

Democracy 1:2 (April 1981)

Higher Education and the Politics of Knowledge

SHELDON S. WOLIN

Education and democracy seem to complement each other so naturally that their union appears predestined. No elaborate theoretical argument is required to show that a system that rests upon equal political rights and the consent and participation of the governed needs an educated citizenry. The common sense of it was expressed by Washington in his Farewell Address: "In proportion as the structure of a government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened."¹

If democratic theory looks toward education as its natural ally, American history suggests that education has not regarded democracy as kindly; or more precisely, that the social groups and classes that have dominated American society and exercised a preponderant political influence throughout American history have taken a more calculating and complicated view of both democracy and education. Historically, both democracy and education have been co-opted by antidemocratic regimes and used for purposes that contradict the principles of both. Totalitarian regimes, with their plebiscitary appeals to "the masses" and their universal systems of free education, are obvious examples, but the strategy of including an element of democracy in an otherwise undemocratic system is as old as Aristotle's prescription for various mixed constitutions. Even co-opted, however, democracy and education pose a potential threat. They contain a universalizing thrust, a restlessness with incomplete fulfillment. There is always the possibility that they will recoil, turn against a system that seeks to exploit the formal value of democracy and education while suppressing their universal implications.

Throughout its history America has negotiated the difficulties of trying to acknowledge the democratic principle in politics and education without accepting it. Those who have ruled America have shaped a political system so that

¹ James D. Richardson, ed., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789-1902*, 11 vols. (New York: Bureau of National Literature and Art, 1908), vol. 1, p. 220.

while it has incorporated certain formal elements of democracy and fostered the growth of public education, it has prevented both the democratization of education and the education of democracy from being realized.

In pursuing this course America's ruling groups and classes have never faltered in their conception of education as political. Indeed, the only important group that has insisted on the nonpolitical, even antipolitical, nature of education has been the faculties of colleges and universities. This is remarkable, considering that the fundamental political nature of education has been recognized since antiquity. The ancient Greeks were the first to remark upon the connection between types of political constitutions and types of human character, and to argue that if a particular regime, such as an aristocracy or a democracy, were to be perpetuated, positive steps had to be taken to educate its future citizens according to the distinctive ideals and needs of that regime. This political conception of education had serious implications to the Greeks, who considered the different types of political constitutions as embodying rule by different social classes. Aristotle had put it bluntly: democracy is "a constitution in which the free-born and poor control the government—being at the same time the majority; 'oligarchy' is a constitution in which the rich and better-born control the government—being at the same time a minority."²

Perhaps no group in American history has had a livelier appreciation of the political stakes in education than the Puritans. Having first "settled the Civill Government, one of the next things we longed for, and looked after was to advance Learning and perpetuate it to Posterity."³ The Puritans strongly favored free common- and grammar-school instruction, but their educational ideas, like their political ideas, provided only a restricted place for the populace. While acknowledging that freemen should choose their governors, the Puritans denounced the idea of a democracy as a violation of the principle of superiority. "If the people be governors," one famous Puritan divine asked, "who shall be governed? . . . None are to be trusted with public permanent authority but godly men."⁴ The Puritan preference for rule by the saintly few, who would be living exemplars of the religious and political ideals of a holy community, virtually dictated a crucial role for higher education. The importance of education was also assured by another consideration: the scarcity of power in that socially barren land.

² *Politics*, IV. iv 1290. 16-20.

³ "New England's First Fruits" (1643), in Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson, eds., *The Puritans*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), vol. 2, p. 701.

⁴ John Cotton, "Letter to Lord Say and Seale," in *The Development of American Political Thought*, ed. J. Mark Jacobson (New York: Century, 1932), pp. 33, 38.

