

## Ever Changing America: The Universities

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Every spring at colleges and universities in the USA students organized protests against some policy of the government, and frequently the dissent continued as in the case of the Vietnam war. If there was no specific action or project to which students could direct their ire, an international organization, such as the World Bank, could receive the complaints of demonstrators. The lack of specific targets, however, might lead to an attack on general conditions in the world, such as capitalism or globalization. Much debate has been devoted to the latter on university campuses in recent years, and the malaise in regard to globalization has spread beyond students, especially to ethnic groups in the USA, who see a threat to the preservation of their identities.

Since the USA is the most diverse of lands, with inhabitants from all over the globe, the problems of preservation of ethnic identity are especially acute among Americans. The old concept of America as a melting-pot of peoples is long gone, and instead the need to find solutions to problems of the place and role of different peoples, religions and cultures in the USA, as well as in the world, is now important in teaching and research in institutions of higher learning. It was not always so. Pre-World War Two memories of life in a small midwestern town astonish me at the amount and speed of change in all realms, economic, cultural and social, compared to the present time. Much has been written about transformation of the economy but less about other subjects, including ethnicity.

One hundred years ago, when my father Nels Freij emigrated from Sweden to the United States, immigration authorities told him he would be ridiculed if he retained his surname, and obliged him to change it. He soon realized that in a small town, in public one should speak only English or be subjected to rude comments. My Swedish mother too was constrained to speak only English. In contempt, Italians were called Dagoes, Czechs were Bohunks (from the Bohemian), French were Frogs, and no ethnic group escaped the maliciousness of those who had migrated earlier and considered themselves 'true' Americans. The sign of the times was rejection of

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the past, isolation, and what in German is called *Gleichschaltung*, conforming to the existing society. World War One did little to change this general attitude, rather it confirmed it with a belief that Americans should be concerned with protecting only American trade and commerce with other countries. This was the dominant mood of most Americans, especially in small towns and on the rural land. The concept of a melting-pot was lauded as the goal of American society.

World War Two brought a change and an awakening, for the United States had been attacked. There was no longer a feeling of resentment at taking up the battles of others, but now one had to defend one's country regardless of background or origin. Americans had to work with allies to secure victory. Previous prejudices and emotions did not vanish, however, witness the internment of US citizens of Japanese origin during the war. American troops went everywhere in the world and returned with a new feeling of power, self-righteousness and, especially, a new identification. They had met cousins and relatives who were like themselves and not to be looked upon with disdain or contempt. Essentially they found their roots and were fascinated by their discovery. The fact that the USA had escaped the ravages of war not only brought a realization of the privileged position of the country in the world, but also a sense of responsibility to others who had suffered much. This was especially true among students in universities who were veterans, and who continued their education in massive numbers because of the GI ('government issue') veterans' bill of rights. The latter was an innovation in American education since it enabled many more young people to become well educated than ever before in the history of the country. There was a change in the general attitude towards the world; isolation was out and involvement was now in.

The result was the founding of the United Nations in San Francisco, the Marshall Plan and a new relation to the rest of the world. Now Americans could also be good Americans and good Germans, Italians or Japanese; the condescension of the past was replaced by a new spirit of friendship and cooperation with others. But then the dissensions of foreigners reached into America. American Jews supported Israel while Arabs defended Palestine; Irish Americans became embroiled in Ulster, and Croats in the USA supported their fellowmen against the Serbs. The sweetness and light of the immediate postwar period changed to ethnic and religious disputes, many deadly. Americans became disunited and fell into a dilemma, which defeat in Vietnam and the fall of the Soviet Union only increased. No enemy was on the horizon, so the immense technological and economic advances seemed to be the route to follow in establishing a benevolent American world hegemony in which everyone could participate in the cornucopia of economic well-being, provided that they adopted an American-style democracy. There would be no more wars. The 19th-century optimism that science and technology knew no bounds and would lead to a brave new world returned with the rising stock market.

Then came 9/11 and America returned to the position of post-Pearl Harbor. An unexpected new kind of war shocked everyone, but then enemies or scapegoats were sought. It seemed to many that American goodwill and charity had been rejected; it was time to close ranks against the outside and unite all citizens in a war against terrorists or countries which harbored them. Americans seemed to be united, but it could not last, as the war on Iraq revealed. Generally speaking, young people

supported international endeavors while many in older generations still held to the supremacy of national interests. How did these overall changes in attitudes affect colleges and universities in the USA? Again one may compare the past with the present situation, but it is important to distinguish between the American 'intelligentsia' and the professors in universities.

