

Notes From The Lower Education: The Looters and the Looting

by Samuel HUX (February 2016)

Undergrads at Amherst College post signs calling for suspension of free speech; you never know who may say something hurtful. Probably-well-fed students at Oberlin are hurt that the college food service is weak in serving up authentic ethnic food; after heart-rending protests, reforms are promised. Students at Yale are enraged that a professorial couple dismissed their fears that some Halloween costumes might offend someone; not only did the administration apologize for institutional insensitivity, the couple apologized as well, the distaff of the two taking a leave from teaching the next semester. Lest this seem like an epidemic at only elite campuses: the University of Missouri football team (no doubt made up of the most sensitive scholars in Columbia) threatens to strike, thereby forcing the college president, who probably did not march in Ferguson, to resign. And practically everywhere “trigger warnings” alert enrollees that parts of the syllabus may cause anxiety to highly-sensitive youngsters seeking safe spaces. (But not, thank God, at my own college, where students are too unsophisticated to know that being a college student is such a dangerous fate. I look at all this from a certain distance now, having recently given up fulltime teaching for a once-a-week adjunct-ship. Thank you, Sweet Jesus, for making me old enough to retire from full commitment to a decaying profession.) My own concerns about college and university matters are not so elevated as the profundities at Amherst, Oberlin, Yale, Missouri, dozens; mine remain on a mundane level. For instance:

The American university has been undergoing for years a fundamental change of its nature, far more drastic than all the “crises of higher education” which make up its history. There once was a higher education which could suffer crises and remain itself. But we are moving toward, perhaps we have already achieved, something else: higher *training*, a different thing altogether. I grant you “the American university” is a rather nebulous place; and, paradoxically, a great deal of the attention it has gotten in recent years tends to obscure rather than

throw light on its nature. When one focuses on the “multicultural” revision of “Western Civ” at Stanford some few years ago (cheered on by Jesse Jackson: “Ho ho ho, Western Civ has got to go”), or the culturally-Marxist English department at Duke, one gives or gets the impression that *this* is where the battle for the soul of the university is taking place. In so far as *this* refers to Western Civilization surveys and English departments, unfortunately that’s not the battleground. In so far as *this* refers to Stanford and Duke (and other elite institutions), they are, frankly, not as important as thought to be. What happens at Duke would matter greatly if this were a very small country—if we were Sweden, for instance, and Duke were Uppsala, from which an extraordinary number of the cultural, political, and economic leaders of our small country graduate. But since we are a very large country with an extraordinarily large college population, what goes on at Good Old State University is a hell of a lot more important than what goes on at Stanford. (JFK went to Harvard – LBJ went to Southwest Texas State.) And a great deal of what goes on at GOSU is probably going on at elite schools as well while not being publicized because it isn’t as exciting.

Take the GOSU with which I am most familiar, having spent most of my professional life there, the City University of New York, a much more typical place than its racial-, ethnic-, and age-diversity, and its absence of dormitory life, would suggest. For more than forty years in at least four “chancellor’s reports” CUNY has been promised-or-threatened-with a radical restructuring. A collection of semi-autonomous units spread over the five boroughs of New York City—supposedly *liberal arts* colleges, community colleges, technical and professional institutes, a graduate school, a law school—CUNY is in effect a university system, competing in size with many state university systems (as it *once* competed for academic esteem with such systems), and it may indeed need restructuring . . . but what kind? Noting that there are overlapping offerings at College A, College B, College C, and so on, the periodic chancellor’s reports have proposed that College C might down-size or phase out Discipline X and perhaps College B Discipline Y, since X and Y are stronger at College A, and that C and B might strengthen Discipline Z which could then be eliminated at College A. Ignore these very generalized representations of details and hear the music: a presumably *liberal arts* college might not have, for instance, a History major, indeed might not have a History discipline. Or Anthropology, Astronomy, Geology, Foreign Language (Spanish excepted) or Philosophy: all judged by one

report a few decades ago to be “non-essential.” But it might have an ISM (Information Systems Management) major. What’s the rationale? Don’t look for an intellectual one. Rather—and this is what the reports are really all about, and, incidentally, the reason to think that four-plus decades of persistence will pay off—look to see how, as we say in CUNY, students “vote with their feet.” In other words. . . .