In the new world of America, where sharp class distinctions, aristocratic privileges, and inherited wealth had mostly been left behind, education, especially higher education, was potentially a powerful engine, second only to economic activity, for introducing new forms of inequality. For when all are roughly equal, any sure means of setting a permanent difference between human beings becomes an important form of social power. No group knew this better than the leaders of early Massachusetts, who were almost as ready to cite Bacon's maxim equating knowledge with power as they were to quote scripture. As good Calvinists, they were prepared to open the new gates of Harvard College to lads of many descriptions, including "Indian youth," so that they might acquire "knowledge and godliness," but without a suggestion that education, any more than salvation, was a democratic right open to all. During the 1670s a Harvard commencement speaker warned that "if these our fathers had not founded the University . . . the ruling class would have been subjected to mechanics, cobblers, and tailors." Instead of "rights, honors, [and] magisterial ordinances," he concluded, there would have been a democratic politics of "plebiscites, appeals to base passions, and revolutionary rumblings."⁵

If knowledge was power, systematic instruction of the young was political and social power of the first magnitude. Its purpose was to train a ruling elite of "worthy persons," as the Yale charter put it, "for the service of God in the state as well as in church."⁶ By education, society would reproduce itself according to an image of virtue and knowledge held by its leaders. Early higher education was not conceived as a vehicle by which individuals realized their potentialities, but as the opportunity for society to inscribe its conception of useful knowledge, virtues, morals, manners, and skills upon virginal minds so that eventually there would be yielded citizens who would maintain and promote the values and arrangements of the existing social order. While students would be busily scribbling their sums and letters upon clean slates, society would be inscribing itself upon the *tabulae rasae* of the students themselves.

The idiom of power was particularly evident in the anxious discussions about education that followed the American Revolution. Revolutionary pamphlets and newspapers had popularized a number of democratic principles and the successful struggle against Great Britain had given these principles a certain legitimacy for the first time. The movement toward democracy forced the dominant groups to search for the means of stabilizing the society and halting its democratic drift without alienating popular support. A consensus was reached at the Constitutional Convention at Philadelphia that served to unite the political

⁵ Samuel E. Morison, *The Founding of Harvard College* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935), p. 250.

⁶ Richard Hofstadter and Wilson Smith, eds., *American Higher Education: A Documentary History*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), vol. 1, p. 49.

leadership of the revolutionary and constitution-making period. Despite important ideological differences and varying degrees of enthusiasm, Jefferson, John Adams, Madison, and Hamilton all understood, first, that there had to be acceptance of the democratic principle that government should be based upon the continuing consent of the people: no other source of legitimacy was possible in the aftermath of a revolution fought in the name of that principle; and, second, that free government had to be designed to allow a public-spirited elite to occupy its most important offices: instead of John Cotton's "godly men" there would be Jefferson's *aristoi*, Hamilton's men of "strong minds" and "merit," and Adams's "natural aristocracy" of "talents."

The principles, which were written into the Constitution, had their parallels in the educational schemes of the time and most strikingly in the reforms advocated by men who were considered most sympathetic to the cause of democracy. Jefferson is the most famous case in point. While ready to defend "the people" against their detractors, he also believed that the people occupied a fixed status; that both their social and political responsibilities required only a limited education; and that the limited nature of these responsibilities and of the education to be given corresponded to the limited potentialities of most people. "The people," Jefferson wrote, are the "only safe depositories" of their liberties. "And to render even them safe their minds must be improved to a *certain degree*." Jefferson described education as "the most certain and the most legitimate engine of government Educate and inform the whole mass of the people, enable them to see that it is their interest to preserve peace and order, and they will preserve it, and it requires no very high degree of education" ⁷ Benjamin Rush, one of the great social reformers of the era, projected a scheme of education that promised to make "republican machines" out of the pupils and so correct the tendencies toward what he perceived as excessive liberty. Knowledge should be disseminated throughout the land, he urged, "to conform the principles, morals and manners of our citizens to our republican form of government" ⁸

The political vision embodied in Jefferson's conception of education is particularly revealing for its incorporation of the eighteenth-century liberal preference for representative rather than democratic politics and for its anticipation of the meritocratic principle of reserving higher education for an elite that would serve as leaders and representatives while providing ordinary citizens with sufficient rudimentary knowledge to discharge the corresponding duties of the repre-

⁷ William Peden, ed., *Notes on the State of Virginia* (New York: Norton, 1972), p. 148; emphasis added.

