



THE DISAPPEARANCE OF CULTURE

Mortimer Adler

During the last few years, my concern about the state of the higher learning in America has reached the panic stage, and my hopes for the reform of the American college and university have dwindled to the verge of despair.

The trouble is not simply that the sciences have displaced the humanities. The humanities, as currently taught and studied, are as much addicted to specialized scholarship as are the scientific departments to highly specialized research. The trouble rather is that the broadly educated generalist has become an endangered species. The ever-increasing specialization of knowledge in all fields has almost completely displaced the generalist.

In most of our colleges, the elective system reigns supreme. Its only requirement—the choice of a major in one field of subject matter and a minor in another—compels students to specialize before they have acquired the general cultivation that would acquaint them with the ideas and disciplines that are the components of human culture.

COLLEGES AS FARM TEAMS

When, in 1936, the late Robert M. Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago, published "The Higher Learning in America," he and I thought that the undergraduate college could be emancipated from the paralyzing clutch of the graduate and professional schools. They, like major-league baseball clubs, tend to regard the college as little more than a bush-league feeder station. We had some hopes for the establishment of a completely required curriculum. Our slender hope then was not entirely ill-founded. However much the colleges at that time needed drastic improvement, they were then in a golden age compared with the state they are in today.

In the last 40 years, the elective system has become even more chaotic in its offerings; specialization in every area of inquiry and study has grown more intense; and those who might have been disposed to become generalist teachers have been disabled by what William James called "The Ph.D. Octopus."

The slight hope possible to cherish in the 1930s has shrunk to the vanishing point today. The obstacles to the reforms required for the preservation of culture through the acculturation of the young now appear to be insuperable. The following things that would have to be done no longer seem feasible:

The acquirement of specialized scientific knowledge or of specialized scholarship in non-scientific or professional fields (the kind of knowledge that is *not* everybody's business) should be reserved for the graduate and professional schools. The Ph.D. should cease to be the *sine qua non* for the appointment of college teachers. Their competence should be the competence of generalists, not of specialists. The members of a college faculty should not be professors of this or that subject matter, or even members of this or that department in the graduate school. The college faculty should be completely autonomous, completely emancipated from the influence of the graduate, school.

THE NEED FOR GENERALISTS

The elective system, with its majors and minors, should be abolished. Parents should send their young to college and the young should go to college not, as at present, mainly to acquire highly salable skills or to earn good livings, but solely for the purpose of becoming cultured human beings. Corporations should recognize

that the most important posts they have to offer can be better filled by broadly trained generalists than by narrowly trained specialists.

None of these things is likely to happen; none can be brought about against the tide that is overwhelmingly in the opposite direction.

In the state of mind induced by these dismal considerations, I recently reread Jose Ortega y Gasset's "Revolt of the Masses," first published in Spain in 1930. There, in a chapter entitled "The Barbarism of 'Specialization'," he wrote of the scientist who "is only acquainted with one science, and even of that one only knows the small corner in which he is an active investigator." Ortega referred to such narrowly trained specialists or professionals as "learned ignoramuses"—learned, but uncultured. As a result of an excessive specialization that is not balanced by general education, we have today, Ortega declared in 1930 more scientists, scholars, and professional men and women than ever before, but many fewer cultured human beings.

Reading that chapter sent me to a lecture Ortega gave earlier that year on "The Mission of the University." There I discovered a proposal for the reform of the university as radical as that proposed by Hutchins in 1936, but unknown to him at the time.


If I were to translate Ortega's message into terms appropriate to American institutions at present, I would render it as follows. The primary function of our institutions of higher learning, which means the function they should perform at the undergraduate level of the college, should be "to teach the ordinary student to be a cultured person."

The college should be the place where culture is transmitted by a curriculum entirely devoted to the humanistic learning of the generalist—philosophical in the sense that it deals with the basic ideas that are everybody's business. Unfortunately, philosophy today has become as specialized and technical as science. It is no longer everybody's business as it should be.

INCURABLE ILLNESS?