Grant me a brief digression, as I urge upon you a brief recollection. For all the manifest deficiencies of higher education in the past (say before the late ‘60s or early ‘70s) colleges did say to their students something like this: “The world (its history, its culture, its scientific structure) is very large, and you are very small. Your job here is through the acquisition of knowledge to grow toward the world’s size. This college is here to help you do that, for frankly you are at this moment too lacking in knowledge to know how small you are and how much in need you are of decreasing the discrepancy between your size and the world’s.” Now colleges are saying: “The world is very large, and you are probably as large as you need to be. The college is here to help you cut the world down to your size by allowing you to ignore most of the world. You, in the freshness of your ignorance decide what’s important to learn, and we will adjust the college to that. So—vote with your feet.”

In other words, if History is not so popular with students, if Philosophy is avoided by students. . . . then listen to the students. If one has a common sentimental view of “the kids” this will seem fair. And one will be a fool. There is surely a difference between students choosing their major fields of study, by now a prescriptive right in the traditional university, and the implications of “voting with one’s feet.” For in the past when one chose a major one was not understood to be blackballing other majors; one was understood simply to be choosing one discipline over others. The others were to remain for other students to choose or not. But now: when enough students choose not to major in, say, Philosophy, and of course most will not as they never have, then the “queen of the arts and sciences” should be demoted. And it is pretty clear what will be promoted: those fields which used to be called correctly “vocational,” but now are called, in rather more confidence-inspiring fashion, “career-oriented.”

Most vocational majors have four things in common. First, they take immediate aim at the job-entry level instead of long-term aim at the life of a cultivated

citizen. Second, they tend to effect fairly well-defined career limits: chances are, for instance, that the graduate with a B.S. in Business Administration is going to have a career working for or under someone who majored in Economics or History or some such. Third, they are enormously popular with students, who are immediate-goal-oriented enough to take the first point but are ignorant of the second. Fourth, they are most of them bloated with required credits: while a liberal arts major will require ten or twelve courses, the vocational major may require twice that many (claiming the national association in the field demands it), effectively cutting all the more into the liberal education that's supposed to distinguish college or university from professional school.

So, again, there's a difference between students choosing majors and students having their "votes" define the nature of the university itself, an institution that predates them and will, if only in modified form, postdate them. Of all the secular institutions of civil society the traditional university was the surest embodiment of Edmund Burke's ideal of a conversation "not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born." Make it merely conversant with the living, or rather a structure of immediate preferences of the living, and it becomes a mere *training institute* providing instruction in one job-or-profession or another. Actually Burke did not say (although he implied) "conversation": he said "partnership." But I have slipped in the former term for the sake of another allusion.

For the English philosopher Michael Oakeshott education is apprenticeship in the "Great Conversation" that is the world's culture. If students, most of whom are not aware that the conversation exists, are allowed, through voting with their feet, to define the university, then indeed the conversation will not exist, at least not in its traditional home. Only the stupid could say good riddance. And only the naïve would think that there are no stupid people in responsible positions in the university.

In a 1949 essay, "The Universities," included in *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, Oakeshott analyzed the possible impact of demographic changes on British higher education. With a pluperfect variation on "You aint seen nothin' yet," I'm inclined to say "You hadn't seen nothin' then!" Oakeshott noted (quite realistically, it seems to me; in a merely Tory fashion others might complain) that a new sort of student was entering universities after the war, less

interested in the great conversation, more focused on practical immediate goals. Well, look. . . that's what happens, and we needn't exaggerate the conversational (so to speak) interests of previous generations of students. But Oakeshott also noted something else: "From the outside we have men of power. . . who have the intention of transforming the universities into places designed to provide what these undergraduates suppose they need. Here, I think, are the makings of a genuine crisis in the universities. For when the pressure of change in this direction becomes irresistible, the universities will suffer a *destructive metamorphosis from which recovery will be impossible*" (italics mine). The problem is not, said Oakeshott, quoting a report of that time on British higher education, "how to translate the ideal of the cultivated gentleman [and lady, yes of course] into democratic terms and combine an intensive and relentless pursuit of excellence with a new sensitiveness to the demands of social justice." Rather (and because), said Oakeshott: "In the past a rising class was aware of something valuable enjoyed by others which it wished to share; but this is not so today. The leaders of the rising class"—here Oakeshott seems to mean both the student leaders and the "men of power" from "outside"—"are consumed with contempt for everything which does not spring from their own desires, they are convinced in advance that they have nothing to learn and everything to teach, and consequently their aim is *loot* [italics mine]—to appropriate to themselves the organization, the shell of the institution, and convert it to their own purposes. The problem of the universities today is how to avoid destruction at the hands of men who have no use for their characteristic virtues, men who are convinced only that 'knowledge is power.'"