⁸ Cited in Rush Welter, *Popular Education and Democratic Thought in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), p. 28.

⁹ Henry May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976) p. 210; Welter, *Popular Education*, p. 27.

sented. He called for free public education for all white males and a curriculum designed to enable the individual to handle everyday transactions, to perform his social and moral duties, and to exercise his rights, including the right to choose "delegates." Sharply distinguished in objectives and curriculum was the university education designed "to form the statesmen, legislators, and judges on whom public prosperity and individual happiness" depended. Those destined for leadership were to receive instruction in political theory, political economy, moral philosophy, mathematics, and the physical sciences.¹⁰

This two-tiered system of education was perpetuated in various distinctions introduced over the next century and a half: between those who "went to college" and those who did not; between "vocational" education and "liberal" education; between state universities and prestigious private universities; between community colleges and four-year institutions; between "open enrollment" universities and universities with "standards."

It was relatively easy for higher education to become an agency for preserving class distinctions and restricting access to political life and its traditions (except as grammar and high school "citizenship courses") to a comparatively small part of the population. Workers and small farmers, who had formed the nucleus of a democratic force during the last decades of the eighteenth century, were indifferent or hostile to college education and remained so, except for interludes like the Jacksonian era, throughout the nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth. Although some social reformers tried to persuade them of the value of higher education, the fact remains that these classes accepted the educational ideology of a business civilization that unless education was "practical," it was useless. Along with the ideology, workers and farmers accepted its underlying assumption: that their own political life was destined to be a modest one and hence needing only a modest education. But as Jefferson and many others had already signaled, the production of governing elites would create a closed and self-renewing circle. The new elites would come to define the political culture of ruling and by that process college or university education would be established as a prerequisite to a political career and as the mode of discourse appropriate to it. University culture would become the basis of a higher political culture without that development appearing as premeditated. As a political institution, education became both inclusive and exclusive, a qualification on democratic access to power as well as the agent of meritocratic rather than democratic political culture, as recent controversies over affirmative action and reverse discrimination have reminded us.

¹⁰ "Report of the Rockfish Gap Commission," in Hofstadter and Smith, *American Higher Education*, vol. 1, pp. 194-95.

The distinction between republican education for the few and rudimentary education for the many was not, it should be noted, a distinction between "private" and "public" institutions of education. The author of a standard history of higher education has commented that "the confusion" created by "such terms as 'public' and 'private'" enabled "the myth of the privately endowed independent college" to obscure the fact that private colleges have survived only because they were fed liberally "at the public trough."¹¹

Public subsidies of private power—or the "socialization of costs," in the euphemistic language of economists—is a familiar American shell game and higher education is one of its oldest beneficiaries. The funding fathers of Harvard were, in this matter of public financing of private enterprise, archetypal. According to a contemporary account of Harvard's beginnings, "it pleased God to stir up the heart of a Mr. Harvard, a godly Gentleman and a lover of learning . . . to give one half of his Estate . . . and all his Library." Immediately following Mr. Harvard's inspired act, several other donors also promised sums of money, and, the report noted laconically, "the publique hand of the State added the rest. . . ."¹² Since then, the public hand has never stopped adding to the revenues of private colleges and universities. "On over one hundred occasions before 1789," Rudolph has written, the Massachusetts legislature had to appropriate funds because Harvard "clearly was not capable of taking care of itself." A similar pattern of public subsidies occurred at Yale, Columbia, Williams, and other famous Eastern institutions long associated with the education of the rich and well born.¹³

Perhaps the most instructive lesson in public finance and the politics of education is in the early history of state universities. One might have imagined that state universities had been established for educating those mechanics and cobblers feared by Harvard and preparing them for a democratic version of "civil and public life."

