

Academic Colonialism—A New Look

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POWER, which may or may not corrupt, has been separated into two components, political and economic. This common sense of power was related to the struggle for human freedom. The French Revolution and the American Revolution of the 18th century and the German and Italian struggles of the 19th century were aimed at the granting of political power to newer groups, including the middle class, the yeoman farmer, and the working artisan. The Russian Revolution in the 20th century aimed at the redistribution of economic power.

In these political and economic efforts the school was deemed to be either an ally or an enemy in the struggle rather than a prime mover. That is, the academic scene was never considered too important and most reformers took on the schools only as an afterthought.

Exploitation prior to mid-20th century existed in political and economic terms. Taxation without representation; the eight-hour day; one-third of the nation ill fed, ill clothed, and ill housed; the war on poverty; the newly emerging nations; self-determination; free elections—all these were slogans which constituted battle cries in the power arena. The term "colonial" became symbolic of the have-nots of political and economic power. In this vein a highly educated African was and remained a colonial man in spite of his education. For the militant black revolutionary, a Negro Ph.D. is in reality "Dr. Nigger" because he cannot release his intelligence in any meaningful way, since the educated colonial is deprived of any active power. The struggle

for Black Power, it is thought, will give a fair share of the twin forces of political and economic power to American colonials (read black, Puerto Rican, Spanish American, Appalachian, etc.) and open the American Dream to a wider population.

In the effort to eliminate or retain economic and political colonialism whether it be by one nation upon an indigenous people, as in the case of Portuguese rule over Angola, or by caste system maintained in the United States, the educational system is used to carry on ideological persuasion by the side which controls the school. The school is seldom seen as a structure providing its own supporting ideological frame. This is because there is another element of power which has been overlooked, thereby contributing to partial solutions to the current issues of colonialism, exploitation, and freedom.

It is within this overlooked segment of power that the term "academic colonialism" resides. Otherwise, if this term is not located within what can be labeled as social power, there will arise the tendency of mistakenly designating the administrative and teaching staff as members of a colonial power while designating students, whether rural, urban, or suburban, white as well as black, as constituting an exploited subject population.

The difficulty of applying the colonial—anti-colonial argument to the school-student situation is that it obscures one struggle

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which is major from one which, albeit important for the near future, is at this moment in time quite minor. The difficulty with attacks against the school establishment in favor of the youth culture is that such attacks try to equate academic colonialism with the civil rights movement. It is as if we were saying that affluent college-bound executives-to-be youth in the school have problems which are equal to, if not worse than, the plight of black youth in the ghetto.

It is no wonder that the extreme right which represents the lower middle class and the militant black have great difficulty with articulate SDS types. The cry of academic colonialism adheres to a false cause because it does not deal with educational disenfranchisement but with the rearrangement of political and economic power within the educational establishment. This rearrangement of power uses such devices as stronger student government, student involvement in the hiring and firing of faculty, and the extension of student control in all aspects of school affairs.

The Issue Is Domination

The upshot of it all is that all the above will and should take place, and yet the goal of equal social power will still be further from realization than it is today. The most salient item to consider is that the move to increase student power has nothing to do with bringing new social groups into schools on anywhere near an equal level.

The bone of contention at Berkeley, Harvard, Columbia, Wisconsin, San Francisco State, and elsewhere has been a clash between a given class of students and a given class of faculty and administrators over a given set of issues which these classes have defined out of their particular experiences. Compulsory ROTC versus voluntary ROTC, military recruitment on campus, the true nature of university research, the proper relation of a university to a ghetto community, the conduct or behavior of students in speech, dress, sex, politics—these were some of the issues resulting in campus disorders. These

are more like palace revolts than total acts of anti-colonialism.

In most cases, the issues fought over did not lead to a significant increase in the enlargement of the student class by the addition of truly alien types. Nor has there been a significant addition to the faculty and administrative class by types other than Urbane Toms. Academic colonialism is not another name for an authoritarian teaching-administrative establishment as seen in the movie *The High School*.¹

Academic colonialism constitutes the total school scene and includes all elements of that scene from student to the part-time nurse; from the martinet vice-principal to the friendly, helpful curriculum consultant. They are all members of a school community, and share that community's protection and punishment. To be in is to be part of and that is the heart of it. Once in, all is taken care of. The youngster who conforms has a future and the youngster who does not conform has another assured future. The non-conformist youngster continues his style at a major university, whereas the conformist may study to be a physical education teacher while coaching basketball provided he does not emulate Joe Namath.

If there is an issue between the types, this issue is one of domination, and it is represented by similar factions within faculty and staff, some of whom want more money for libraries while others want more prayer and less gum chewing. One group may demand old-fashioned teaching while another may be for SRA materials and new math. Yet *all* are the establishment. The introduction of new math is not anti-colonialism, nor is the formation of a student-faculty forum a blow for academic freedom, and the hiring of a young liberal dean of men is not a move which will end school disorders.

Academic colonialism is more a matter of social than of economic and political power. Social power as a real force shaping

¹ During the movie a benign friend of youth whispered to me that the scenes depicted were "worse than Dachau," and he then equated the turmoil of the bored suburban youth with the death of the Jews in the gas chambers. This is a prime example of misplaced issue-itis.

the lives of men has been recognized for ages and includes speech patterns, gestures, social graces, the ability to read the system, dress, mannerisms, and countless seemingly meaningless traits including the ability to handle forms, bureau, and bureaucrat. My own immigrant mother's answer to social power was to eschew all contacts with schooled officialdom, and when she was faced with them she assumed a proper humble attitude. She knew that they all were kings—teachers, principals, student hall monitors, janitors, counselors, attendance officers, and student athletes.

