

ROOTS OF COLLEGE EVILS

ROBERT COOLEY ANGELL

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TWO years ago the undergraduate dailies of two prominent Eastern colleges offered free trips to Europe as prizes in an essay contest on the subject: "What Is Wrong with Dear Old Podunk?" These contests are symptomatic of the introspective mood that has descended upon our institutions of higher learning since the War. But for the most part, writers on education have rarely gone beyond discussions of systems and curricula. In this article Professor Angell digs down to the bed rock of college evils.

IN recent years American colleges have been subjected to a vigorous fire of criticism. It is not my purpose here to add to this clamor which is already general enough, but to point my article toward certain basic facts which are too often ignored by those who call the colleges to account for their shortcomings. That higher education in America has entered upon a promising era of self-appraisal there can be no question.

The many new experiments now being tested in colleges so totally unlike as Harvard and Antioch prove the general existence of this condition, even though the different aims of these experiments may indicate no other point of agreement. Both within the college walls and among thinking people outside, the patent failure of the colleges to raise the cultural level of life in America in any degree proportionate to their influence over the youth of the land, has caused great concern.

There is much to justify this concern and the colleges have been among the first to recognize it, and to answer it with new experiments in teaching and a general raising of standards. But surely no one would say that the low level of culture in American life is caused solely by the failure of American education. There is more truth in the reverse of this statement; for there can be no doubt that the absence of any firmly established cultural background in American family life has been largely responsible for the failure of our education — in so far as it is a failure. The problem of the colleges, therefore, is not one that can be solved in the colleges alone. In dealing with this question the educator reaches a point where even a perfect system, a flawless curriculum, and a corps of the ablest teacher-scholars would be powerless to work any great improvement. At this point the relation of the college to the social unit of which it is a part assumes the first importance.

There can be little question that the common body of thought among American undergraduates which gives to campus life its distinctive flavor is at present disorganized. The undergraduate interest in the immediately stimulating or practical rather than the ultimately vital, his self-assurance and initiative in particular spheres, and the lack of a well integrated social organization are all symptomatic of a time of rapid change. Old ways of doing things have lost their fitness, new tendencies have arisen; but there is no depth of maturity to the collective life because no dominant principle has as yet asserted itself.

Moreover we shall probably have to wait for a new development of intellectual interest to bring back a healthy organization. After all, nothing else can properly unify this whole except the need which brings the students to the university. Though intercollegiate athletics sometimes seem capable of weaving undergraduate life together, their influence upon the great mass is superficially emotional rather than vital. As long as undergraduates leave the preservation of that great contribution of the Middle Ages and of the mediæval universities — the consecration of learning — to faculty members, professional students, and a mere handful of their own number, their collective life will remain disorganized. This disorganization in student thought is a result of unprecedented social changes which have occurred in America during the past seventy-five years.

If an adult contemporary of Abraham Lincoln, outdoing Rip Van Winkle, should awaken after napping for three quarters of a century, he would find it almost impossible to adapt himself to modern life. This period, the greatest in the history of the world as far as invention, economic development, and scientific advance go, has so completely altered men's activities and points of view that only those traditions which were either too fundamental to be touched by the changes or so flexible that they could adapt themselves to unaccustomed conditions have survived. Most bodies of collective thought have been thrown into a state of disorganization, that of undergraduates along with the rest. In the resulting confusion the habits and standards of the general life have been borne in upon the campus, a process which has been facilitated by the rapid "turnover" of students. Lacking the bulwark against the onslaughts of alien influences which a strong intellectual interest would afford, undergraduate life is almost a replica of that beyond the academic pale.

Haste is one of the outstanding characteristics of twentieth century civilization in America. Our mental life has been speeded up by the enormous increase of stimuli which improved means of communication such as the telegraph, the telephone, the radio, and the daily newspaper have brought with them. The horizon of the individual is now almost world-wide and the natural tendency under the circumstances is to attempt the understanding of it all. Moreover we are kept in a state of nervous tension by the consciousness of rapid physical movement all about us.