The first state universities were established in the South in the eighteenth century. Their purpose was not, however, to make education available to the common people, but to establish a regional version of the Harvard idea. There was scarcely any effort made to conceal the fact that the social costs of educating the aristocracy would be borne by all taxpayers.¹⁴ Although state universities became more accessible to the general population during the nineteenth century, especially in the middle West, many of them remained dominantly middle- and upper-middle-class institutions until well into this century.

¹¹ Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 185.

¹² Miller and Johnson, *Puritans*, p. 701.

¹³ Rudolph, *American College*, p. 185.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

Even today there are traces of the inverted world where public education is viewed as if it were a private institution, while private institutions preserve their exclusivity and produce future elites at taxpayer expense. "We are by our very nature," explained an eminent philosopher-administrator at a public university, "elitist." He went on to express relief that the pendulum had begun to swing from an "emphasis on egalitarianism" (i.e., affirmative-action programs) to "emphasis on achievement."¹⁵ Meanwhile private institutions continue to rely heavily on public funds. In 1978 public four-year universities and colleges received 33 percent of their revenues from the federal government while private colleges and universities received 40.6 percent from the same source.¹⁶

In retrospect, the indifference, even resentment, toward higher education on the part of the lower classes seems obtuse and incomprehensible—but only if the knowledge and culture of universities are viewed naively as objectively valuable and extrapolitical, instead of as means of shaping human beings according to a preferred image of power. The stubbornness of the lower classes may, however, deserve a less Snopesian, more political interpretation. It may have signified political resistance, a refusal to accept the terms of power and the political uses of their bodies and minds implied in those terms. Nonetheless, the negativism toward education meant that there were no democratic pressures from below to shape education to the needs of political democracy during the nineteenth century, before political centralization and corporate concentration of economic power had hardened into their present forms. The opportunity was lost for educating democracy in a favorable environment of small towns, family farms, local business, a struggling but unbureaucratized trade-union movement, and provincial politics. That missed opportunity would also contribute to the decline of liberal and humanistic culture. In being confined to colleges and universities from which the mass of the population was excluded, that culture was divorced from the "low" culture of immigrants, workers, and farmers. This would have grave implications when higher education began to be transformed in the second half of the twentieth century. Higher education would become accessible to the general population at the historical moment when humanistic culture was ceasing to be the major force in the definition of education.

15 John Searle, "A More Balanced View," in *The University and the State: What Role for Government in Higher Education?*, ed. Sidney Hook, Paul Kurtz, and Miro Todorovich (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1978), p. 208.

16 Nancy B. Dearman and Valena W. Plisko, *The Condition of Education: Statistical Report*. National Center for Education Statistics (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979), p. 128.

The expansion of the American economy following the end of World War II and the determined bid of the United States for world political supremacy produced the first substantial democratization of higher education. Beginning with the GI Bill of 1944, a vast system of federal financial aid was created that completely altered the face of higher education. Over the next three decades the campuses were gradually opened to the mass of the population, and especially to racial and ethnic minorities. Imperial expansion, not democratic reform movements, brought higher education within the reach of the citizenry. Education was conferred on democracy because of the needs of a rapidly changing economy. This was made plain in the report of a presidential commission of 1947:

It is a commonplace of the democratic faith that education is indispensable. . . . We shall aim at making higher education equally available to all young people. . . [as] their capacity warrants. . . .

Because of advancing technology, the occupational center of our economic system is shifting away from the major producing industries. . . . [There is] a new and rapidly growing need for trained semi-professional workers in distributive and service occupations. To meet the needs of the economy our schools must train. . . medical secretaries, recreational leaders, hotel and restaurant managers, aviators, salesmen. . . automotive and electrical technicians. . . .¹⁷

The huge needs of an advanced, technically oriented society led to a vast expansion of professional and preprofessional education and, along with the trends toward the natural sciences, mathematics, economics, and the behavioral sciences, to the dissolution of the traditional liberal arts-humanities cast to many institutions. This effect was not always apparent during the 1950s and '60s because the funds and resources lavished upon higher education, including extensive support from private corporations, were so large that even the most esoteric branches of learning were rewarded with money. Since the humanities and the arts were able to share in the general prosperity, the illusion was created that public authorities and private benefactors had resolved to nourish those academic subjects that traditionally had defined the broad political and social purposes of higher education and that, therefore, the moral and political foundations of education remained intact.

