institutional settings—to little towns and big cities, to industrial or agricultural life, to life in a corporation or in government.

That was about as far as we went at that party a year ago. We agreed that we were part of a university system which was actively engaged at its Dexters in destroying whatever indigenous culture might remain among the American working class. We recognized that, consciously or not, we had assumed an invidious clerical relationship to our student laity. Like medieval priests or missionaries to the heathen, we dispensed a culture to all our students, despite the fact that a scant few could participate in it. For the others, the language of that culture, like Latin to the colloquial, was grasped largely in rote phrases, its symbols and doctrines recognized but only dimly understood. To the extent that this majority of students acquired the external trappings of the university, they seemed both culturally pacified and made culturally passive. Pacified because they were acculturated away from their own historical values and traditions; passive because they could at best be spectators of a culture whose home remained an alien institution.

II

In the year that has passed since my visit to Dexter my views of the relationship of general culture to political culture have very much developed under the influence of Edward Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. [See review by Norman Fruchter, *The Nation*, April 6, 1964.] I find particularly persuasive and suggestive Thompson's demonstration of how certain aspects of the general culture of the English working class, over a period of time and under the stress of events, came to support a specifically political culture—that is, to enlarge its capacity to define its social interests and to struggle successfully in their behalf. I shall cite several instances of this, for I want later to use them to illuminate the problem at Dexter from a new and, I think, hopeful standpoint.

Thompson shows that the movement into the factories in England of the late 18th and early 19th centuries was made up of two distinct streams. One was the movement of poor, dispossessed rural persons to the city and the factory in search of opportunity; the other of highly skilled, often literate craftsmen being pushed down the social and economic ladder by the new forces of industrialism and technology. The former, abruptly torn from their rural poverty, had some reason to view the change as an improvement. The cultural shock of the transition, the traditional passivity to authority, the stimulus of urban life, and the novelty of cash wages might easily have disguised for a time the exploitative nature of their place in the new factory system. The urban craftsmen, however, having a sense of their own skill and worth, with still lively guild traditions, and a strong sense of declining status and economic position, were most unlikely to think of the factory experience as a road to opportunity. They knew it for the oppression it really was. It was the meeting of

these two groups that proved so creative for the future of the working-class movement. The skilled printers, weavers and mechanics recognized that their lot was cast with the unskilled rural migrants, and they became a creative element among the larger mass. Their literacy, their talent for organization, their family and folk memories that working people had once lived secure in their homes, livelihoods and craftsmanship, were transferred over the years to the mass of working people. But they were transferred with a radical difference. By contributing them to the cause of the entire working class, what might otherwise have been merely a narrow defense of guild interests was instead universalized into a struggle for the rights of all Englishmen, a struggle for the rights of man.

Thompson also shows how important for the new working-class movement was the experience so many workers had in the Dissenting Churches. Men and women who, over the years, had learned to contend with the problems of maintaining a minister's salary, keeping up the church and parsonage, administering an active religious and social program, and organizing regional church activities were able to apply these skills to nascent working-class organizations. Of particular importance was their long experience of persecution at the hands of the Church of England. Both ministers and congregations had learned how to preserve their churches and beliefs in the face of official hostility and repression. Thus when Pitt, Burke and their successors attempted to destroy the new workingmen's organizations, these were able to go underground, preserving their organizations, maintaining their programs and extending their networks throughout the country.

Still another general cultural factor cited by Thompson as a primary support for the growing working-class movement was the belief among the English lower classes that they were "freeborn Englishmen." The phrase had no precise meaning, but it was habitually called into play to criticize or resist any arbitrary act against the populace and its organizations, any claim to special place by the upper classes, any innovation in government control over the speech, writing, travels or associations of the common people. It was a useful and eminently flexible weapon in the hands of the working-class movement against the power of the capitalists and the wiles of Edmund Burke.

