

The Gentle Revolution:

Crisis in the Universities

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Issues

There is no smoke without fire. In this section there are three contributions all of which are meant to show that there is indeed something wrong with the contemporary university, in particular with UCD, and that the student revolution is understandable.

The first contribution is by a husband and wife team: Bernard Jensen and Katherine O'Doherty. They try to show that the university fails very often to provide the situation it is meant to provide: the situation for the search after truth. It fails when it becomes the function of interests other than that of truth, the interest of economic concerns for instance. A symptom of the degeneration of the university is the present examination system which reduces the meaning of understanding to that of information.

Michael Chesnutt argues that one of the basic failures of the present university system is the failure to make matters of public interest facts of common knowledge. He says that in a system such as that in UCD information, which is the source of power, is too often the virtual prerogative of the administration. If the university is to become an academic community, he argues, which hires administrators, rather than an administrative system which hires academics, the information problem, and with it the problem of participation, must be solved.

Richard Walsh contributes the third article in this section. He gives an account of the demeaned position of most academic staff in UCD and describes it as one of a spalpeen, or hireling. He suggests that university democracy can only be achieved when the teacher is given the place which is his due. Student power is a far cry when the teacher hardly has his rights.

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The artist puts before him beauty of feature and form; the poet, beauty of mind; the preacher, the beauty of grace: then intellect too . . . has its beauty, and it has those who aim at it. To open the mind, to correct it, to refine it, to enable it to know, and to digest, master, rule, and use its knowledge, to give it power over its own faculties, application, flexibility, method, critical exactness, sagacity, resource, address, eloquent expression, is an object as intelligible . . . as the cultivation of virtue, while, at the same time, it is absolutely distinct from it [Newman, *The Idea of a University*].

The student movement at UCD has conformed to the normal pattern of student revolts in the 1960s in the sense that it has been a local and highly concrete problem which has triggered off the wave of student protest and radical activity. At Berkeley, the issue was the right of students to free speech and demonstration; in Copenhagen, it was the content and structure of university courses; in Berlin, it was the students' right to political involvement. In UCD attention has focused on the move to Belfield and the library issue. The particular issues which set things in motion do not necessarily appear to be of central significance when one tries to understand what in fact is going on and what is causing the widespread disturbance of 'normal' university life.

A number of issues seem to have been common to many student revolts. There is the very obvious one, the question of student power, i.e. the students' right to full participation in the decision making in universities. Closely related to the rapid growth in the political awareness of students is the debate between the students themselves about their political role and responsibility in society. Another question which is being raised again and again is the economic, social and political role of the university in present day society. But besides these questions there is a very fundamental

one, namely, 'What is the university?' Present day students are not willing to accept without question the university as they find it. They are pressing for the explicit formulation of the aims and ideals of a university education and the creation of structures which would make these ideals a reality.

Our aim in this short contribution is to inquire into the problem of what a university is or should be. We will focus attention on some aspects of the structure at UCD. If structures are to be evaluated this can only be done in relation to some ideal. For this reason we begin by formulating some ideals concerning the nature of a university. In doing so we hope to throw some light on the nature of the frustrations which have been expressed by the present generation of students.

Most people working in a university might agree that a university serves two main functions. The first of these is a research function, the second an educational function. It is only when one tries to work out in detail the specific meaning of the ideas 'research' and 'education' that major disagreement occurs. Later we will return to the question why such disagreement can occur. But first the attempt will be made to spell out in some detail what we mean by these ideas.

As an institution the university undertakes research. It is important to specify what the aim of this research is. To acquire more knowledge is normally the central goal of research. At the same time it is commonly agreed that research has achieved its goal only to the degree that it increases our grasp of true knowledge. Truth, therefore, is the object of research. Accordingly a university can be understood as an institution in search of truth.

Besides stating this it is necessary to further specify what would be the optimal conditions under which the search for truth can be achieved. To speak of the university as an institution in search of truth is to presuppose the freedom of that institution from economic or political pressures. The problem of attaining adequate finance, adequate physical environment and facilities is one which must be met. This much we take for granted. But these things alone do not constitute a university. Of equal importance to an institution in search of truth is the quality of the social relationships within that institution.