Anyone acquainted with the present state of American institutions of higher learning must know how much worse the situation is in 1978. The disease of specialization was accurately diagnosed by Ortega in 1930 and by Hutchins in 1936; but their prognoses did not accurately foresee that its *sequelae*, including the disappear-

ance of culture from our colleges and universities and from our society, might make the malady incurable 50 years later.

The reforms they urged a half-century ago no longer motivate even a sympathetic minority of academics. The evil that confronts us is not C.P. Snow's conflict between two cultures—the sciences vs. humanities—but the demise of culture itself, fragmented into an unintelligible chaos by the rampant specialization that has invaded all fields of learning. What Aristotle defined as *paideia*, the learning of the generalist that was the saving leaven in Western civilization from the Greeks until the end of the nineteenth century, no longer exists. 

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LIBERAL EDUCATION

Theory and Practice

Mortimer Adler

Despite considerable evidence to the contrary, I still cling to the notion that everyone understands what it means to be a liberally educated man or woman. If professional educators seem to be a major exception, it is not because they really do not know, I tell myself, but because the horrible jargon of their profession has prevented them from saying plainly what must be plain even to them. Even they know that the marks of a liberally educated person are not wealth or recognition, success in business or marriage, emotional stability, social poise or adaptation to environment, good manners, or even a good moral character.

Each of the things I have just mentioned is worth having, not in itself or for itself, but for its contribution to the fullness of a happy life. But none is the direct result of liberal education, though we may hope that liberal education does not oppose the acquisition and possession of some, if not all, of them. The direct product of liberal education is a good mind, well-disciplined in its processes of inquiring and judging, knowing and understanding, and well-furnished with knowledge, well-cultivated by ideas.

In any roomful of people, we would pick out the liberally educated man or woman as the one who manifests all the goods which be-

long to the intellect. These goods—the truth and various ways of getting at the truth—contribute to a happy life; they may even be indispensable, as is good moral character and some amount of wealth; but by themselves they do not make a man happy. A liberally educated man, lacking the goods which liberal education does not provide, can be more miserable than those who have these other goods without the benefit of liberal education. Liberal education is a perilous asset unless other and independent factors cooperate in the molding of a person. It is an asset, nevertheless, both because of what it contributes—a good mind, which everyone would enjoy having—and because a good mind is useful, though never by itself sufficient, for the acquisition of all other goods.

Anyone who thus understands the point of liberal education should recognize three corollaries. (1) Since every normal being is born with an intelligence that can be disciplined and cultivated, i.e., with some degree of capacity for developing a good mind, everyone can be and should be given a liberal education to an extent which equals his capacity. (2) No one can be given a completed liberal education in school, college, or university, for unlike the body, the mind's capacity for growth does not terminate with youth; on the contrary, the mature mind is more educable than the immature; therefore, adult education must take up where the schools leave off and continue the process through all the years of adult life. (3) Schools and colleges may concern themselves with other goods than a good mind—in a defective society this may be necessary—but if they do, they do so at the expense of time and energy taken away from liberal education.

Now the chief difference between ourselves and our ancestors, considering even those who lived as late as the end of the 19th century, is *not* that their educational institutions succeeded in the work of liberal education while ours so plainly fail. The sad fact seems to be that at no time in European history—neither in classical antiquity nor at the height of the middle ages, neither in the renaissance nor in the 18th and 19th centuries—did schools and colleges, teachers and administrators, do a good job for most of the children submitted to their care; and until very recently adults were always left to shift for themselves. In every generation a small number of persons managed to get liberally educated, even as today a few can, in spite of bad schools and teachers, or lack of them. Learning has always been hard; thinking always painful; and the flesh always weak, weak in the teacher as well as the student.

The chief difference between ourselves and our ancestors is that they, for the most part, talked sense about liberal education,

whereas we for the most part—I mean our leading educators—do not. Since I have admitted that our ancestors did not succeed in practice despite their sound conceptions, does it matter, then, that our institutions are dominated by misconceptions and confused theories of what liberal education should be?

I think it does matter because I still have hope that the difficulties in practice can be overcome, that education can achieve a greater measure of success in fact than history has yet evidenced. To make this hope come true, we must think as soundly about liberal education as our ancestors, and beyond that we must remedy their deficiencies or rectify their errors in practice. But unless, we start by setting ourselves straight on the level of theory, we shall certainly go backward rather than forward on the level of practice.