Indeed, "you hadn't seen nothin' then!" For Oakeshott's remarks speak more eloquently to our problems than they did to his own. They do so not because of the thousands of "non-traditional" students—although I shall return to that point—but because those "men of power" with the "intention of transforming the universities" are no longer "outside": they are inside. Some are faculty members, some of whom would, as a colleague of mine says we should, remove all humanistic and scientific "obstacles" (that is to say, traditional standards) from the students' swift entry into the job market, cheap degree in hand. Some are a new class of administrator, you might say a technician of administration: not the retired minister, the former dean of the law school, or the philosopher with a talent for administration and a compelling sense of duty—none of those characters of popular memory.

The new-class administrator—whether president, vice-president of Such-and-Such, dean, director of This-or-That—will not after a few years return to a professorship, because chances are that's not where he or she came from, rather has always been a "director" of one sort or another. If one of these bureaucrats once actually was a professor it would not be obvious from style or values. For like his new-class colleague he has two modes of rhetoric: when he's being hard-nosed he talks about cost-efficient measures which-yet-preserve-academic-integrity; when he's being soft he talks about "student-centered" education—by which he does not mean an invitation to the young to join in or at least listen to the great conversation. If the bureaucrat has a political agenda (not really necessary for a technocrat) he will talk about insuring that the curriculum is not "gender silent" (yes, that's a real phrase), or ponder ways to make faculty reflect the racial or ethnic composition of the student body. If this academic bureaucrat is the college president, he or she will have a power far beyond what is popularly assumed (since the myth of faculty control of curriculum remains current): all personnel decisions are subject to presidential pleasure. If the one remaining professor of German retires, then so does German. *Kaput*. (I speak here from experience and observation. I hope my old friend is enjoying his waning days in Israel.) The money saved is then spent on another, more "practical," program that feet have voted for. Privately I imagine the new-class administrators as "Student-Centered University Managers," or S.C.U.M. For the sake of the proprieties I will file that cognomen away into privacy.

I came to one of the flagship colleges of The City University as a young socialist eager to teach in "the university of the proletariat," as I romantically perceived it. In the subsequent decades in one of the new (officially) liberal arts colleges of a much bigger CUNY I have become someone who's comfortable speaking the language of Edmund Burke, and who takes the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset as his guide through the American university—not his *Mission of the University*, but a work in which higher education is barely mentioned.

The Revolt of the Masses (1930) is an oft-misunderstood book, for as with most books its title rather than *it* is read. *La rebellion de las masas* is not the rise of the working class. *Las masas* are no social class at all, but a human type. "Mass-man" is fortunate in that he lives in a period when except for the very poorest all enjoy a "rise in the historical level" where "average

existence. . . . moves on a higher altitude" than in the past. That is, life offers a greater possibility of one's earthly desires being fulfilled than in previous periods. One has "formidable appetites and powerful means of every kind for satisfying them": economic, physical, civil, technical. But one is mass-man if along with "the free expansion of his vital desires" he has a "radical ingratitude towards all that has made possible the ease of his existence": the history that preceded him and the civilization that provides his ease.

This radical ingratitude does not mean mass-man is without "ideas"; indeed he has them ready-made, an offshoot of the "rise in the historical level." "The individual finds himself already with a stock of ideas. He decides to content himself with them and to consider himself intellectually complete. As he feels the lack of nothing outside himself, he settles down definitely amid his mental furniture. . . . [H]e has lost the use of his hearing. Why should he listen if he has within himself all that is necessary? There is no reason now for listening, but rather for judging, pronouncing, deciding." Does this mean that mass-man possesses, after a fashion, culture? Not at all, for the "ideas" are not genuine. "Whoever wishes to have ideas must first prepare himself to desire truth and to accept the rules of the game imposed by it. It is no use speaking of ideas when there is no acceptance of a higher authority to regulate them, a series of standards to which it is possible to appeal in a discussion. These standards are the principles on which culture rests." Mass-man "wishes to have opinions, but is unwilling to accept the conditions and presuppositions that underlie all opinion. Hence his ideas are in effect nothing more than appetites in words." Nonetheless, he is satisfied with himself to the degree that he would be a model for others even though he knows he is no noble soul. "*The characteristic of the hour is that the commonplace mind, knowing itself to be commonplace, has the assurance to proclaim the rights of the commonplace and to impose them wherever it will*" (italics in original).

