



COMMENDABLES

Poisoned Ivy Redux

by Herbert London

Benjamin Hart: *Poisoned Ivy*; Stein & Day; New York.

For at least four decades liberal pieties have ruled the cultural roost at Ivy League colleges, a situation that William Buckley described in *God and Man at Yale*. What Buckley did not describe—what he could not have anticipated—is the challenge to this orthodoxy that has been mounted in the 1980's. Reagan's Presidency has undoubtedly had some influence on the climate of opinion in academe. But the challenge predates his stunning electoral victories.

In 1980 several students founded a lighthearted, irreverent, high-spirited paper called the *Dartmouth Review*. From the beginning many Dartmouth faculty members and administrators violated all the dicta of democracy they normally espouse. They have systematically violated the Constitution they defend as the bulwark of their freedom. And they have violated the traditions of fair play and free exchange to which they regularly give lip service.

This story is recounted by Benjamin Hart in his book *Poisoned Ivy*, an often hilarious, sometimes sad, and usually provocative examination of life at Dartmouth College. What he demonstrates most poignantly is that the halls of Ivy have been converted from ivory towers of scholarship and dispassion into political action launching pads for gay rights, women's liberation, black militancy, and the assorted lunacies now institutionalized in the post-Vietnam era.

Because the *Dartmouth Review* attacked the faithful, it became the target of the true believers. That in itself is hardly surprising. What is shocking is the virulence of the reaction. When Hart delivered the *Dartmouth Review* to an administrative office, he was confronted by a black middle-aged college official who attempted to push him through a plate glass door. This unpro-

voked assault did not result in retaliation. Instead the victim tried to restrain his attacker by using a headlock. Several seconds later Hart noticed that his "sweatshirt was soaked with blood from a four inch wound" inflicted by a bite on his chest. After receiving treatment for the wound and a tetanus shot, Hart filed assault charges against his attacker and won the case.

However, three days after the assault the Dartmouth faculty assembled and voted 113-5 to censure the newspaper Mr. Hart was distributing, not his assailant. During that curious time, free speech and the free press were suspended (to say nothing of reasonable discourse). The *Dartmouth Review* had so offended the sensibilities of the faculty that it, rather than the violent behavior it evoked, became the target of opprobrium. Admittedly, the *Dartmouth Review* can be outrageous. What offended most faculty members was its style; for the *Dartmouth Review* is the literary equivalent of *Animal House*. However, in these times students are usually encouraged by their faculty elders to commit offenses against taste. The shock came from the fact that this challenge to the status quo came from the right. It was not fraternities they questioned, but affirmative action; it was not a policy of parietals they ridiculed, but black studies. The students took on the left establishment using the style of Tuli Kupferberg and other leftovers from the turbulent 60's. They gave the provocateurs a taste of their own medicine. But instead of recognizing this effort for what it was—an attempt to balance opinion—the academics nurtured on 60's rhetoric let out a cry of "dirty pool."

The reaction could have been predicted. College faculties have, to an extraordinary degree, been politicized. The student rebel of yesteryear is now a tenured professor with standing in the faculty senate. Current political attitudes have had only marginal success at our universities because the 60's revolution has put a liberal edifice solidly in place. Where is the professor with sufficient temerity to take on the gay student alliance? Where is the university president who challenges the intellectual integrity of women's studies?

Undoubtedly there has been a shift in

college attitudes. But it is not as pronounced as most journalists suggest. What has happened is that the left-wing gospel regularly confronts student apathy and agnosticism. That may not be a major victory for those of us who would like to restore a passionate concern for fair- and critical-mindedness to our colleges, but it's nothing to sneeze at. After all, we will have another four years of Ronald Reagan, the *Dartmouth Review* continues to publish, and Benjamin Hart and his stalwart editors are now writing books and influencing public opinion. cc

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Ascent to Wisdom

George Caspar Homans: *Coming to My Senses: The Autobiography of a Sociologist*; Transaction Books; New Brunswick, NJ.

George Homans has had certain advantages not ordinarily granted to a social scientist. His distinguished New England ancestry, for example, included successful physicians, lawyers, and men of business—to say nothing of the Adamsses (his mother was the niece of Henry and Brooks Adams). Added to the solid pleasures and benefits of a boyhood on Massachusetts Bay were the fruits of Homans's student days at Harvard. His friend and tutor was Bernard De Voto and his teachers included Ivor Richards, who was also responsible for Homans's introduction to Wyndham Lewis.

Another strong point in the future sociologist's favor was the fact that he studied no sociology as an undergraduate. His interests were literary, but after losing out in a literary rivalry with James Agee, he gave up his ambition to make a career as a poet. His comment on this youthful decision is characteristically frank:

Note the wretched competitiveness of this young man! Note his worship of success! But note also, you snug liberals, who sneer at compe-

tition while practicing it avidly, that my silent competition with Jim Agee led me to reach a better decision about my future occupation than the one I might have reached without it. By competing I learned where *not* to compete.