What makes Thompson's work of more than antiquarian interest is the suggestive analogy it offers to situations such as that at Dexter. There is a double movement into such universities today, somewhat as there was a double movement into the factories of England two centuries ago. On the one hand, a flood of lower-class young people is moving into these universities, seeking entrée into the old independent professional middle class which university attendance supposedly affords. It is necessary to add "supposedly," for passage through a non-elite university no longer qualifies one for that kind of life. The jobs for which the Dexters and the junior colleges prepare students are elementary and secondary teaching, the lower levels of social work, white-collar hire, petty management—that is, employments which were once semi-professional, but which now are being rapidly industrialized by bureaucracy, managerial science and the IBM ma-

chine. Thus the lower-class boys or girls who go to Dexter only appear to escape from the world of industry; they are really taking the first vocational step into a new kind of industrial life.

The second movement into such institutions as Dexter is of a gifted minority of educated persons, who identify with the values, accomplishments and prestige of elite professions, but are forced by the economics of academic employment to take positions they consider beneath their skills, their sense of worth and accomplishment, their lively memories of the recent past.

But here the analogy with Thompson's English working class begins to break down, for these latter specifically and pointedly refuse to make common cause with the lower-class students with whom they share daily existence. This gifted Left minority does not help the students to develop an effective and vital popular political culture. On the contrary, it often occupies the vanguard of a university culture which, as I suggested above and now wish to argue more fully, pacifies lower-class students.

III

The most obvious political characterization of university culture is that it lives by, and presents to its students, the values and attitudes appropriate to its own upper-middle-class life style—a style that is part of the older, now declining, professional middle classes. As indicated above, a university education did once promise membership in the professional classes. This meant that university graduates could ordinarily expect a life of considerable social and economic independence, some measure of personal influence in local business and political communities, significant autonomy and initiative in carrying out their daily work, and thus the possibility of enjoying the pride that follows from personal accomplishment and craftsmanship.

Could it be clearer that no such life awaits the graduates of the nation's Dexters? Today a degree from a second- or third-line institution is a passport to a life style of high consumption and of reasonable job security. But it will probably be an industrial life style, characterized by social and economic dependence on a large institution, by little or no political or social influence, and by participation in rationalized work processes wherein one must try merely "to get by and not step on anybody's toes." Consider, therefore, how the professionally oriented values of the university's culture might function in such an industrial environment. High on the scale of university values, now and in the past, stands the virtue of tolerance—not only personal tolerance in the face of new or differing ideas, attitudes and values but the belief that tolerance itself is of greater personal and social value than the substance of almost any set of creeds. Such a value was useful in the professional worlds of the past, for it would normally help diminish conflict in a middle class made up of highly autonomous individuals. And in elite circles even today it diminishes the weight assigned to ideological differences and helps to harmonize the social and political relations of our pluralistic, semi-autonomous industrial, educational, government and other managers. It carries the advantage, too, that it opens managers to the merits of technological

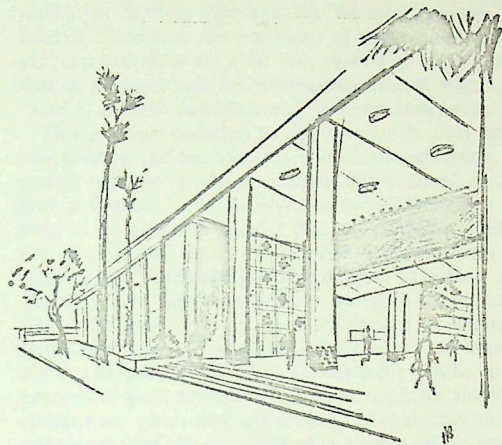
and organizational novelty in a political economy strongly oriented to such innovations.

But how does this belief function for the young men and women of Dexter, who will normally occupy the lower and middle levels of great institutional bureaucracies, and who may have reason to resist those very same innovations: speed-up, compulsory overtime, more and more alienating work processes, forced transfer to another city or region, institutional propaganda, Muzak and the other normal tyrannies of personnel managers? Is it a value that helps them to initiate or continue those collective struggles which are necessary to defend or enhance their interests; or does it rob them of the moral and ideological assurance which must support the beliefs of people who challenge the social legitimacy and retributive power of authority?