During the three preceding centuries colleges and universities had had the task of preserving, replenishing, and transmitting the religious, moral, and civic traditions of American society. Although the importance of science, mathematics, and modern languages had long been given curricular recognition, what-

¹⁷ *A Report of the President's Commission on Higher Education*, 6 vols. (Washington, 1947), vol. 1, pp. 5, 36, 68-69.

ever coherence there was to higher education had come primarily from a core of Christian and classical teachings. This was not surprising given the strong emphasis that was placed on "virtue" and "character" as educational ideals fully equal in importance to knowledge itself. Even after religion had been gradually eliminated as the defining element in many colleges and most universities, the "humanities," abetted by moral and political philosophy, provided a coherent set of constitutive principles that undergirded and informed the more specialized skills that were already a feature of the industrial society that emerged after the Civil War. This prescientific university and college culture persisted until World War II.

After World War II, the growth of the nation's economic and political power, and the determination of its ruling groups to compete for global supremacy, were reflected back upon the universities—in the form of pressures and incentives to concentrate upon developing scientific research, technical skills and methods, and the forms of professional knowledge that aid in social control (law, medicine, public health, social welfare, and the management sciences). The result was the radical alteration of the purpose of the university and college, from education to the pursuit and imparting of knowledge. It was at this point, when humanistic education was being replaced by technical knowledge, that the masses went to classes.

This shift had been partly grasped by most observers who frequently remarked on the emergence of scientific and technical subjects to a position where they and their spokesmen were now the defining force in higher education. The consequences of this shift were cushioned by the growth and affluence of the 1960s and early 1970s. Its full force is now being registered. Higher education is undergoing a profound political crisis that is masked because its condition is officially presented as though education were one of several economic sectors suffering from the effects of recession and hence to be understood in terms of economic analysis and remedies. The political nature of the crisis has also been ignored because, by purely quantitative measures, education displays many of the outward signs of prosperity. According to rough estimates, by the fall of 1981 there should be 11.7 million enrolled students, the highest number in American history. Total revenues are currently about \$45 billion, about two-thirds of which comes from public sources. The so-called prestige schools report consistently large numbers of applications; junior colleges are crowded beyond capacity; and law, business, and engineering schools are enjoying a brisk trade. Total expenditures for higher education more than doubled during the years 1976–1977 (\$41 billion) over what they had been for 1967–1968 (\$17.2 billion).

As the Sloan Commission recently observed, "Higher education is now a big business."¹⁸

The evidence of the political nature of the crisis is not to be sought in enrollments or budgets but in the transformation of the faculty. The identity of the faculty is being altered, its corporate nature destroyed, and its former role as the main source of institutional definition usurped. Administration is now the primary power on most campuses, while the faculty—more precisely, the nonscience faculties—is being parceled into two elements, a senior or tenured faculty that forms a subsection of the administration (faculty bureaucrats, in effect) and the remaining part that constitutes an academic work force. This second group, which is mainly composed of young and nontenured scholars in the humanities and social sciences, most sharply mirrors the fate of the faculty as a corporate body. Today if a new Ph.D. is fortunate enough to secure employment, he or she will have virtually no prospect of tenure, but will live a gypsy existence, moving from one short-term job to another, probably teaching a different set of courses each semester, and completely outside the system of sabbatical leaves and retirement schemes. The dependence inherent in this condition will, in the long run, make for less critical, venturesome thinkers, a species that has already become endangered by the excessive professionalism that permeates all scholarly fields.