Oakeshott's "looters" (both students and administrators) who "appropriate to themselves the organization, the shell of the institution, and convert it to their own purposes" are, no surprise, mass-men. As it is often difficult to imagine a particular adult ever having been young, it is even more difficult to imagine the new class of academic bureaucrats ever having been, except in the most formal sense, students. Another healthy quotation from Oakeshott, his 1975 essay "A Place of Learning" (also in *The Voice of Liberal Learning*):

“There, in school, the narrow boundaries of the local and contemporary were swept aside to reveal. . . a world of things and persons and happenings, of languages and beliefs, of utterances and sights and sounds past all imagination and to which even the dullest could not be wholly indifferent. The going was hard; there was nothing to be got without learning how to get it, and it was understood that nobody went to school in order to enjoy the sort of happiness he might get from lying in the sun. And when with inky fingers a schoolboy unpacked his satchel to do his homework he unpacked three thousand years of the fortunes and misfortunes of human intellectual adventure. Nor would it easily have occurred to him to ask what the sufferings of Job, the silent ships moving out of Tenedos in the moonlight, the terror, the complication and the pity of the human condition revealed in a drama of Shakespeare or Racine, or even the chemical composition of water, had to do with *him*. . . . Either he never considered the question at all, or he dimly recognized them as images of a human self-understanding which was to be his for the learning. All very innocent, perhaps even credulous; and in many cases soon overlaid by the urgencies of current engagements. But however superficially they might be appreciated, these were not circumstances which generated a positive resistance to the invitation of liberal learning in a university. Indeed, their very innocence nurtured a disposition to recognize it.”

Surely, one feels, this was not the childhood experience of the looting academic bureaucrats. Nor of the vast majority of contemporary university students. Much more likely bureaucrat and student both experienced “a ceaseless flow of seductive trivialities which invoke neither reflection nor choice but instant participation”; they felt themselves “well-informed about the world” but it held “no puzzles or mysteries for them”; they knew “the moon as something to be shot at or occupied before ever they. . . had the chance to marvel at it”; their world had “but one language, soon learned: the language of appetite.” School in their circumstances was “notably unimportant”; it had “surrendered its character as a place apart where. . . languages other than the language of appetite may be learned. . . . Its virtues and vices [were] those of the surrounding world.” These were, are, the “circumstances hostile to a disposition to recognize the invitation of liberal learning; that is, the invitation to disentangle oneself, for a time, from the urgencies of the here and now and to listen to the conversation in which human beings forever seek to understand themselves.”

What *is* a university when it's nothing but an invitation to the "here and now"? It is, in its various characteristics, "skills acquisition" as if you learn to write the way you learn any other "technique"; vocational majors training applicants to be trained-on-the-job later; faculty search committees enjoined to make their hirings reflect as closely as possible the ethnic, racial, and sexual composition of the student body, which itself should be a reflection of demographic percentages; the encouragement of pedestrian voting, so to say, just as in the "real world" where human beings are electorate and consumers; the consequent message to academic disciplines: compete, subject to market forces, for the student clients or disappear. What *is* a university in such a state of being? Home to mass-man, that's what.

And now, since the overwhelming majority of the American university's population are not faculty or bureaucrats but students, comes the most difficult part of this argument: How to talk about students realistically, avoiding the protective temptations of sentimentality.

In a course several decades ago twenty students and I set about trying to decide which of the philosophers we read—Aristotle, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche—provided the best insights into the literary tragedies we read. At semester's end a student wandered by the office. "It was really a good course—I mean really worthwhile." "I'm glad." He hesitated: "It wasn't *really* a lit course, you know. I mean. . . well. . . I think we learned a lot about life." A few years of teaching had taught me to suspect such statements and to resent the dichotomy. I didn't this time; I knew something of what he meant, but didn't know how to say that his appreciation had less to do with anything I had done that semester than with an atmosphere that made the thoughts and creations of the great minds we read seem more valuable, even more to be valued, than they had seemed, say, a year before. I don't refer to any "atmosphere conducive to learning," as the teaching-evaluation reports have it; rather, something almost the opposite. All semester long the students had read of and heard reports that the university of which their college was a part would have to be restructured in such a way as to make it more cost-effective, which meant a certain retrenchment of the less "career-oriented" of the arts and sciences throughout the university, and a significant down-grading of the liberal arts in favor of the vocational at their particular college. (I refer of course to one of those "chancellor's reports" mentioned already.) Their response in the classroom was