A second political aspect of university culture is its almost uniform hostility to the institutions of local and community life. Many churches, fraternities, veterans' associations, councils and boards upon which local and community life in America is built are havens of the narrowest sorts of provincialism, racism, intellectual baiting, babbittry and jingoism. For these reasons, and for reasons having to do with the demands of the national economy for college-trained persons, the tendency of university experience is to propel the young away from local and community life and toward national life and its institutions. A result of the university's liberalism, cosmopolitanism and technologism, this tendency is supported by the national culture, by the students themselves, and by their parents.

But it should be combated by those, like my friends at Dexter, who are interested in building mass resistance to the prevailing currents of American life. A young person from Dexter, unless extraordinarily gifted or fortunate, has almost no means of gaining influence in national politics. And to the extent that university culture directs great masses of lower- and lower-middle-class young people into the institutions of national rather than local and community life, it assists in disenfranchising them from political influence. Of course, the conventional representatives of university culture argue that the decline of local politics and local institutions is inevitable, given the institutional needs of 20th-century industry and government, the gradual nationalization of American life, and the march of technology—i.e., liberalism, cosmopolitanism and technologism. But we should begin to question whether this inevitability amounts to more than advantageous prejudice. For the kind of society which these university spokesmen describe as inevitable appears to be coincidentally one in which the Ph.D. takes its place with property and birth as a means to political influence and social status.

Similarly, the ignorance, racism and the like which characterize so much of local life should not put us off. Given the preoccupation of the Left, over the past epoch, with national rather than local concerns and institutions, it is not surprising that local America has become a playpen of unchallenged right-wing attitudes, persons and organizations. Of course, one could not expect, even under the best conditions, that the life style of local America will rival the faculty club in gentility, civility, humanist learning and other caricatures of university life. But that



is not its test, any more than the theological elegance of the Dissenting Churches was the test of their usefulness to a struggling movement of ordinary Englishmen. Those who are today concerned about a different kind of economic barbarism and a similar kind of world-wide crusade should draw the appropriate lessons.

A third political aspect of university culture is its latent hostility to two of the more valuable and humane realities in current popular culture. One cannot move around this country without being impressed by its egalitarianism, that is the depth and vitality of the ordinary American's feeling that he is as good as the next fellow. And the other reality so important in our popular culture is the well-nigh universal belief among our people that they possess an extraordinary range and variety of substantive rights. Like the belief in "the freeborn Englishmen," the belief in substantive rights is often vague and contradictory. Nevertheless, the history of popular political movements is the history of ordinary people acting in behalf of what they believe to be their substantive rights.

It would be too much to say that the university's culture is uniformly hostile to these popular realities, for the situation is ambiguous. However, it is not difficult to identify important hostile tendencies. Thus in contrast to the normal American acceptance of the principle of equality, the professoriat strongly values formalized differences of age, academic rank, scholarly reputation and, it may even be, accomplishment. The effect of this sort of deference is somewhat difficult to gauge and it may be tendentious on my part to believe that it influences student attitudes on legitimacy, authority and equality. Perhaps the issue is instead that university men and women, by failing to provide a living example of egalitarian relationships, merely fail to make common cause with the American people in their resistance to the hierarchic tendencies implicit in the social and economic system.

A more secure case can be made against the disposition in the university world to identify right not with substantive but with procedural matters. Peter Gay expressed this position in the Summer 1968 issue of *Partisan Review*:

"... democracy is essentially procedural and what matters is not so much (important though it may be) what a given policy is as how it is arrived at. . . ." Persons as fortunately placed as Professor Gay, whose substantive rights are well established in easily available procedures, have an understandable tendency to overlook the fact that, for example, tenure, sabbaticals, choice of hours, and freedom of expression on the job—are virtually unknown outside the academic world. Obviously there are other, important and thorny issues here as well. Without going into them at any length, note that the test of Professor Gay's remark is its fidelity to historical fact. From that point of view, it tends to obscure the fact that the great libertarian and democratic turning point in postwar American political history, a turning point with great promise still, came not from the narrow defense of procedural rights by academic and other liberals against Joe McCarthy in the 1950s but from the assertion of substantive rights in the 1960s by mass movements of students, blacks, professors and ordinary Americans.