Undergraduates are particularly likely to be affected by the spirit of haste because a disproportionate number of them come from the urban communities where this spirit is at its height. Street cars, crowded thoroughfares, hurrying delivery autos, and, in the larger cities, elevated and subway trains, roller coasters, and the throngs from the business district bustling to and from lunch have worked upon their nerves.

Hastiness in mental activity breeds superficiality. Our people are so intent on absorbing all of the ideas which come flooding in on them that they do not go deep anywhere. The daily newspaper, with its headlines designed to give hurried readers the gist of events, encourages them to secure a smattering of all the news and a real knowledge of none of it. The students obtain a little knowledge of many fields but are rarely led to a vital understanding of any one of them.

Much the same conditions which are producing haste in our life are developing in our children a love of excitement. Pleasures which satisfied the adventurous spirit of their elders seem tame to these moderns. Our whole civilization is pitched in a higher emotional key which requires shriller notes than before to startle the audience. Thrilling forms of recreation and entertainment have been institutionalized in professional athletics, automobile races, public dances, and amusement parks, so that not only is excitement easily obtained but the craving for it is increased.

Commercialism in the sense of an undue preoccupation with the production, appropriation, and consumption of material things is another quality rampant in America. With all the world turning its energies into commercial pursuits, the nation possessing the greatest potentialities in this sphere could hardly be expected to do otherwise. Moreover, there was in this country no well established cultural tradition to oppose the tendency. The necessity of conquering the continent, the shifting character of

the population, the constant influx of immigrants, the relatively low degree of family pride, and the shallowness of our institutions of secondary education have all been hostile to the development of a strong cultural organization.

Commercialism is at the bottom of an unfortunate trait which, for want of a better name, we may call externalism. The American devotion to the immediately "practical" has led to a lack of concern for the truly vital aspects of life. The average citizen is not even superficially interested in social reform, international politics, and art. He looks up to those of economic power such as railroad magnates and large manufacturers, dreams of becoming like them some day, and regards the scholar as an uninteresting recluse. When he takes his mind from business, he is likely to feel the need of complete mental relaxation; so he seeks refuge in sports, amusements, and avocations, especially those in which little intellectual effort is required.

The failure of most American parents to take a serious interest in their children's mental growth tends to give the young a wrong attitude toward the vital things of life. What a contrast with the situation in Germany during Munsterberg's youth! "The teachers were silently helped by the spirit which prevailed in our homes with regard to the school work. The school had the right of way; our parents reinforced our belief in the work and our respect for the teachers. A reprimand in the school was a shadow in our home life; a word of praise in the school was a ray of sunshine in the household." Nowadays the parents, distracted by other duties and absorbed in their own pleasures, turn the larger share of the task of education over to the schools; while the children do not find the learning process adventurous enough to compete with the more colorful pursuits at hand.

One might suppose, however, that although a lack of intellectual interest is characteristic of American school children as a whole, our university students were a select few whose very enrollment indicated a background of culture. Though a reasonable assumption on *a priori* grounds, this view has recently received many hard knocks. An eminent literary critic, Henry Seidel Canby, remarks: "Our teaching is sown upon a bare and barren hinterland, where, finding no soil to root in, it dries up and blows away." This situation arises partly from a less respectful attitude toward university education. The sons of the upper economic class have come to take it for granted. Even among those from

less affluent homes the motives are not always the best. Probably the majority are aiming to increase their earning power in later life; many to secure the social prestige which the diploma brings with it; some to distinguish themselves in athletics and campus activities. A burning desire for knowledge is relatively infrequent.

It seems probable despite all this that university men and women come from more stimulating environments than the average. There are almost no students from the most ignorant families, while the cultured homes are well represented. The great majority of students' families, which lie between these extremes, seem often to encourage valuable self-expression, for about one-quarter of the freshmen at a university will be found to have some sort of literary or artistic hobby. Even where interest in the finer things of life is absent, there is not a little understanding of contemporary conditions. The fathers are usually business men who are shrewd observers of the course of events. Moreover, many students do summer work which brings them into sympathy with points of view previously foreign to them.