The "Social Ethic"

High school graduation has become the key for social entry and does not serve as an indicator of higher mental skills. The teenage cashier must be a high school graduate but not because she can add or subtract. The National Cash Register Company has seen to it that the school graduate need not add, but the supermarket employers want her to appeal to their suburban patrons in shopping center malls throughout the country. The ingredients of social power become manners and morals. Both, then, become part of what William Whyte, Jr., called the "social ethic."

It is this ethic, not the Protestant ethic, which is being propelled by the schools and the mass media. The old issues which revolved around economics and politics are at best lukewarm and at worst irrelevant. This is true for that old chestnut, federal aid to education, as it will be true for the issues of religion and education and sex education, and all those issues now labeled as controversial.

The supremacy of the social ethic will be felt in the eventual legalization of abortion, in the eventual acceptance of mild hallucinogenics, in the widespread distribution of birth control methods to middle class youngsters, and in the liberalization of religious rituals and codes of behavior. Also, the social ethic will be *imposed* on the lower classes. For example, birth control will have to be practiced by the urban poor. The dif-

ferences between social workers, police officers, and psychiatric counselors are becoming extinguished as we move from a punitive to a therapeutic order. It is this movement which gives social power such a prominent place in our contemporary society.

The granting or withholding of social power is never totally punitive and is carefully couched in permissive terminology. To obtain an education is deemed a privilege rather than a right. To enter college is seen by students and teachers and administrators of all stripes as being earned by dint of interest in learning and hard work. If there are uneasy feelings, these usually find their bearings in judgments concerning whether the tests used to affirm learning and interest are objective and fair. Few within the educational establishment believe that such objective measures are unobtainable or, what is even worse, that it is a forgone conclusion that all the tests both fair and unfair are to academic colonialism what the exclusive club was to imperialistic colonialism.

Academic colonialism is quite petty and probably harms very few because going through or dropping out of school does not by itself do much for anyone in any significant political and economic sense. For this reason we do not get excited about the effects of academic colonialism, which can be defined as the withholding of the fact of academia from a predefined undesirable group whom academics² hold would lower standards. These undesirables can, it is thought, be made ready by Operation Head Start or Operation Higher Horizon and similar help projects. Or if one is a traditionalist, the undesirables can either shape up or ship out even if police must be brought in to control hooliganism.

A loss of deep moral concern occurs whenever we face the petty, be it by a school librarian who insists on absolute silence or by a registrar who holds up student schedules. Then, too, the victims of academic colonialism do not get upset at being victimized. They drop out with little or no rancor or fanfare. What we are left with is the

² Academics include students, staff, and administrators.

totalitarianism of the trivial. It is wicked because we cannot be free and easy with trivialities and must make of them unreachable baubles. It is one thing to deny or affirm important concerns—to die for life, wife, country, religion, love; but to raise academia to high importance is unfair.

The trouble is not that academic colonialism does no harm but rather that it robs education of the power of doing some good to a larger number of people from different social backgrounds.

A New Common School?

To fight academic colonialism I would suggest supporting a new concept of the common school movement for the lower levels and a new concept of land grantism for the university. We need to promote decentralization and the move toward people's schools and then find a way for genuine interaction between and among these schools to avoid parochialism along color and ethnic lines.

A stand calling for a limited enrollment in high schools is supportive of academic colonialism; so is the raising of fees and the formation of entrance standards or the introduction of formal tests before accepting candidates for advanced degrees. Certifications and credentials form barriers to a free and open academic community. The credentials and certification system has failed. (Mental illness has not been eliminated since the mass certification of therapists and driver training does not reduce the accident rate.)

The answer is not chaos (although, as Norman O. Brown holds, chaos in trivial matters is not an alarming state and might even be fun) but rather a reshaping of our whole judgmental posture. For example, the success of a group can be measured by how

effective it is in passing on its particular sub-cultural features as well as how well it takes on the graces of academic respectability: that is, whether the language is enriched as well as standardized.

Tests can also be viewed as a two-way street. Every so often we should administer a square test and an authenticity test and thus punish perpetual role players and pompous teachers and overanxious book-worms. Perhaps one way to reshape our judgmental posture is not to talk of student unrest or worry about a high dropout rate but to be concerned with academic and administrative irresponsibility. The posture assumes that the educational end is never to eliminate evil or even to fight evil, whether that evil be air pollution or high crime rate or automobile fatalities. The aim is to increase some particular small good.

To admit to a disbelief in education as a universal panacea is to place less importance on the educational enterprise and therefore rob academia, forming its own type of colonial empire of social form and mental style replete with monies or positions granted to its retainers. The end of this colonialism may come from killing the educational myth by banking on the human condition born of identity and history and not depending on the granting of school degrees by school masters who have become provincial governors of the soul.

What needs to be invoked is a new educational stance and the breaking away, by those who benefit most from it, from the assumptions locked in our minds. To end academic colonialism we must engage in radical conversion and not programmatic stopgaps. We need an acceptance of generosity in an era of educational plenty rather than a philosophy of scarcity supporting false importance. □



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