The American intelligentsia before World War Two was both heavily concentrated in New York City and generally not productive of ideologies or intellectual movements such as the existentialism of Sartre or the philosophy of Heidegger in Europe. Rather writers and artists looked to Europe, especially France, as the place for expatriates, stifled by the isolationist atmosphere in the USA. The elite universities, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Chicago, and others, provided centers of discussion and discovery, but they were 'ivory towers' little motivated to nurture leaders in the 'real world' of action and achievement. While France provided a haven for American artists, musicians and writers, the names of whom such as Ernest Hemingway, Josephine Baker and much earlier James Whistler, were as well-known in Europe as they were in the USA – sometimes even more so. My own life provides an insight into pre-war universities.

The year before Hindenburg appointed Adolf Hitler to be chancellor of Germany, other than Latin I chose to study German as an elective foreign language in secondary school. The reason was the dominance in higher education in America of both German scholarship and its methodology of narrow concentration on a subject. After obtaining the baccalaureate at the university of Illinois in 1939, at my first graduate class in Chinese at Harvard University the instructor asked if all students had fulfilled the prerequisite of Greek or Latin. Several dared question the relevance of such a preparation but were ignored. Later one student timidously asked when we would begin to learn to speak Chinese. The surprised professor answered, 'You do not come to a university to speak a language. Here we only teach the literary classics. To speak you should go to a Berlitz school of languages.' Such was the teaching of foreign languages before World War Two. Memorization was cultivated in all disciplines. Yet already changes in academia were foreshadowed.

After 1933 Austrian and German intellectuals began to emigrate to the USA, and they were not only specialist scholars but also people with broad and varied interests. Some held socialist, communist or religious ideologies, and they opened the eyes of many Americans with their grasp of economic, political or cultural matters beyond their special fields of interest and training. The influx of European intellectuals into the institutions of higher learning in America provided a catalyst to the development of various ideologies and beliefs in politics and social movements, as well as in the sciences and humanities. In the universities Americans were open to many currents of thought, but such influences were restricted mainly to elite universities, and suspicion of foreigners among the populace was not greatly changed. Curricula in American universities, hitherto copied from European counterparts, however, were to undergo far-reaching changes after the war, and changes were not slow in coming.

Returning veterans, who were finishing their education in universities, demanded a more practical approach to subjects in classes. The old curriculum had to be modified, or in some cases completely abandoned, for there was no time or inclina-

tion to spend on subjects meant to enrich one's vocabulary or knowledge of the Classics. The universities responded by the creation of new fields of study – business, applied sciences and social studies. The new catch-word was 'applied', and over and above all was the directing guidance of technology. This did not happen overnight, however, for the entrenched faculties had to be replaced by younger scholars willing to experiment with new methods and directions. The new catalysts for change were grants of money from rich, recently established foundations, even more than from the government which, moreover, followed the private initiatives. For example, departments of Semitic languages, created to elucidate the Bible, were changed to Near Eastern Studies, but money went to the establishment of centers of contemporary matters, with a new name, Middle Eastern Studies, which were concerned with politics, oil and economics rather than classics. In other words, the new pattern of universities was the enlargement of their purviews to include research and consultation with industry and government. The ivory towers collapsed and a new philosophy of pragmatism came to dominate the universities.

At the same time that universities responded to the needs of the government in its expansive foreign concerns, internally changes were taking place in American society which soon were to be copied by the institutions of higher learning. The most important question facing the people of the country was the inequality of races, especially discrimination against Blacks in the southern states. The Civil Rights movement of the 1950s, with the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr, is well known; but at the same time a book, later made into a motion picture film, called *Roots* created a new designation for Blacks henceforth called also Afro-Americans. In universities sub-Saharan Africa had received King's attention, but later, with the success of the Civil Rights movement in entering many more Blacks into universities in the program called Affirmative Action, this changed. Although the interest in Black origins was kindled, the new departments in the universities were more about American Blacks than about Africans. Nonetheless the various departments were called Afro-American Studies, and the history of Blacks in American became their principal activity.

Other ethnic groups were not remiss in asserting their need to be represented in academia, but they did not have the support of the US government in their endeavors as did the Blacks. One of the first communities to break out of their ghettos to establish endowed professorial chairs in leading universities was the Armenian. At present there are a dozen such chairs and programs of Armenian language, history, art and architecture in various universities of America. This private initiative was launched by the National Association of Armenian Studies and Research, which continues to be active in promoting knowledge of Armenian subjects at various levels, supported by the community. Not to be outdone, but on a smaller scale, the Ukrainians established the largest center of Ukrainian research and teaching outside of Kiev at Harvard University. Other ethnic groups followed suit in asserting their need for representation in American academia such that ethnic studies became a regular part of the scene in many universities.

Together with such innovations as ethnic studies, graduate schools, beyond the baccalaureate, proliferated, but the new institutions were now professional. Business schools blossomed as well as centers of political study, such as the huge Kennedy

School of Public Administration at Harvard. Because of its enormous wealth the latter university became the model as well as the envy of others. So the influence of pragmatism pervaded all aspects of learning and it had an effect on the idealism of undergraduates. In the 21st century, apathy began to replace the activism of the past, for students had to be more concerned with their livelihood in the future, and 'political correctness' began to replace the rebellion and activism of previous years. This coincided with another trend which could be traced to computers.

