The Academy and Social Change:
What Are the Rules?

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THE TOPIC YOU WILL BE ADDRESSING in the coming three days, Voices of Harmony, Voices of Dissonance, could not be more apt. As Hannah Arendt said, we are living in one of those "odd in-between period[s] which sometimes insert | [themselves] into historical time ... an interval in time which is altogether determined by things that are no longer and by things that are not yet. In history these intervals have shown more than once that they may contain the moment of truth." We sense that the past does not fit any longer, but the next stage is not yet here. We faculty know this, and so do our students although their awareness is more tacit, less explicit. It seems to me that it is our duty towards our students that requires us to dialogue with them concerning this moment in history that will define their lives. Yet this is not an easy task, and there are many reasons for feeling uneasy as we attempt to undertake it. We will sometimes agree, and sometimes disagree, not only amongst ourselves, but with the students we are trying lo empower, and even more with the society at large, that employs us and in a sense to which we owe our loyalty. C.S. Lewis might see us as dealing in the work of the devil, and perhaps social change—which is what is at issue here—is something of the sort, since it demands the destruction of one set of ideals and assumptions, of one "religion," and its replacement by another.

A few years back, at a Lilly Conference, I gave a paper entitled "Universities: Servants or Shapers of Worldviews." Some of you may have heard it. Today, I want to restate the issues I raised then, but expand on them in ways I could not do then, because I knew less about social change, and especially about our students' psyches.

In my book, *Ariadne's Thread: The Search for New Modes of Thinking*, I contrasted those periods in history when the job of educating the young could be classified as **"mould-to-fit"** with those much rarer periods when it was better described as **"critique/create."** In the case of **mould-to-fit**, social life was such that there was no clamor for massive change, no outspoken criticism of the *fundamental assumptions* underpinning the *status quo*. All that "the elders" who raised the young—in recent times, that's us, the school teachers and university academics—had to do was to pass along, more or less intact, the values and their legitimizing myths, as shaped over past generations. Whatever social problems emerged were dealt with by processes and procedures internal to the social paradigm itself.

In "modern" times, there have of course been many slight modifications of the old values, produced through "research," particularly of the "scientific" sort, but these were acceptable because the paradigm itself had a built-in accommodation for them: it labelled itself as "progressive." In the modern view, humans were building a logical edifice founded on "laws of Nature." These laws were constantly being extended by new "truths" obtained through "value-free" science, as it chipped away at the cutting edge of our knowledge of all reality. Indeed, very little change in values has occurred—with all but the fringes of religion, for example, having accepted the great age of the Earth and the gradual evolution of humans in the past couple of million years. Where change *has* occurred is in the technical sphere, where it has often come too fast, but to which our paradigm has told us we **must** willy-nilly adapt. Indeed, we are now living in an age when technical change is occurring so fast that college students are being warned that their hard-won skills will soon be obsolete. Retraining is becoming a constant part of adult life!

Yet all of this dizzying change is occurring under an unchanged set of assumptions and values. Margaret Mead said that youth today "are being reared to an expectation of *change within changelessness*. The mere admission that the values of the young generation, or of some group within it, may be different in *kind* from those of their elders is treated as a threat to whatever moral, patriotic and religious values their parents uphold with . . . unquestioning zeal or with ... defensive loyalty." And we, in the academy, for the most part are still moulding youth to fit a world based on those assumptions and values. It is a world based on the assumption of a managed hierarchy, defined by a written code of rules, wherein social problems are viewed as "conflicts of interests," to be settled through negotiation—or, when that fails, by confrontational litigation in the courts—or, when *that* fails, by massive coercion. (The last is a state we have not yet reached widely in the United States, but it exists in many other societies today.) In other words, social problems are seen as something to be **managed**. Disputants and dissidents

have to be brought around to **fit** into the **mould** of the current paradigm. It is they who are at fault, not the paradigm itself.

The present paradigm is based on the assumptions of continuing economic growth, of ever-more efficient technology, of ever-more control over Nature, over disease—indeed over everything **except the logic of the assumptions themselves**. Those are sacrosanct, beyond questioning or changing: beyond our control. We have just come through an election which did not address a single one of the assumptions underlying our hierarchical system. No one asked: Does this system really make sense? Candidates differed only in the specifics of their **management proposals**—and even there, there was enormous reticence, preference being given to *ad hominem* attacks on rivals! Modern democracies have so far shown themselves incapable of profound self-analysis.