The students at Dexter, and a great part of their countrymen, rightly view the liberal and academic preference for procedural right as a defense of privileges which they themselves are denied. Many view the principle of academic freedom, for example, as they view some of the laws of property. It is a tricky device which enables professors to do things, like criticize the dean or the country, for which ordinary people can be fired; just as the law of property is a tricky device which enables installment houses and loan companies to do things for which ordinary people can be sent to jail. The goal is not to do away with academic freedom, or any other hard-won libertarian procedure. A better approach would be to shape a university culture which would help to extend Professor Gay's tenure, sabbaticals, and freedom of expression on the job to everyone, on campus and off.

The existence of hostile tendencies toward egalitarianism and the primacy of substantive right is very much related to still a fourth political aspect of university culture. Even though the university is the home and source of much of the libertarian ideology within our culture, it is often the source of authoritarian ideology as well. I have two cases in mind. The first has to do with the extensive commitment to technologism found among many faculty members. A considerable body of university opinion believes with Zbigniew Brzezinski that the premises of modern technology demand for their social realization a society characterized by "equal opportunity for all but . . . special opportunity for the singularly talented few." The evasiveness of the formula should not be allowed to obscure the authoritarian social and political processes which are envisioned and justified by it—processes today best exemplified in the area of national security, where the equal voting opportunities of all are nullified by the special bureaucratic opportunities open to a singularly talented few. The second of the university's authoritarian ideologies I call clericism. To borrow from Brzezinski's formula, it is the claim to "equal cultural rights for all, but special cultural authority for a singularly scholarly few." I refer to the still widespread (but declining) academic

belief that, whatever else culture may include, it also includes the Western Heritage, the Western Tradition, the Literary Tradition, the traditions of reason and civility, etc., and that these are most fully embodied in the profession of academe and the written treasures of which academe is priestly custodian and inspired interpreter.

This principle underlies faculty sovereignty over curricular matters, justifies any and every required course, oppresses first-year graduate students, and received its most prosaic formulation in the observation by Columbia's vice dean of the graduate facilities that ". . . whether students vote 'yes' or 'no' on an issue is like telling me they like strawberries." Clericism and technologism have their good points; no one wishes seriously to derogate either the social or the moral value of good scholarship or competent technology. But as principles under which to organize cultural or political life they are distinctly hostile to the interests of great numbers of non-elite students, the social classes from which they are drawn, and especially the social classes which will constitute when they leave the university. For clericism and technologism, like the doctrines of apostolic succession and of property which they tend to replace, transpose major areas of social concern from the purview of all to the treasure house of the few. Culture, no less than politics, is a critical factor in the nature of social organization; in the distribution of power, reward and status; in the infliction of powerlessness, oppression and despair. This is becoming increasingly understood with regard to politics, where ten years of war, urban decay and increasing social chaos seem to have been the fruit of the same decade's obeisance to technology's claims. But I am not persuaded that clericist depredations on culture are similarly recognized.

As I think was made clear at the start of this essay, the faculty at Dexter did not feel called upon to know the specific cultural history and experiences of the students they taught. Neither they nor anyone in the academic profession consider it their task to use their own superior symbolic gifts and wider historical perspective to identify the specific historical culture of their students, to clarify its ambiguities, to criticize it, purging it of its moral (not geographical) provincialism, and thus to assist the students to develop a culture which is at once personally ennobling and politically self-conscious. On the contrary, at Dexter and elsewhere the faculty assume that it is their duty to replace the students' actual culture with an alien culture. Missionaries from these graduate schools, like clergy from colonial empires everywhere and in every time, feel confident that what they bring is good for the natives and will improve them in the long run. In culture, as elsewhere, this is manifestly not so.