With the invention of computers the methods of statistics could be and were applied to all branches of thought, and the proliferation of technological terms led to an explosion of jargon in the social sciences and even in the humanities. Art and music could be subjected to statistics as well as the natural sciences, according to some scholars. Instead of broadening the vistas of intellectuals in the USA, however, the proliferation of fields of knowledge led to a narrower focus than in the past. Technology brought more specialization, and the end result was to create an expert or a highly specialized scholar who, outside of his own sphere of competence, was just as subject to political and other influences as everyone else. In other words the old-fashioned 'Renaissance' intellectual had been reduced to a specialist in an ever narrowing field. In the USA it became almost a point of pride to be highly concentrated, with no shame in being ignorant of ideological issues, or indeed anything outside of one's field of concentration. Individuals who did not fit this pattern were regarded as outcasts or deluded.

Technology, specialization and utter objectivity were the new goals of training, be it in colleges and universities or in the marketplace in America. But what was happening in Europe? In universities there professors had declared that the innovations of American centers of higher learning, such as departments or seminars of women's studies or ethnic studies, would never happen in their institutions. But just as fast foods, malls and other features of American life have arrived there to the dismay of many Europeans, so the practical emphases of American higher education have invaded Europe and the rest of the world. Just as globalization in commerce, led by American entrepreneurs, was spreading across the world, so the Americanization of universities everywhere became the fad.

In the end 'old-fashioned' scholars everywhere were united in their despair at failing to halt the juggernaut of technology, with its resulting efficiency, cheapness, and global dimensions. But like Greek philosophers as early as the 6th century BC, who declared that change was the concomitant of all life, so many claim a reaction has begun to set in, and it may be most acute in the United States. Among students trite phrases began to initiate discussions about the future development of society. 'It does not compute' came to mean that something or someone did not fit into the pattern of 'politically correct' and was to be rejected or ostracized. Bertolt Brecht's question 'Wo ist der Moral?' induced some to declare that medical doctors no longer have patients and lawyers no longer have clients, rather both have only customers. In cynicism one declared that America was the most democratic land in history because everything could be reduced to one common denominator, the dollar. Europe, and elsewhere, had its aristocracies, classes and social groups, but the United States had the leveling measure of the dollar. A good athlete, artist, musician, or whatever, became an aristocrat by virtue of money. Did this not simplify life and

was it not real 'democracy'? Such were the ruminations of young people in America in most recent times.

Among many Americans is a belief that all problems can be overcome by money, for the model which they offer to the world is one of economic opportunity to everyone. For them private enterprise is always better than governmental bureaucracy in all realms, even though it means the survival of the fittest. But what of the unfortunate, the poor and disabled? They too can best be aided by private charities created for such purposes. If we use our minds, and our ingenuity, science and technology linked to economic growth will give all the key to a good life. If the rest of the world followed the American model they would experience similar benefits. On the other hand, commercialization of everything in America, including universities, is decried not only by foreigners but by many Americans. The reply to this assertion is that the reduction of everything to the measuring stick of the dollar is the best means of insuring an equality of values. Furthermore, what better computes than one input into a system? One may ask whether this is more compatible with democracy than with autocracy. Beyond this discussion, however, is a call for cooperation and mutual assistance in idealistic terms, which is not dead among some of the young. They would express what should be done in the future world as follows.

Whether we like it or not, the world is now bound together as never in history, and we must begin to act in accordance with world law, a world court, a world police force, and eventually a world government, with each country or ethnic group maintaining its identity and culture. Although in world matters we must all conform to universal rules, yet in our daily lives we hold to our community and its social norms and culture. One must believe that the clash of civilizations is neither real nor inevitable; rather we will have a clash of individual fanatics. This is the future danger, the rise and seizure of power by fanatic leaders, who seek to perpetuate their own position and power at any cost. Let us end the dictum of Thomas Carlyle that individuals (sic. fanatics!) make history, and cease the honoring and idealization of conquerors, like Alexander or Napoleon, but rather insure that reason and moderation rule. By law no prime minister or president should remain in office more than 10 years. If such a person is not completely exhausted and seeking retirement, he obviously has not been serving his people but only himself. Institutions are important not individuals; it is kingship not the king, the presidency not the president which should be respected and honored. In the end only the law will make us free.

It is instructive to remember the words of a Spartan king, ostracized by his own people such that he fled to the court of the Persian king who was about to invade Greece. The king asked the Spartan to tell him about the Greeks, and, on being excused for perhaps offending Xerxes, he replied: 'Your majesty, your subjects fear you more than anything, but the Greeks fear something else. It is the law which is above everyone.'

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