The tyranny of the hierarchy is made palatable by the illusion of freedom. We, as individuals, "own" ourselves—we are "free" to change jobs, to travel 3000 miles to a meeting (if we can find someone to pay the way), to marry (and divorce) whomever we please. We are free—**by right**—to read anything, see anything, write anything, say (almost) anything, to grumble, complain, swear. Yet all our freedom does not translate into empowerment! Instead, we "freely" sit in gridlock forty minutes each morning and evening. Indeed, **gridlock** is becoming the metaphor for our times: millions and millions of us, trapped in the collective sum of our own individual freedoms, unable, it seems, to join together in meaningful ways to change the logic of the gigantic hierarchical system in which we are embedded. Having all these legal rights as **individuals** is beginning to seem rather useless. Votes don't do much to change anything. Every year, our ability to control our environment —natural and social—seems to recede further and further away from us.

What I propose is that our society needs to learn, as a whole, how to refashion its values, and from those new priorities to refashion its institutions. It is a process that, as I said, I labelled **critique/create**, and in Western history there have been really only two times when that process was carried out deliberately by social thinkers: during the Golden Age in Greece and during the Enlightenment. It is, of course, no accident that it is the philosophers of those two particular eras that are most taught in our academies today. It is they who first elaborated the arguments for the current paradigm. Unfortunately, however, people like Allan Bloom seem to think that all major thoughts have been thought for all time, and that all that is needed today is to refurbish those thoughts—change the hemline and neckline a little, perhaps—and then we will have created a society able to solve all its problems. He is really saying, as are people like Lynn Cheney, that all the old ideas are sufficient, that **mould-to-fit** is all we need, and **critique/create** is highly dangerous.

This argument, of course, appears incorrect to more and more thinkers, both inside and outside the academy. Any citizen **who reads, listens, and observes**, knows that global changes—environmental, political, economic, and social—are rapidly increasing all around us, and that they demand to be interpreted and responded to in **totally new ways**, using totally new values and assumptions. For example:

1. Global population: how does the promotion of individual "freedoms" and "rights," whether parental [the freedom to have children] or fetal [the right to be born], jibe with the decline in per capita resources globally?

2. Economic growth: how does further expansion of *per capita* consumption in rich countries jibe with the net transfer of resources from south to north since mid-century? Or with the growing numbers of homeless everywhere, even in the so-called rich countries?

3. Social stability: in the United States how does the promotion of ever more law and order (i.e. coercion) jibe with the simultaneous increases in court and prison costs on the one hand, and crime, violence, drug abuse and alienation on the other?

I could go on. But those examples are enough to make the point. These (and many other) seemingly intractable dilemmas are direct outcomes of a set of beliefs about human nature, about social order, and about moral values that are deeply embedded in our Western thinking. Not only do those beliefs underpin the logic of our constitution; they also underpin the assumptions of the academic disciplines—which, incidentally, have metastasized to every university around the globe. Again, a short list to focus us:

1. Humans are naturally competitive and acquisitive, and thus require enforceable contracts to preserve order.

2. Acquisitiveness and competition are not only necessary, but beneficial to the whole society, as they provide the incentives needed for productivity.

3. Indeed, social welfare demands preserving the rights of individuals, not only from arbitrary government (Jefferson's idea), but the rights to unlimited acquisition of property (Madison's idea), which need protection from the less "successful," whom Madison realized might well be a *majority!* (See Federalist #10).

What does an academic, an educator, who sees the need to question these beliefs in depth, in such a way as to expose the

multiple fallacies upon which western society is based—what does such a person *do*? What, indeed, is our responsibility to the public at large? to our students? to our colleagues?

The Politics of Education

Universities, whether "private" or "state," are social institutions, embedded in a society which supports their existence and to which they are in some sense accountable. Presumably, they exist in order to perform a function that society wants. Here, of course, is where politics enters. **Who** exactly, is "the society" that supports the university, and **what** function does it want performed?

This strikes immediately to the heart of the matter. Who *is* "the public" and what *is* "the public good?" Do private universities, with their tax exempt status, serve the same "public good" (at least in terms of curriculum) as state universities? (For the moment, I leave aside our students as a significant sector of the public that we serve.)

Suppose we academics perceive significant errors or imbalances in the basic values on which society rests. Suppose those errors demand deep restructuring of that society's world view, which, if not developed carefully, could create social chaos, not unlike that now being experienced in Eastern Europe, or that which befell most African polities upon throwing off the colonial yoke. What is our responsibility to society *as a whole*, remembering that those social factions that oversee, directly or indirectly, the activities of universities may not be congruent with the "whole?" In cases such as the former USSR or El Salvador, it was obvious that the "Party" in the former or the military in the latter (which bombed the universities and "disappeared" hundreds of faculty and students) did not represent the good of the whole society—and one could ask whether democracy anywhere is such that those controlling universities do intend the wider good.