In the remainder of this brief essay, I must content myself with doing two things: first, offer some explanation of how our theory got so confused; second, suggest some practical changes in our colleges which would indicate that they were willing to undertake the task of liberal education.

It seems to me that our ancestors were able to think more soundly about liberal education because (1) they were not democrats and hence *wrongly* failed to recognize that every human being deserves the maximum educational opportunity proportionate to his ability; (2) the consequences of an industrial economy did not make themselves fully felt until the middle of the 19th century; and (3) until that time; the wonders of technology had not created the religion of science, with the consequent exaggeration of the place of scientific studies in the curriculum.

The third of these factors was responsible for the elective system. The second generated vocationalism. The first led us to suppose that the liberal education which our ancestors advocated was essentially aristocratic in theory as well as in practice, and so prompted the false conclusion that there must be some other theory of liberal education more appropriate to a democratic society.

It is undoubtedly easier to think soundly about liberal education if you are preparing to give it only to the few who are favored in natural endowments or economic position. But democracy is right and we must solve the problem of giving to everyone the sort of college education which is most readily given to the favored few.

The industrial economy is here to stay, for better or for worse, and we must somehow free the colleges from the burden of vocational-


ism by having other social agencies do whatever may be necessary to fit people into jobs. (What I am saying here about earning a living applies equally to all the other goods, such as emotional stability or moral character, which cannot be achieved by liberal education, and therefore should be taken care of by other social agencies; or if by colleges, *at least outside the curriculum.*)

Finally, scientific method; knowledge, and ideas, deserve a proper place in the curriculum, together with, but not out of proportion to, poetry, philosophy, history, mathematics, theology, for all these differently exemplify the liberal arts; and though we now see that the traditional "classical" curriculum was too exclusively "humanistic" in a narrow sense of that term, the problem is obviously not solved by throwing away or corrupting what should have been amplified and thereby invigorated.

The practical suggestion I have to offer as therapy follow from the foregoing diagnosis of the illness of our colleges. We must so reform the curriculum, methods of teaching, and examinations, that we do not mistake the It A. degree as signifying either a completed liberal education or adequate preparation for earning a living or living a happy life. It should signify only decent preparation for the continuing task of adult education.

A liberal curriculum should, therefore, include no vocational instruction; nor should it permit any subject-matter specialization. In a liberal college, there should be no departmental divisions, no electives, no separate courses in which grades are given for "covering" a specified amount of "ground," no textbooks or manuals which set forth what students must memorize to pass true-false examinations. The faculty should comprise teachers all of whom are responsible for understanding and administering the whole curriculum; lectures should be kept to a minimum and they should be of such generality that they can be given to the whole student body without distinction of year; the basic precept of pedagogy should be the direction of the mind by questions and the methods of answering them, not the stuffing of it with answers; oral examinations must be used to separate facile verbalizers and memorizers from those in whom genuine intellectual skills are beginning to develop and whose minds have become hospitable to ideas. No student should be dropped from college because he fails to measure up to an arbitrary standard determined by a percentage of mastery of a subject-matter or skill; he should be kept in college as long as he manifests any development of his own capacities, and lack of such evidence should be interpreted as a failure on the part of the college, not the student.

These recommendations are, I know, either negative or formal. They do not positively or materially prescribe the course of study which should be the curriculum of a liberal college. But if they were all followed, and if a faculty understood the purpose of liberal education, I would trust them to devise a curriculum worthy of the B.A. degree—aiming to do what little can be done in college toward the production of a good mind.

That would still leave us with four unsolved problems: how to overcome the weakness of the flesh on the part of both teachers and students; how to make what must be essentially the same college curriculum work for every level of intelligence and every diversity of talent; how to institute the sort of schooling which properly prepares all children to go to a liberal college; and how to organize and execute an interminable program of adult liberal education to carry ever further what the colleges begin—the motion toward that unreachable goal, the ideal of the good mind which would be attained by each individual only if we could exhaust his capacity for knowing the truth and how to get it. 

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