to develop an intense attachment to such irrelevancies as Sophocles, Kierkegaard, and Ibsen. Which I had almost forgotten students could manage and which, when I wasn't feeling silently ironic ("It's about time!"), I found nothing short of moving. At times there was a kind of cohesiveness and camaraderie to our meetings, a kind of pride and mutual protectiveness: "We're doing something sane and worthwhile that the big shots would like to deny us 'in our own best interests.'" I remember no class so well as this one. We happy few. It was for me the first experience of what I and a few like-minded pals began to call over the years "the college within the college."

That was then. Now? A class of twenty students fixed on intellectual treasures and resistant to the practical, real-world, dynamic plans their academic elders have for them? Not bloody likely. Looters, more likely. Of course this is not the sort of thing I am supposed to admit about. . . . "the kids." One reason for faculty sentimentality about "the kids" is that unwholesome American desire to be loved by the young and thereby be somehow authenticated. A compounding reason in colleges with modest to high concentrations of "non-traditional" students is the fear of being thought racist. Forget it; you can't control what will be thought.

My classes have been for some time typically about a third foreign (mostly Asian, Latin American and Caribbean, and Muslim middle-eastern), more than half American Blacks and U.S.-born Hispanics, a smattering of people who look like me. A few of them—no national, racial, ethnic, or sexual pattern—are exceptional students, occasionally extraordinary. Some—again no pattern—are duller than butter, too dull even to be mass-men, beneficiaries of Open Admissions, and eventually they disappear. It is the majority that's problematical. Some of that majority, while they didn't enjoy that childhood schooling that prepares one for "the invitation of liberal learning in a university," are just innocent and bewildered enough to wonder what's going on and therefore are without the ready-made meretricious ideas and opinions of mass-man. Some others are unreadable, and I hesitate to generalize. And some would excite central casting if anyone ever figured out how to make a film of *The Revolt of the Masses*. And for those there is a pattern, although not demographic. They tend to be the "extracurricular" enthusiasts, the elected and unelected "student leaders": the presidents, vice-presidents, and secretaries of the student government, the officers and many members of the Hispanic Caucus, the Women's Coalition, the

Whatnot and the Notwhat, the inevitable student reps on the Presidential Search Committee, the thug with the foghorn at the periodic protest campus-lockout.

Someone might object that this does not sound like a typical GOSU, but that someone would give stronger weight to ethnicity and race than I do. Furthermore, since the "minorities" are the vast majority at my college, and since no one benefitted from Affirmative Action quotas but rather perhaps from CUNY's Open Admissions policy, we're free of that neurotic atmosphere of colleges where minority students insist on more Affirmative Action yet resent being thought beneficiaries of it. Consequently, the minorities here are as comfortable in their setting as the traditional majority at other colleges.

But not necessarily appreciative of that fact. The mass-student, like the exceptional, the bewildered, and the unreadable, is fortunate that he enjoys in college a "rise in the historical level" where his "average existence. . . moves on a higher altitude" than did students in the past. There are all sorts of financial aid programs which have nothing to do with academic promise or academic prowess, as well as a few which do reward promise. Student opinion is solicited on questions of governance, personnel (mandatory student evaluations of instructors—where an undergrad can judge whether his professor has "a good command of his subject," which might be quantum mechanics or Kantian metaphysics!), and curriculum (dreadful mistake, but there it is, absurd residue of the '60s-'70s). If a student "has problems" there is free counseling available. If a student fails a course, then, depending upon the specific course, the F might be expunged from the transcript. If a student feels a need for peer support within his or her racial, ethnic, or sexual group, or feels the urge to express himself or herself through membership in an organization committed to the celebration of his or her bio-cultural heritage, then he or she will find such an organization, officially sanctioned, suitable for him or her, unless he or she is the only man or woman on campus of his or her background, but in any case he or she can know that there's a Campus Climate Committee policing against any possibly uncharitable words or hints of attitude toward the racial, ethnic, or sexual group to which he or she belongs. And if he or she is at the moment uncertain which sexual persuasion she or he really should belong to—God often mistaken in His or Her assignments—the college will surely in time come up with a program to aid her or him (or "them"?).