Let us assume for the moment, however, that at least in the United States the trustees and the state legislators really *are* representative of the whole society. Suppose that the wishes of that society are to preserve the present world view, that it wishes that world view to be propagated more or less intact. What is our duty? Many of us in this room, I suspect, would immediately say one or both of the following:

1) teach the "truth" at all costs;

2) teach all sides and let the students make up their own minds.

In my opinion, those are "cop-out" answers and undeserving of our demands for academic freedom and tenure. Why? Very briefly, as many philosophers of knowledge have shown—including my favorites, Alfred North Whitehead and Michael Polanyi—our mental models of reality are always abstractions, selected and partial working models of the total reality in which we are embedded. We attend only to parts of it and mostly are quite unaware that we have been selective. Even when we are aware, we often cannot explain why we "know" what we know; we intuit through tacit understanding far, far more than we can describe in a logically deducible way. Like an elusive wood sprite, "truth" is always just out of reach ahead of us. All we can hope to do is to reshape our world view, to shake the kaleidoscope of our vision in order to perceive new patterns, based on new—and, one hopes, improved—assumptions about such things as "human nature" and the "causes" of events. The evolution of *Homo sapiens* is, in fact, a never-ending process of adapting anew our culturally generated world views—and hence our behaviors—to new circumstances, often brought about by our own past actions. What was an adaptive world view in the past becomes maladaptive today, and requires new assumptions and values.

To suppose that we can escape the dilemma thus presented us by pretending to a kind of value-neutrality in our curriculum—a sort of "teach all sides and let students decide"—is probably worse than nothing. It is like four years of a MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour, where issues are treated in isolation, virtually ensuring a superficial analysis. Underlying assumptions are never plumbed. Furthermore, confrontation becomes the model pattern for social dialogue, leading to "majority rule" and subsequent coercion of dissent. It is a highly divisive approach to social change, one that tends to destroy social coherence and increase the overheads of maintaining order. Not only are factions encouraged, but as they seek to gain power by various means, they constantly up the amount of social energy devoted to the change process. (Mr. Ross Perot's recent $60+ million bid for the presidency is but one example.)

Beyond the high costs of "persuasion" in confrontational decision-making are the probably even higher costs of on-going social mistrust and alienation. An overall confrontational behavior pattern becomes established that eschews group participation and cooperative problem-solving, by which all sides create solutions and have an ownership in the outcome. Cooperative problem-solving is a community-building process based on consensus. It stands in sharp contrast to the socially divisive process of confrontational decision-making that increases conflict and necessitates coercive management.

I have spent some minutes discussing why our conventional responses in defense of "academic freedom" for the greater good are inadequate—and have laid the groundwork, I hope, for what I believe must be the framework for an ethically-based curriculum that responsibly promotes social change. But first let's turn briefly to our responsibilities to students and to each other.

What We Owe Our Students

If we see the world in the process of massive change and wish to empower our students as they struggle to shape those changes rather than merely react to them, what is our proper duty to them?

First, let me say that few students today are totally unaware of the changes now in progress around the world. On the other hand, most of them dismiss or suppress their concerns because there is not yet a legitimate forum in most of their lives in which to raise them. There seems to be, superficially at least, widespread acceptance among students of the need to become highly-trained functional units in the giant economic engine. They are saying, as it were: "Here, take me. I come as a paying client: mould me to fit a high-paying competitive niche in the social machine." That's what they and their parents are paying for; that's what "society" says they should do. It is, on the surface, a straight-forward demand to be "moulded-to-fit," in order to become successful.

On the other hand, there are several reasons for thinking that our responsibility is not totally congruent with that apparent demand. First, many students, in private conversation with peers or a professor, admit their unhappiness with their career options. Many a student has told me in my office, "I'm a business major, but I'd rather do something for people, except there's no jobs there." Given the growing cost of living, teaching, nursing and social work are becoming less and less attractive—and with no reversals in sight. Second, society as a whole still pays lip-service to the notion that it wants its university graduates to be educated *citizens*, which suggests more than mere robots for the economic engine. Hence, it mandated general education requirements that are now universal. And that tacitly implies teaching critical thinking and exploration of social values, if indeed, "democracy" means participation in decision-making, no matter how remote.