Homans was also fortunate in picking up his sociology largely on his own and under the inspiration of a gifted biochemist, Lawrence J. Henderson. The formative intellectual influence was Vilfredo Pareto, whom he started to read at De Voto's suggestion. Two years after his graduation, with still no formal training in sociology, Homans coauthored *An Introduction to Pareto* (1934). As a junior member of Harvard's Society of Fellows (he never advanced beyond a B.A.) he divided his time between boning up on the social sciences and working on a study of rural life in Medieval England. His *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century* turned into a sort of personal search for his roots. His researches led him to trace the customs of East Anglia (the land of the Homanses) to Friesland—an hypothesis not widely accepted by British historians.

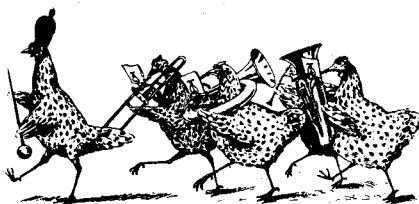
His professional career was interrupted by the war, and Homans devotes several interesting chapters to his less-than-exciting naval career, as well as *excursus* on the time he spent sailing under his uncle Charles Adams. However, the chief interest of Homans's memoir is the account he provides of his development as a sociological theorist. His major contributions to the field, *The Human Group* and *Social Behavior*, lie more in the realm of social psychology than pure sociology. As a theorist, he is an unashamed psychological reductionist. Even before World War II he had concluded:

There was a single human nature, single in its general characteristics. . . . Therefore my general propositions would have to be psychological rather than sociological, propositions not about groups as such but about what human beings have in common as members of a species.

This firm stand on human nature sets Homans at odds with nearly every school of modern social thought, including the followers of John Dewey, Franz Boas, Jean-Paul Sartre, Karl Marx, and B. F. Skinner. Groups that have nothing else in common are in agreement on one point: the malleability of human clay. If there were such a thing as "the common human," then

we should have to rethink a great deal of the social experimentation that has been done in the name of Marxism, feminism, and progressive education. To Homans's everlasting credit, he was among the few American social scientists of his generation who dared to affirm the universality of human social behavior.

Unfortunately, Homans's decision to concentrate on individual behavior rather than on social organization also had negative consequences. It led him to reduce social units down to assemblages of individuals interacting according to certain psychological principles—as if man born of woman has ever existed outside the social context. In a way, it is a sort of trick of perspective—like looking at a painting of Seurat. If you stand very close to the canvas and examine the dots, all you will see is dots that group themselves in certain arrangements of color and shape. It is not until you stand back and look at the whole that you can learn to see the forest despite all the trees. In much the same way, Homans's "methodological individualism" is apt to lead to a distorted—perhaps libertarian—perspective on social relations. On the other hand, it can also serve as a healthy corrective to the tendency, particularly prominent in French sociology since Comte, to treat "social facts" as if they were real entities. Homans correctly perceives that his method, because it only looks at one side of the coin, has to be supplemented by a more structuralist approach.



Homans summarizes his theory of social behavior as an attempt to explain "how small groups, given half a chance, tend to develop social structures." Although his answer is expressed in terms of a modified behaviorism—his friend, B. F. Skinner, really should be shocked by what has been done with his theories—it still constitutes one of the few serious attempts to grapple with the elements of social behavior. Even today, Homans continues to work out the implications of his system. For most professors, tenure means death from the neck up, but even after retirement Homans remains open to new ideas—like those expressed by the sociobiologist, E. O. Wilson. His willingness to

listen to Wilson stands in marked contrast to most leftist sociologists. But George Homans is decidedly not a man of the left. We might apply to him the phrase he used to describe Pareto, an "aristocratic libertarian." Although he is not even a theist, he argues that "some doctrine of original sin is crucial to the survival of any religion, and that it would be well for everyone, everywhere, to recite once a day the General Confession of the Church of England." Skeptical of the ruthless idealists who are willing, like Sacco and Vanzetti, to murder or, like Alger Hiss, to betray their country for a cause, he reserves his scorn for the sentimental humanitarians and those who sympathize with "idealists" (what most of us now call liberals):

They will not go as far as the extreme idealists to use evil means to achieve ends presumed to be lofty. But they will go some distance; they are certainly prepared to lie in what they consider a good cause.

Homans's autobiography comes as something of a revelation. In the mid-1980's we are confronted with a frank, articulate scholar who is also a sociologist; a principled conservative who views politics dispassionately; an aristocrat proud of his family, his people, and his race, who seems immune both to snobbery and guilt. Altogether a sounder head than either of his more brilliant great-uncles, Brooks and Henry Adams, Homans should cause us to reverse the judgment implied by the chronicle of the Adams family, *Descent from Glory*. (TF) cc

Weekend Remedies

E. M. Delafield: *Diary of a Provincial Lady*; Academy Chicago; Chicago.

E. M. Delafield: *The Provincial Lady in London*; Academy Chicago; Chicago.

E. M. Delafield: *The Provincial Lady in America*; Academy Chicago; Chicago.

E. M. Delafield's *Provincial Lady* volumes delighted a whole generation of readers on both sides of the Atlantic when they were first published in the 1930's. It is easy to see why. These diaries of a liberated (by 30's standards) literary (by provincial standards) lady