The prodigious bustle of American life, though far from salutary in most respects, does denote a degree of activity found in few other peoples. Whether the selective influence of pioneer conditions, the stimulating climate, or our open class system which allows the lowliest to rise is chiefly responsible for this trait, there can be no doubt of its effectiveness in rearing a vast social structure in a comparatively short time. Indeed, we are often said to have a talent for organization. This resourcefulness, so obvious in connection with the campus activities of the undergraduate, has been remarked even in a field to which the American is so unaccustomed as statecraft. Says Dr. Hermann Lufft in his *American and European Statesmen Compared*: "While the typical European statesman proves hopelessly inadequate when faced by novel and unanticipated tasks and situations, this is not characteristically true of American statesmen. During the rapid development of the United States in the nineteenth century, its public men faced many extraordinary emergencies. Most of these leaders were persons of mediocre ability. Nevertheless, in nearly every case they dealt competently with the problem thrust upon them, and no one of them completely lost his mental or ethical equilibrium."

Our talent for organization has combined with our emphasis on externals and the break-up of the old neighborhood group

to create a veritable "joining habit." Someone has said that whenever four Americans foregather one is chosen president, another vice president, a third secretary, and the last treasurer. We have a capacity for forming organizations; we need the companionship formerly secured in the neighborhood; but perhaps above all we have an intense desire to belong to prestige-giving groups. Lacking titles of nobility or other badges of distinction we are prone to seek distinction through membership in societies. Children brought up to regard membership in a Masonic order or a woman's club proper for their parents, frequently form societies of their own, and many students, indeed, come to college rather to gain distinction by belonging to a college group than to acquire knowledge for its own sake.

Perhaps the most fundamental difference between the young people of to-day and those of yesterday is a growing sense of independence of all that is old or traditional. Twentieth century children seem to feel a new confidence in their own ability to deal with the situations of life and a corresponding scorn for customary patterns of behavior. The sense of independence is developing, in the first place, because the play group is increasing its influence at the expense of the family. A quiet evening in the family circle talking, reading, or playing games is a rare exception in modern American life. Parents as well as children find their amusement elsewhere after the evening meal. And in the daytime, since the help of boys and girls is no longer required about the house, they go off to play with their fellows, usually for lack of other space, to a public park or playground. Moreover, the rise of institutions like the Boy Scouts specifically designed for young people has given the latter a sense that they are sharers in "real life" quite as much as their elders, and hence they no longer mimic so much the ways of their elders.

Not only is the family losing much of its former power to the play group, but it is exercising what it has left less in accordance with traditional patterns. A time of rapid social change has destroyed many of the traditions it formerly bore, so that for adults as well as children the guides to conduct come largely from contemporary life. The parents are frequently less capable of adjusting the family to the new situation than are the children, for they have to rid themselves of much mental baggage now out of date. When an automobile is to be bought, a summer holiday planned, or a room redecorated, the young people are

consulted. This accession of power by the children has been in no small degree responsible for the spirit of independence of which "flapperism" and the new moral code of youth are but expressions.

The youthful spirit of independence, paradoxically enough, also tends to increase conformity. The sense that they are breaking away from the traditional ways of doing things breeds in the members of the rising generation a strong feeling of solidarity. Just as a group of pioneers, cut off from their former homes, must depend more than ever upon each other, so twentieth century young people, having abandoned the standards of their elders, must rely on those sanctioned by their own group. Apparently this break with the past has developed a somewhat militant attitude among the rebelling element and an exaggerated pride in their own ways. This leads to conformity of the strictest sort lest others of their group cry "traitor."

In the realm of thought there is also not a little conformity. Perhaps the explanation of this is to be sought in our history. Born just in time to lead in the greatest era of material progress yet experienced, the United States has never become really stable. To the unsettled conditions of a new country have been added the unsettling economic changes and scientific discoveries of the past century. It is small wonder that Americans, trying to hold their heads above the flood, have snatched whatever straws were within their reach. Their material world altered beyond recognition, their dogmatic religion slipping from their grasp, they have clung tenaciously to whatever ideas were left. The moral strenuousness of our times also breeds conformity. So many new problems confront us daily that our energy is consumed in revolving them in the light of our already accepted ideas. We are unable to work out new standards and alter old beliefs.