Finally, and most compelling for me, is the duty I believe we have to prepare students beforehand for the kinds of crises that are likely to come about during their lifetimes. Not just to recite those crises: population growth, global warming, etc., etc. But to try to uncover their causes and to consider how to avert, ameliorate, or even reverse some of them. *Not to do this would be an act of gross negligence.*

However, after teaching about global problems for more than a decade, I have learned that students undergo considerable—sometimes even profound—psychic depression when forced to confront the magnitude of those problems. Breaking through their suppression and denial leads to new responsibilities for faculty. Among these are preparing students ahead of time about what they may feel; giving them lots of opportunities to talk with each other; finding ways to validate those of their fundamental values that remain appropriate; and offering them examples of places in the world where groups of people are finding ways to overcome economic, environmental, and political impasses. While we may not be able to meet their demands for ready-made "solutions" to everything, at least I think we need to offer them some visions on which to build their own answers when the time comes.

Finally, I believe we are responsible for teaching our students about the mechanisms of social change—about forms of political dialogue different from the sort they have seen and feel so disempowered by. My own belief is that the hope that any significant change can come from the top-down in our giant society is misplaced; I suspect that Clinton's administration will have little more success than the past one in really reversing fundamental trends. Sooner or later, we shall have to have quite a different political dialogue, one that looks to local communities for solutions to crises that a remote, overly bureaucratic centralized system is powerless to correct. We all agreed that it was over-centralization that brought down the Eastern European regimes; why do we expect *our* centralized government to succeed? In any case, sooner or later, *local, participatory* governance systems, based on grassroots dialogue and consensus building are going to be necessary—and skills in dialogue and collaborative problem-solving will be widely needed!

We must, however, balance our responsibilities to students to prepare them for the more distant future with their more immediate needs to survive in society in the near-term. Like earlier American immigrants, who had to learn to live, work, and think in two cultures—their old world one and the new American one—our students need to be given skills for living a bit longer in the old system, while being readied to move into, and help shape, the new one.

Our Duties to Each Other

In my experience, universities, supposedly "communities of scholars," are in fact associations of squabbling prima donnas—and team-taught courses require extraordinary skills of orchestration and mediation if they are to succeed. Given our universal experiences in the competitive boot-camp of graduate school, a competition that never ends within one's discipline even after tenure, it is no wonder that exposing our minds to the critical faculties of our colleagues is a totally unnerving experience. The double insecurities of our competitive upbringing and the explosion of so-called "knowledge" combine to put us on guard at all times. We are like feudal princelings, defending our tiny pieces of intellectual turf.

This problem is one that I am sure many of you here today have faced and that some, at least, have found ways of solving when teaching cross-disciplinary classes. It involves learning to feel sufficiently secure in one's own knowledge to open it up

to the scrutiny of another—and likewise to have respect for another's knowledge while still being able to ask questions about it. These are not dissimilar skills to those for social dialogue in general that we need to teach our students.

There is another area that requires mention and that is the need to recognize fully the contributions of those faculty (one hopes they will become increasingly numerous) who choose to be generalists rather than specialists. Indeed, we need to seek such persons out. Generalist thinking surely requires at least as much intellectual capability and is more and more needed.

Conclusion

As I draw to the end of this talk, I see I have not touched on any of the contemporary clichés of the ivory-tower: post-modernism. post-positivism, deconstructionism, and all those other -isms. Somehow in face of loss of ozone from the stratosphere, of massive starvation in Somalia, of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia—in face of these overwhelming realities, the academy's affected phrases describing its own internal intellectual squabbles seem effete. Although these "squabbles" may indeed bear ultimately on the state of the planet, their failure to consistently ground themselves in those realities gives them the aura of the scholastics' concerns with how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. History is sweeping past us in the universities: we are in grave danger of becoming "beside-the-point." It seems to me that you who are here today are indeed in the intellectual vanguard—concerned with pulling the centrifugally-flying disciplines back together, and in so doing, forcing them to correct their inner inconsistencies in practical and immediately applicable ways.

At the present moment, universities are being pulled in two directions. In Arendt's words, the "things that are no longer"—the outworn assumptions that gave us a future of expanding economies, of unbounded technological progress, of increasing centralization, of infinite knowledge, in short, the world promised by an optimistic logical positivism—these things that are no longer pushing the disciplines into ever more fragmentation, demanding ever higher technical skills of students, and shifting more and more of the dwindling resources available to us away from holistic philosophy, from wisdom, and from reflective dialogue, and into a frantic effort to keep the promise of the old logic alive for a little longer.

On the other hand, the "things that are not yet" are beginning to take shape through the fog and mist that still swirl about the future. We are caught at the moment, however, in trying to keep a foot in both the past and the future, a feat that becomes daily more difficult. As the demands from the past grow, the resources available for tackling the future are cut even further. We have indeed arrived at **the moment of truth**.