But the mass-student (he or she) while enjoying on campus "the free expansion of

his [or her!] vital desires" in so far as they're vaguely appropriate on academic soil, has a "radical ingratitude towards all that has made possible the ease of his existence." (*Or hers!* O.K., enough of that.) He thinks this is the way it's always been at Good Ol' State U., has no idea university life was once much more Spartan, feels it is his due, like air and water—and what have you done for me lately?

He may have no idea—but on the other hand he's full of ideas and opinions. And "he decides to content himself with them and to consider himself intellectually complete. . . [as] he settles down definitely amid his mental furniture." The ideas may differ depending upon the campus, but in my familiar haunts they are politically correct, racially progressive to aggressive, and rarely "gender silent." He knows Columbus was a mistake. (You'd be surprised how many Hispanics are theoretically sorry to have been born.) She knows traditional modern English grammar is sexist and a conspiracy to insult half of personkind. (Because like most people she is ignorant of Anglo-Saxon where "he" was *he* and "she" was *heo*, making the evolution of gender-neutral "he" quite natural.) The Greeks lifted their culture from Africa and hence western civilization is a theft of a birthright. (And yet—schizophrenically—as Jesse Jackson chanted, "Ho ho ho, Western Civ has got to go.") He's not at all sure that minorities were not targeted for AIDS. He doesn't necessarily buy the nonsense of the famous Professor Jeffries at City College (CCNY)—melanin, sun people, ice people—but he'll defend to the whatever the man's right to bold speech, hears in it a profounder music than mere reason, and thereby having dispensed with the content tells you that perhaps you're too impatient with the man's style. He is never, absolutely never, himself a racist—"Don't lay that shit on me"—because only a member of a majority in a nation can be a racist. If you ask if that means no white in Africa can be a racist, and if you don't accede to his answer about not-confusing-the-issue or that's-different-altogether, you're liable to be told you're guilty of "linear thinking" or some such (I forget what).

In any case, he has not "prepare[d] himself to desire truth and to accept the rules of the game imposed by it [and] is unwilling to accept the conditions and presuppositions that underlie all opinion." Nonetheless, when pushed to the wall in argument, he asserts with unrecognized banality that "It's a matter of opinion, and my opinion's as good as yours," which doesn't imply for him the reverse. (At other GOSUs, and at the more elevated levels too I suspect, a

different set of manufactured ideas and opinions prevail, more mainline acceptable: that's all.) The single feature that separates mass-student from Ortega's conception of mass-man is that although he has the assurance to proclaim and impose his opinions wherever he will, he has no idea that he is *commonplace*.

An apparently good question: Why even dream of submitting this student to a rich immersion in the "Great Conversation," into the tradition Jesse Jackson has such contempt for, why bother submitting him to more than the minimum liberal arts at all? Why resist the trend to election by feet? There are two reasons.

First: A certain amount of remediation has become recognized as necessary in the university—that's what all Composition courses are, not only those designated "remedial"—but more remediation is needed than is generally recognized, although a different kind of remediation. Since most students did not receive that tough paradisiacal education Oakeshott recalled with such fondness (and during which one picked up writing along the way as a mysterious cultural acquisition), the university is the last chance for even a patchwork approximation. *Cultural* remediation, if you will. But this answer may seem to beg the question that a patchwork is even possible with this student, mass-student. Why not just service him with some how-to courses and let it go?

So, second: To define higher education in terms of the ostensible needs of mass-man is to sell short and to violate the others—the exceptional, the bewildered, and the unreadable. And you cannot announce there will be one track for mass-man—Now all you mass-men line up for this!—and another track for the others. Furthermore, some mass-men are fools, but some are not. The man of sense, says Ortega, "is constantly catching himself within an inch of being a fool; hence he makes an effort to escape from the imminent folly, and in that effort lies his intelligence." The fool, however, "does not suspect himself" and with "enviable tranquility. . . settles down, installs himself in his own folly. Like those insects which it is impossible to extract from the orifice they inhabit, there is no way of dislodging the fool from his folly. . . . The fool is a fool for life." But the problem is that you cannot always tell which mass-man is a fool and therefore incorrigible, and which for whom there is some hope. As you can't know for a certainty who is capable of accepting the invitation of liberal learning and who isn't, that's why the great conversation should be available to all university students.