Undergraduates do, however, escape much of this general narrowness of belief. The knowledge assimilated in university courses cannot but increase the meaning and significance of life and thus broaden one's sympathies. Each step along the pathway leading up the mountain of knowledge enlarges the climber's horizon, unless, indeed, his gaze becomes so fixed on the view in one direction that he fails to bring that portion of the landscape into relation with the rest.

The mingling with men and women of other localities, other social classes, even other races is also of incalculable benefit. The

student learns to appreciate points of view new to him; he sees life not through his own eyes or those of his "set" alone, but through the eyes of many of his university acquaintances as well. Not all of student tolerance, however, is due to a desire to hear all the evidence. Ignorance of religious and political questions as well as indifference to them have much to do with students' open-mindedness in these fields.

Other factors, such as the absence of arbitrary control and the lack of family and business responsibility contribute to a carefree existence, even where economic security is lacking. Though some have to borrow money to pay their tuition, while approximately one-third work regularly during the school year, and the majority help to earn their way by summer employment, very few appear discouraged or seem to be afraid that they cannot meet their obligations. This is evidenced by the popularity among students of by no means inexpensive moving picture shows, the throngs who attend public dances, the number who go to out-of-town football games, and the uniformly well-dressed appearance of students.

This relative prosperity means that the young men and women have been free from onerous responsibility and have enjoyed an exceptional share of life's advantages. Their contacts with misery and vice, or indeed with any of the social problems facing this generation, have been meagre. When they have had such contacts, their fathers, who generally possess the point of view of the employing classes, have characteristically minimized the evils of the existing order, so that the children have remained but mildly interested in them, if not completely ignorant. Incidentally, this has tended to keep intellectual interest at its present low ebb.

If our universities received men and women mainly from the most cultured families on the one hand, or from the poorer classes on the other, we should probably find a real desire for learning because of a keen realization that contemporary problems must be solved. As it is, most of our students come from families having none too great an intellectual curiosity and, above all, from a group which is eminently satisfied with things as they are. It is small wonder that their sons and daughters have not realized the need for constructive thinking.

Next month, "Self-Education in College," by President Lowell of Harvard.

PROTESTANTISM LOOKS TO THE MONASTERIES

ROLLIN LYNDE HARTT

RALPH ADAMS CRAM, in his "Ruined Abbeys of Great Britain," gives a remarkable account of monastic life in mediæval England. At a time when the secular clergy had become corrupt and indifferent to the needs of the common people, the monastic orders kept the spark of religion alive. Last month THE FORUM debate called attention to the present plight of Protestantism in America — a situation which Protestant clergymen are frank to recognize. Here Mr. Hartt urges a novel solution of the problem.

before. Ten years have passed since army chaplains first discovered the failure of Protestantism as a teaching force. Boys, a majority of whom expected soon to die, had never grasped the meaning of Christianity. No one had taught them. It was too late to teach them then.

Moreover, the chaplains concluded, rightly, that this ignorance of Christianity in the army indicated a great ignorance of Christianity elsewhere, and so they cast about for means by which to erect the superstructure of faith where no foundations had been laid. Some prescribed a broader liberalism. Others advised a militant reaffirmation of dogma. Still others saw hope in religious education, meaning the religious education of children in Sunday School. What nobody thought to suggest was the religious education of adults.

Even to-day the religious education of adults remains a rarity, though during the past ten years the churches have had some fairly sharp warnings. Christian Science, New Thought, and Theosophy have all gained ground at the expense of the churches. It was easy; their converts did not know what they were so lightly abandoning. More and more college men — and college women, too — have drifted away from the churches, assuming that they have "outgrown" Christianity. Nor does it appear that Protestantism as a whole benefited by the uproar at Dayton, Tennessee. While extreme liberalism had a chance to make its case clear, no other interpretations of Christianity enjoyed quite the same op-

AS a teaching force," says the president of a famous university, "Protestantism has abdicated." Question a Catholic concerning his religion, and you get a definite reply. He has been taught. Question a Protestant, and there comes a puzzled look, then a moment of mental rummaging, then an answer so vague that, once he has got his ideas out in front of him, the man seems rather more perplexed than