Consider the matter of historical traditions. No acculturation worth the name should be permitted to block the transmission of Dexter's militant working-class traditions. Even granting, as is probably the case, that only a small minority of the Dexter students are children of depression workers or the earlier Wobblies, to assist, even if only negatively, in destroying these traditions is to minimize for most of the students the opportunity to discover the reasons for their attitudes on a score of moral and social

questions, the reality of their social lives, and the possibility of rebuilding a more humane culture in Dexter for their own advantage. White intelligentsia recognize this danger when they peer across cultural lines at blacks or Vietnamese; why are they so blinded by the class lines of their own society? It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the anti-intellectualism of the students is often as deep and as bitter as the hatred exhibited by other colonial peoples toward foreigners and their works.

A university culture which related positively and creatively to the traditions and history of the working classes, blue collar and white collar, would find allies not only among the hippies and the leftists of Smith and Williams but from the squares of Dexter as well.

What is particularly disturbing about cultural pacification in the university is that it is not entirely an accidental phenomenon. At least since Herbert Croly's *Promise of American Life* (1909), America's dominant historians have been strongly nationalist, more interested in discovering and celebrating the American essence or character, the national mainstream, consensus or moral epic, or the peculiar quality of our national integration, than in emphasizing its divisions, especially those based on class. It has often crossed my mind that when liberal historians two decades hence write the chronicle of the Southern freedom movement of the early 1960s or of the anti-Vietnamese War movement of today, they will find imaginative and persuasive reasons to show that the first was really part of the New Frontier and the second of the Great Society. It was thus that their predecessors have managed to reduce the richness and variety of popular revolt in the 1930s to the bureaucratic dimensions of a Washington-based "New Deal."

Fortunately, some of the younger historians, such as Staughton Lynd and Jesse Lemisch, have begun to undermine the epic poetry of the Crolyites by reviving interest in the history of popular insurgency in America. Thus they have created the possibility that at least at some universities young people will be reacquainted with the real diversity and conflict of their past. More than that, and without exaggerating its importance or extent, this new scholarship provides a point of departure for a fundamen-

tally different university culture than the one I have been describing.

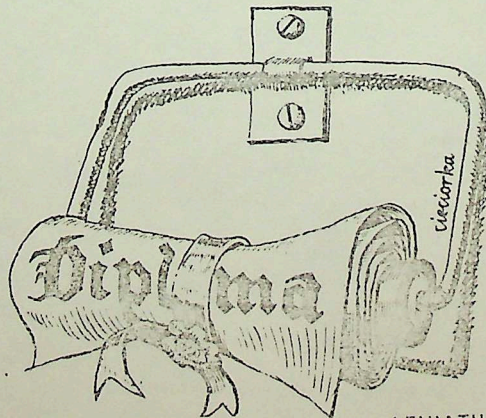
IV

Faced with the vast social diversity of America and in opposition to the variety and strength of its Populist traditions, the thrust of university culture is to pacify its working-class "natives" and thus, I believe, to help preclude any fundamental change in national politics and priorities. Because of the surge of rebellion on campus since last spring, it is likely that this is understood better now among faculty than it was at the time I visited Dexter. But many university men and women, comparing the university's cultural values to those of industry, the mass media and the military, or to the restless hostility of lower- and working-class America, remain partisans and priests of academe, convinced that for all its faults it is, at least minimally, a humane alternative to its rivals.

The analogy I began earlier to the work of Edward Thompson points in a more hopeful and, I think, more realistic direction. A survey of recent campus rebellions would show that it is no longer only the Harvards and the Berkeleys which suffer serious student unrest; some of the most interesting and militant activity occurs at the non-elite schools. In addition, scores of young men and women continue to be exiled by their elite graduate schools into a lifetime of work in the non-elite universities. The narrowest interests of these teachers and their most lofty professional and political aspirations lie in the same direction. It is to take up the task, in common with their students, of rebuilding the vitality of a popular resistance culture—that is, of a culture which will "enhance the capacity of ordinary Americans to identify their social interests and to struggle successfully in their behalf."

This is not a task which individuals can successfully undertake in isolation, nor one whose champions will be free of serious reprisal at the hands of university and political authorities. Nevertheless, there are already a handful of campuses where the work has begun, in critical universities, liberation courses, seminars in local and working-class history, student-taught courses for faculty, and research projects on local and campus decision making. It remains for others to add to these hopeful beginnings.

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LEVIATHAN