A further threat to independent thinking is the growing attacks being mounted by administrators and boards of trustees against the principle of tenure. That principle, it is alleged, leads to an inflexible system because, first, it places an automatic barrier to administrative attempts to slash costs by firing expensive senior professors, and second, it prevents the rejuvenation of a senescent faculty. Although it seems unlikely that tenure will be abolished in the immediate future, all institutions seem determined to reduce drastically the percentage of tenured faculty on their staffs. When this possibility is combined with the growing trend toward increasing the number of pickup teachers, contracted to teach a specific set of courses but excluded from active involvement in the affairs either of a department or the university, it suggests that the university of the future will be essentially an administrative unit rather than a collegial body. Departments will be run by a senior cadre of carefully selected tenured professors who will be indistinguishable, as so many are now, from other administrators. Higher education will then be a rationalized system.

As though sensing their vulnerability, some faculties, in (unconscious) emulation of the workers in declining industrial sectors, have attempted to organize trade unions. These efforts are less significant than the response that they

¹⁸ Sloan Commission on Government and Higher Education, *A Program for Renewed Partnership* (Boston: Ballinger, 1980), p. 3.

have provoked. Consulting their own role models, campus administrators have taken to union-busting and recently have won an important ruling from the Supreme Court. In the case of *National Labor Relations Board v. Yeshiva University* (1980), a university refused to bargain with the representative of a union elected by the faculty and certified by the NLRB. The court upheld the university by reasoning that faculty members did not qualify as workers and hence could not avail themselves of the procedures and protections of the NLRB. The law, according to Justice Powell, was intended to cover management-employee relations "that prevail in the pyramidal hierarchies of private industry." In "mature" private universities, he continued, the faculty forms part of management, participating in many decisions, helping to form policies, and recommending appointments and promotions. "[The] faculty determines. . . the product to be produced, the terms upon which it will be offered, and the customers who will be served." One of the main considerations that led the court to classify faculty as managers was the danger of "divided loyalty": a unionized faculty could not be trusted to "implement" university policies.¹⁹

The incorporation of the faculty into the administration has happened so quickly that many faculty have long forgotten the historical animosity toward "the administration" that was a fixed datum of faculty life until recently. Once upon a time it was assumed that a natural conflict of interests separated faculty from administration. Before World War II, most academic institutions were run by the faculty. The faculty determined curriculum, looked after the welfare of students, controlled appointments and promotions, and set the tone of the institution. There was frequent conflict between faculty and presidents, as well as between faculty and trustees, but there was little doubt that the activity of the faculty defined the identity of the institution. After World War II the *administration* of colleges and universities began in earnest. The emergence of the "professional" administrator signified a new and powerful element, one wholly under the control of trustees and completely independent of the faculty. The administrators stood for an entirely different understanding of institutions, for, by definition, they were divorced from, and mostly ignorant of, the activity of education or of inquiry. Their skills came from the marketplace: they brought leadership, fund-raising abilities, public relations, employment networks for graduates, and contact with foundations, corporations, and governments.

Virtually all universities and many colleges are now run by administrators who look to business management as the model for university governance. Practically all aspects of a modern university are under the control of management: admissions, student activities, athletics, budgets, enrollments, size of faculties, and teaching loads. Although faculties may still retain considerable voice in cur-

¹⁹ *United States Supreme Court Reports*, 63 Lawyers Edition, no. 1, March 27, 1980, pp. 124, 128.

riculum, hiring, promotion, and setting criteria to judge research and publication, administrators often have the last word and always are able to exert some influence in every area.

The rise of the manager symbolizes the politicization of the university from a direction never anticipated during the mid-1960s when conservative academics, alarmed at student protests and faculty sympathizers, warned against the university's "Latin Americanization." But just as the successful politicizers of Latin American universities have been the defenders of property and martial order, so their North American counterparts have not been hippies, militant blacks, or academic rebels but the representative of the corporate and bureaucratic world. The manager is political man in the age of public-oriented corporations and private-oriented government, equally at home in the boardroom of Bechtel, the corridors of the Pentagon, and the ivied administration buildings. Management is governance when state and society, the public and the private, are being integrated into a political economy.