The immediate future of the universities depends, I believe, on the ways in which the public perceives the social value of universities. And here, of course, we must identify who comprises "the public" that is doing the perceiving. If the public is the sector that still strives to preserve "things that are no longer" and the universities are deemed to be failing in the training and research believed necessary, much support could well shift to corporate training centers, thus shrinking and (for a time at least) marginalizing universities. In the long run. this might not be a bad thing, and 1 suspect it may well happen regardless of whether we try to bridge to the future or put all our efforts into preserving the past. If we choose the **mould-to-fit** route, we may simply hasten the system's collapse without being able to escape the blame. If we try to urge thoughtful change through **critique/create**, we risk censure by the believers in "things that are no longer" and the withdrawal of public support.

Yet sooner or later, I am convinced, the decision-making "public" will perceive a need for **new modes of thinking**. It may happen only when chaos is already upon us—when the old patterns have broken down and left us all in a socio-cultural vacuum. We are witnessing a minor case of this in Eastern Europe and among the former Soviets at the moment. There was virtually *no* attempt to introduce a society-wide reformulation of underlying social assumptions. One day, there was the Communist Manifesto and the KGB. and the next these were gone, with mere "words" to take their place: "democracy" and "free markets." The thinking needed to redesign daily patterns of life never took place. An exactly similar state of affairs took place in post-colonial Africa, which today still walks with one foot in the past and another in the future. How shall we, in the rich North, face the even greater chaos looming before us? (We, after all, have much more to lose and much less social capital of the traditional, community sort to fall back on!)

If the American public—whoever *is* the decision-making public—does not perceive a need for new modes of thinking until we are in "deep, deep chaos" then universities may well become extinct. But if that change happens *before* the social collapse becomes too extensive, universities will likely flourish—*especially those that have laid the groundwork for social visioning and have developed teaching skills in the processes of social change—particularly the skills of participatory social dialogue that is necessary for reconstructing community*. If universities can today contribute to the creation of "things that are yet to be" such that the public is skilled in time to cope with the massive changes that are needed, then they could play a central role in staving off excessive chaos and—incidentally—ensure themselves a continuing life in the world of the future!

It is clear that the period ahead will involve massive dissonance—as we pass from "things that are no longer" to "things that are not yet." The role of the academy in that passage is critical. If we move too far ahead of the public we serve, we may suffer —perhaps not the shelling and the "disappearances" of all too many Latin American academies, unless of course the social collapse becomes violent, which is not improbable—but marginalization.

On the other hand, if we drag our feet, we may lose the very opportunity I believe we now have to catalyze the social change

that could bring our whole society through this uncertain period with the least possible pain. In other words, universities, if they keep their wits about them, really *can* "shape" world views, rather than merely following along as passive "servants" of wherever the *status quo* drifts. As I noted at the outset, it is far more difficult to deeply *change* a paradigm, a world view, than it is to merely adjust it. Do we wish merely to stay in the safe, shallow end of the pool labelled "critical thinking" or are we ready to plunge into the deep end?

As I have been trying to suggest, there is risk either way. If we fail to take up the challenge, it is likely that as the crises arrive —economic depression, environmental stresses, political disaffection at home and threats from abroad, social disintegration— and as society is forced to change, it will fall into anarchic chaos at least as threatening as that now facing the former Soviet states. There are some grassroots organizations who may offer a resource for restructuring local communities, but without the input that could be available were colleges and universities involved, I am skeptical that sufficient facilitation is possible.

So I urge all of you here, to return to your campuses and encourage your colleagues—*all of them*—in thinking through how they, both those "of the past" and those "of the future," can harmoniously work together to catalyze perhaps the most profound paradigm change in all human history. When the supply-side Chicago boys can dialogue with the humanistic economists, when the Machiavellians and Gandhians can talk and listen together, when the technological fixers make peace with the environmentalists on all our college campuses, we could indeed bring about the needed depth of change in our society as a whole, for *we* would have created a **working model** for the process that is needed on a society-wide scale! It is that kind of model that the new curriculum must reflect; not the confrontational MacNeil/Lehrer, value-neutral type of approach, but an impassioned dialogue, where "winning" is *not* **power-based**—who can generate the biggest number of followers—but **consensus-based**—what is the outcome that makes sense to *all*! The process by which this is achieved is quite different from the present modes of pedagogy, that critique only the superficial, and hence never get to the real underlying causes of our different viewpoints. But that new pedagogy is a whole other lecture. Perhaps tomorrow?

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