To search for truth, not as an individual, but as a member of an institution which defines its goal in these terms is to come into contact with other people in a special way. The pursuit of truth is an intellectual activity and to pursue the truth is to bring one's questions and one's intelligence into the open. It is to call in question the claims made by other men of intelligence. It is to intelligently grasp the limitations of one's own questions. It is to communicate with the minds of other men.

What appears to be of central significance therefore is an atmosphere where there is a maximum of mutual openness, where there can be a free flow of ideas, where individuals can without fear challenge each other's ideas, and offer their mutual criticisms. Such an atmosphere provides a context in which new ideas or scientific hypotheses can go through a process in which a communal attempt is made to decide on their validity and bearing. In short, one should not speak of a university merely as an institution in search of truth, but rather as a community in search of truth.

If this line of argument is correct, it has important implications for the quality of the education which a university offers its students. An educational institution cannot guarantee that students will arrive at truth but it should aid them in the appropriation of truth. It should foster in the minds of students a critical mentality. It should provide an intellectual training which enables the student to discern relevant from irrelevant data, adequate from inadequate evidence, probable from improbable interpretations, valid from invalid conclusions, partial from complete explanations. In other words, a university education should provide the student with a training in intellectual discipline.

A university education should develop in the student an awareness of the canons of critical method such that he or she can apply these canons to new fields of intellectual endeavour. Unless the student has learned to transpose techniques of inquiry and critical method from one text to another text, from one field of analysis to another, his imaginative capacities and creative talents cannot be channelled in the direction of fruitful work. Creativity and discipline, far from being incompatible, are jointly the preconditions for intellectual growth.

More importantly, such an intellectual training should aid the

student in gaining a mature perspective such that he comes to appreciate the partial knowledge he has obtained when he claims particular ideas to be true. Not only particular ideas, but each of the sciences understood as separate and particular fields of inquiry, constitute no more than partial explanations of reality.

To grow in a personal appropriation of truth is not only to develop a wider range of particular knowledge. It is to be able to locate one field of inquiry in relation to other fields. It is to be able to identify the boundary lines between what we know and what we do not know. In our view, catching on to the limitations of one's knowledge is a measure of one's intellectual maturity; it is also an essential component of human wisdom. For this reason the major goal of a university education can not be the achievement of expertise in any one field of human knowing, much less the achievement of a paper qualification to a career.

There are those who understand the nature of intellectual inquiry in a different way. We are conscious that in the last analysis any definition of the goal of a university education involves taking a philosophical stance concerning the nature of the human intellect. But disagreement may flow from another source. Apart from research and education, which we have described as the primary functions served by a university, it can not be denied that universities as we know them in the West serve many other functions.

A university provides skilled personnel demanded by expanding economies; it grades personal achievement in a way which governs access to key jobs in society. The economic function served by university education makes it a focus for community investment. Political planning and economic investment can not for long ignore the significance of the university and its role in society. Consequently, when university personnel are asked to specify what they mean by 'education' or 'research', it should not be surprising to discover that the multiple functions served by a university may be reflected in the answers.

Many might claim that the major goal of a university is to provide society with qualified technicians and to undertake research which will help the development of industrial enterprise. This may sound like an overstatement. Nevertheless, we are convinced that the multiple functions served by universities are not

altogether compatible. Moreover, so long as contradictions within a system remain implicit there is little hope of resolving them. If, for example, there is a tension between the academic and career interests of members of a university this tension is likely to be reflected at all levels of the structure of that university. Unless such tensions are made explicit the university fails in its own self-understanding.

If there is a point to the current debate in UCD, it is that all of us, students and staff, may explicate the sources of basic disagreement such that the university itself can grow in its own self-understanding. If there is neither coherence nor internal compatibility in the structures and ideals of UCD, let us through debate reach a correct understanding of the state of affairs. Then let us live with it, or attempt to change it, but let us not perpetuate a myth of harmony in the College.