(To be fair to some I have vilified—I suppose that is the right word—as I write the CUNY chancellor’s office is making noises, as it has occasionally before, about general education reform. Quite probably embarrassed at the anarchy that prevails throughout the university at the “GenEd” level, the chancellor’s office would like to arrange or impose a standard university-wide set of requirements. I sympathize with the office, or “CUNY Central” as we often call it—notice how fair I am—for their offer of the nickel and dime. But I suspect—not a lonely suspicion—that the real motive is to shrink the semi-autonomy the city colleges enjoy to demitasse size. If CUNY Central is successful a few colleges may possibly appear more respectable GenEd-wise; but, since it is unimaginable that CUNY Central would champion a GenEd plan that would be large enough to cut into the credit-fat vocational majors, the plan will have no transformative effect upon the real status quo. Should CUNY Central successfully impose its will, then its reform, called “Pathways,” will ensure that GenEd requirements are even more curtailed, but with enough similarity between constituent colleges *that transfer of students from one branch of CUNY to another, which is what Pathways is all about, will be more easily facilitated.* A number-cruncher’s dream.)

And, oh yes—there is a third reason. Even if all students were no better than the new class of academic bureaucrats, the university was here before they were (“they” being both students and bureaucrats). Its structure was made to facilitate a certain purpose, not just any purpose. Looters be damned. It seems a characteristic of our age that we take a traditional institution which had evolved to perform a particular function, populate or staff it with a new breed, and then say it can’t or shouldn’t perform the function it was originally created for. The military for instance evolved for reasons of national defense and the aggressive pursuit of national interest abroad when that was deemed necessary. In time it became as well (and then in time could become *instead*) a kind of welfare institution, employment service, and technical jobs-training program; so that now some of its leaders, many public officials, and pacifically interested civilians, counsel that it not be used for its original purpose because that would be unfair to the militarily employed, many of whom after all did not join up to be warriors but to escape poverty or the dole. The university is now to suffer an analogous transformation, its traditional virtue, initiation into the conversation of humankind, rendered irrelevant since most students do not matriculate to be *students* but rather “in the immortal words of Lyndon

Johnson [as Walter Karp once put it] 'to get a better job'"—and since the new-class academic bureaucrats are more inclined to listen to the tread of students' feet than to the great conversation itself.

"Aha!" I imagine someone saying, "Doesn't your military analogy reveal a certain subliminal aggression and hostility, relative virtues in a warrior but hardly so in a professor?" *Subliminal?* I beg your pardon! Indeed I am hostile. There are enemies within the gates of academe, and I suspect that they will win; I suspect they already have. No, not the students: certainly not the exceptional, the bewildered, the unreadable, and not even the mass-student, really. For although he is the enemy of genuine ideation and thoughtful opinion he wins no more than his student betters. He wastes an opportunity to hear the great conversation as he passes through, and once he's passed through he casts but an occasional idle thought at the university he leaves behind. The new-class academic bureaucrat and his faculty ally, who remain, win. Their prize: control of a university no longer committed to its traditional values, for which they have no appreciation, but committed to the same consumeristic and clientistic ethos of the surrounding world. And they win this prize through the institutionalization of the majority student "vote" as a blackball of the minority disciplines: the Student-Centered University, from which the Student-Centered University Managers will as likely be dislodged as the insect from his orifice or the fool from his folly.

It is well to remember the beginnings of universities in the western world. Although *university* has come to suggest both the universe and the universality of learning—as it should—such was not its original meaning. As Charles Homer Haskins noted in his classic *The Rise of the Universities* (1923) the university was *universitas societas magistrorum discipulorumque*, a corporation or guild of masters and students. The medieval University of Bologna was at first a *universitas societas* of students, with professors at their beck and call. Students could, for instance, fine a professor "If he failed to secure an audience of five for a regular lecture." (Were they absent voting with their feet?) In time the professors formed a guild of masters and eventually stability overtook the original Student-Centered U. The universities of northern Europe and Britain followed the pattern of master and student with the master master—and the rest is history.

Until perhaps now. I am afraid the university, GOSU at the very least, is about to return—through the agency of the Student-Centered University Management and

albeit ignorantly—to its roots. . . and suffer, as Oakeshott put it, “a destructive metamorphosis from which recovery will be impossible.”

No, let me correct that. I think it has already happened. I don't think the GOSU can recover from that destructive metamorphosis. I don't think it is reformable.

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