The impetus toward integrating higher education into the political economy has produced a curious inversion. During the 1960s, when students and faculty of the left protested the connections between university professors and researchers on the one hand, and business corporations and government agencies on the other, they were accused by administrators and conservative faculty of adopting an "adversary mentality." The same words are used today—"the prevailing adversarial mood is dangerous," in the words of the Sloan report—but their meaning has been inverted. The dangerous campus adversaries of university administrators are from the faculty right who are outraged by the assault on "excellence" and the invasion of academic prerogatives that they perceive in the attempts of government agencies to force an end to discriminatory practices based on race, ethnicity, and sex. The government, according to the Sloan report, is "more and more . . . raising questions about faculty appointments and promotions," attacking student admission policies, "expressing views on curriculum," and causing scholars and scientists "working with federal grants [to] feel . . . like suppliers of office equipment or builders of dams." The problem is, as the Sloan Commission recognized, a delicate one because "in the coming period" of scarce resources "dependence on the government as a patron will be so great."²⁰

In the end the Sloan report sided more with the federal government and university administrators in favor of enforcing affirmative action, even to the extent of proposing a new federal agency to insure compliance. The recommendation casts a sidelight on the mentality of the twentieth-century manager,

²⁰ Sloan Commission, *Program for Renewed Partnership*, pp. 4-6.

whether he is in the "private" or the "public sector." The rationalizing mentality of corporate capitalism and public bureaucracy is essentially indifferent to race or sex distinctions, for they simply do not enter into the efficiency calculus of the one or the quest for uniform rules by the other. For this reason they can serve as agents of a bastard democratization—as they did consistently from the GI Bill to recent financial aid legislation. The effect is not only to legitimate the political economy—as occurred also in the social legislation that now constitutes the welfare state—but also to create a special form of democratic dependence. Democracy seems to be a right, conferred by capitalism and bureaucracy.

Perhaps no single factor has done more to conceal the political nature of the current developments in higher education than the reluctance of academics to admit that there are political stakes and determinants in matters of knowledge. At a time when colleges and universities are desperately seeking to make themselves attractive to government, corporations, and "consumers," and to find ways of patenting research in genetic engineering, of developing real estate, and of diversifying stock portfolios, the academic clings to the rhetoric that portrays the academy as a "community of scholars" devoted to "disinterested truth." Certainly those who represent the great corporations are clear about the political implications of scholarly activity: "Is it important to keep our great research universities, both public and private, strong? Yes, because they make our world leadership in science and technology possible by maintaining and enlarging our knowledge through scholarship, research, and teaching."²¹

The academic illusion is not that truth is a vain project, but that truth and the political are mutually exclusive. In reality there are political commitments and directions inherent in the choices that shape the curriculum and ethos of a campus; in the image of the ideal student embodied in scientific and technical programs; and in the fact that when education shifts from a liberal-humanist foundation, which had incorporated elements from the earlier religious foundation, to a scientific and technical one, crucial questions are posed concerning the future source of civic values. There are profound political implications to the fact that the humanities are gradually being transformed in ways that make them more congenial to a technocratic than to a political culture. Historians have increasingly adopted the methods and outlook of the social sciences; scholars of literature are now second to none in the enthusiasm for "technique" and for modes of textual analysis that restrict understanding and conversation to a progressively smaller circle of adepts. There is, if one can take seriously the language of a recent report, even a new species of humanist, "the professional humanist," called into being by the desperate straits to which the humanities are

²¹ Ibid., pp. 6-7.

being reduced.²² Perhaps the most significant development has occurred in philosophy, which was once thought to be the center of the humanities. Philosophers are now the supreme proponents of the primary value of techniques. So confident are most philosophers in the analytic methods developed in this century that they believe there is virtually no area of serious knowledge that they cannot clarify. Accordingly there are now "philosophers of public policy" and "ethicists" who are ready to argue the implications of genetic research, abortion, and pollution, but none who seem to know where philosophy ends and the rationalization of bureaucratic morality begins.