Bearing in mind the ideals which we have mentioned, we will briefly examine one of the internal structures in the university. This structure, which has been violently criticised by many of the students, is the present system of examinations. We would argue that this is both understandable and justifiable. It is understandable because for many students examinations are the first preoccupation, and it is justifiable because the present structure seems to reinforce a clear exam-orientation in university life. We will consider the examination system, as it appears to operate in our University, from three points of view: as a measure of student achievement, in relation to the teaching situation, and in relation to the wider society.

At present, the examination-system demands that students write answers to several questions within a short period of time. For example, a student taking a general BA degree may be required to select four questions from a possible twenty-four and to formulate answers within a time span of three hours. The time pressure excludes the possibility that the student may critically reflect and carefully work out an answer. In a certain sense the student has to know 'the answer' before the examination starts.

This structure demands of the student either that he risk anticipating fairly accurately the questions which are likely to appear on his examination-paper, or that he spread his revision and prepara-

tion work thinly but evenly over a wide range of material. Either way, the prerequisite for 'success' in this system is that the student attend almost all the lectures and seminars relevant to his particular subjects.

The student, in fact, is not only required to attend lectures but to give attention to the wide and disparate range of lecture content together with related reading. In this situation, unless the criteria of examination success are made explicit, there is a danger that the examination system may be understood by the student to be a measure of memory and of the ability to reproduce ideas accurately. The actual criteria on the basis of which the student's achievement is judged at present are unknown. It is understandable therefore that some students today are protesting against a system which is seen to demand an accumulation of a maximum amount of factual knowledge and information, and which militates against a critical appreciation of any subject in depth.

Because of the close relationship which operates between the content of lectures and the content of examination papers, the teaching staff may exercise a high degree of control over both attendance at and attention to lecture content. This system is one which allows a deterioration of lecture content without redress on the part of the students; it is one which allows the possibility that lines of communication will be established in one direction only—from staff to students. This account does not constitute an indictment of the standard of teaching at UCD. It is a description of the way in which the system can function.

The seminar system of teaching has been designed to create a higher degree of interaction between students and staff. In this structure lines of communication in both directions between staff and students may be established. But here again the examination-structure may function in a way which allows the deterioration of discussion and exchange of ideas. Students may, because of their understanding of the system, bring pressure to bear on teaching staff only to discuss topics which are highly relevant to possible examination content.

The fact that many students interpret the system as one in which memory work and the capacity to reproduce ideas are the most important qualities may be seen in the number of students who

anxiously try to note down every word that is said during lectures and seminars. This means that the attention of the student is not predominantly geared towards understanding a particular problem and thereby developing intellectually, but rather to the work of a stenographer.

Finally, the importance of the examination system may be viewed in the light of the student's choice of a career which itself is dependent on examination success. If it is true that university life in UCD is examination-oriented, then it is also true that university life is career-oriented. When the student is career-oriented, this means that his goals are outside the university and consequently the university is for him only a place of transition. Precisely because the goals are located outside and not inside the university itself, the career-oriented student demands of the teaching he receives that it shall be geared towards utility. To such students, only topics which have an obvious utilitarian function are acceptable and of interest. Maintaining and developing an institution in which the ideal of truth has top priority is difficult, if not impossible, when such a pattern becomes established. This pattern in university life is one of the most important issues in the student revolution.

It is often claimed that the present student revolt is predominantly negative in character. By this is meant that students only have criticism to offer and that they have not had the capacity to formulate realistic alternatives to the present structures. We anticipate that the same line of argument may be used against this contribution. Still, we do not accept this line of thinking. We would argue that at present we are only just entering into the phase of criticism, i.e. a period of time when attempts are made to identify what in the present structure is unacceptable and to understand fairly precisely why it is unacceptable. Such a period must necessarily precede any serious attempts to formulate new alternatives. The vitality of any alternatives will again depend on the depth and perspective of the present debate.

What is urgently needed at present is that as many as possible start asking questions about UCD. It is of vital importance that all members of the University bring their intelligence into the open and exercise their creative talents so that many new ideas will emerge. Only then can one hope that out of the present debate new and

fruitful structures will be formulated which will insure that the university may be a breeding ground of critical thinking, a centre of intellectual development, a reproductive organ of human wisdom, in short, a community in continuous search for truth.