There is, in this age of an emerging scientific culture, one common feature to the new ethos of the academy: the dominant fields of knowledge are basically antihistorical, largely unconcerned with their own history as disciplines, and committed to the claim that the present state of knowledge supersedes past formulations. At the other end, the jeopardized fields—history, literature, languages, etc.—still represent the conviction that historical knowledge is the fundamental mode for understanding in depth the nature of human beings and human experience; or, stated differently, that abstract knowledge, which treats knowledge independently of the historical location of the knower (the subject of knowledge) and the known (the object of knowledge), misrepresents the latter and misleads the former into confusing his models with reality.

The academic controversy over the rival merits of historical understanding as against scientific methods is of long standing and can be argued endlessly. At a political level, however, the matter has already been decided. The declining importance of historical subjects in the definition of the culture of the university and college is not simply a negative way of describing the dominance of science. Rather, it indicates that historical modes of thought, and the reflective turn of mind that they encourage, appear as marginal in content and as out of keeping with the rhythms of science, with its quick tempos of research, discovery, the rapid obsolescence of truth, and the quest for power, first theoretical, then applied.

*of
Rorty*
The pace of these developments has been such that liberal and humane learning has ceased to make sense to those who are outside it because the terms of understanding have eroded. Already the language of an incipient scientific culture is at odds with historical culture: the one is formulaic and propositional; the latter, trapped by its historical accumulations, cannot present what it knows in formulae or propositions. Contrary to the conventional wisdom of many social scientists, the trouble with the historical understanding is not that it has proven too little, but that it knows too much.

²² Commission on the Humanities, *The Humanities in American Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1980), p. 5.

The problem is that by its own self-understanding science is inherently incapable of serving society as other great political and religious world views have in the past. Science is a source neither of moral renewal nor of political vision; it has no principle that requires solicitude for traditions or historical identities that, until recently, were the basis for most political thinking and action. There is still time to deal with this problem before the memory of democracy and education is obliterated, but it requires a clearer picture of the stakes and their form.

Democracy is being incorporated into higher education at a time when education itself is becoming more completely integrated into the needs of a political and economic system that is struggling to compete in the changing international political economy. Given the strategic importance of scientific and technical training in this setting, the consequences for the future of democracy are profoundly disturbing. Education for a scientific society will reproduce yet again the two-tiered system that has characterized the history of American education, only this time it will take the form of advanced scientific education for the few and a technical education for the many. The specific nature of a technical education is that it is what it claims to be, immediately useful. The technician, in other words, is a unit of potential power, ready to be fitted into the predesigned slot for which his or her education has been a preparation. It is at this point that the demise of liberal and humanistic education becomes crucial. As more and more educational time is taken up with technical subjects to the exclusion of humanistic ones, the individual becomes a more "perfect" unit of power, unalloyed by useless, reflective, critical notions of the kind deposited by the humanities, and hence easily integrated into the system as a whole person, that is, a person who is only the sum of his/her technical parts.

In retrospect, one can see that the value of humanistic education was surplus value: it could not be translated directly into usable power—which meant that, from the point of view of a system based on technical functions, humanistic learning was useless. But from the point of view both of the individual and of what we might call democratic humanism, that learning was neither useless nor powerless. It did not make sense in an input-output model of a knowledge-power relationship; but it spoke instead to how a person should live by himself and with others. And because it spoke to persons rather than things, it formed a critical presence of unincorporable power in a world where, increasingly, the line between treating persons and handling things was becoming obliterated. The problem does not require a simple restoration of a humanities curriculum, but a facing up to the fact that if current tendencies in higher education go unchallenged, then higher education will continue to be an essential cornerstone of the antidemocratic structure of our society.