

A PROFESSORIAL DEBATE

Fashions Among the Faculty

I. *It's Smart To Be a Liberal*

by MORTON CRONIN

I DON'T SAY that the anguish that college professors express over the uncertain fate of academic freedom is compounded of nothing but humbug. I say simply that this anguish contains a rich element of humbug—not enough to render spurious the ideal of freedom for teachers—no degree of disingenuousness could do that—but enough to make their defense of that freedom ring from time to time with an embarrassingly false note.

The propositions that spokesmen for academic freedom stand on are these: Society has a great stake in truth; truth is elusive; the wise policy is one of wide accommodation for all important schools of thought. Fair enough. But what the appeal for academic freedom boils down to is the insistence that a college faculty have exclusive right to determine the criteria according to which it will recruit, retain, promote or discharge its members.

Now it should be obvious that the possession of this right does not automatically guarantee that a wide range of opinion will prevail on a college campus. As a matter of fact, faculties that are almost entirely self-governing, as many of them are, often generate within themselves such coercive pressures toward conformity that the range of opinion that is effectively expressed among them is decidedly narrow. It is when members of such faculties, often monuments of their local orthodoxy, rise in defense of academic freedom that the note of humbug is apt to become unmistakable. I am reminded of South American patriots who inveigh against Yankee imperialism at the same time that they perfect their domestic tyrannies—indeed, the one facilitates the other. But let me elaborate upon those head-shrinking pressures that professors bring to bear upon one another.

The atmosphere of tranquillity that rises from a sun-striped campus rarely matches the quality of life that is lived on it. Those noble trees, those placid buildings, the green grass and the ivy are a lovely façade behind which life is deeply competitive. The popular conviction that colleges are sanctuaries where men escape from the ten-

sions of rivalry is naïvely rooted in the fact that professors give up the possibility of making much money. But money is only one counter with which human beings can measure success. There are many others, and in the academic world the contestants keep score primarily with rank, publications, and the good opinion of their colleagues. The struggle for these riches can be, and is, just as ardent as, in other contexts, the struggle for money is. Of the three measures of success for a professor the most important is the good opinion of his colleagues. The rank he achieves will usually depend chiefly upon this, and to a considerable extent even his opportunities to publish. Now for the all-important question: What provokes this good opinion? Well, too often the only magic necessary is an amiable disposition and, most crucial of all, a willingness to espouse the current prejudices of the club, whether these be social, political or merely professional.

The important unit in a college is the department. It is here that diversity of opinion is needed most, for as one passes from the subject-matter of one department to that of another the issues often change. But it is in the individual department that such diversity is most often absent. I have in mind, for instance, the Philosophy department that abounds in positivists who will not make room for an idealist or a pragmatist, except perhaps for a very tame one. Or the English faculty that will not hire a *New Critic*, with the possible exception of a quiet one. Or the complement in History who will not pipe aboard a scholar who does not venerate the historical fact as a pious end in itself. Or the Education professors who will not welcome a new man unless his heart is twisted into a pretzel that spells John Dewey. Or the Art department whose door opens only to individuals in a highly abstract condition. Or the Sociology department that simply will not engage an able man, no matter what his school of thought.

In this last example we have bumped against another facet of faculty-bred conformity. Freedom is not the only wallflower at these parties. Such faculties are apt to turn away from intelligence and ability too. As a matter of fact, conditions that contract freedom and

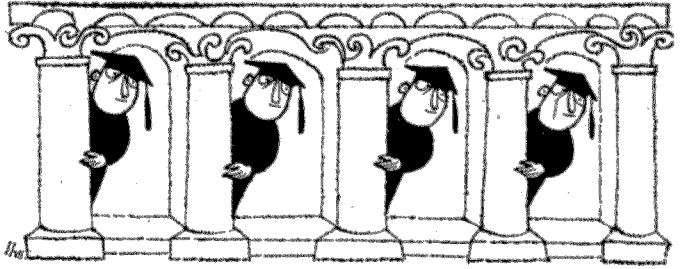
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those that depreciate intelligence are virtually identical. It is the shortest of baby steps from an insistence on no wrong opinions to an insistence on no brilliant or complicated opinions even within the limits of the orthodoxy. First of all, a really intelligent man is too likely to change his opinions. But secondly, where a faculty is free to choose its own members, it will, if it does not stick fast to principle, find irresistible the temptation to exclude men whose ability might make their colleagues uncomfortable. It is an unsettling paradox that the absence of monetary considerations, otherwise so admirable, is one of the things that makes this exclusion possible and enhances incalculably a faculty's power to nourish the human weakness for both conformity and mediocrity. No-one is discernibly out of pocket if a good man is not hired. The consequences may ramify through generations of students and professors, but they will never appear in any annual report and provoke the ire of stockholders.

Such orthodoxies as positivism, progressive education, *etc.*, in respect to which individual departments often demand conformity, are more or less professional dogmas, which do not always lead inevitably to certain views concerning specific social and political questions of the day. But when the pennant of academic freedom is waved, it is usually over the right of professors to express themselves in regard to these specific questions, concerning which individuals are usually classified as radical, liberal, conservative or reactionary. I must now submit that customhouses and sentry boxes installed by professors themselves restrict the movement of ideas along these borders, too.

College departments, often colleges in their entirety, have a dismal tendency to be overwhelmingly one or another of two political complexions: They are either piously and complacently liberal, or they are stolidly and stubbornly conservative. In either case freedom is curtailed. The sins of conservatives have been meticulously diagrammed, richly mounted, and exhibited in every conceivable light. I shall confine this discussion to the tyranny of liberalism as it prevails on many campuses. Lionel Trilling merely overstated the matter when he declared, "In the United States . . . liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition." This is especially true in the academic world because a fair definition of a conservative campus, at least if it is not sectarian, is one where controversial questions of a non-technical nature simply do not excite much discussion.

LIBERAL unanimity on a college campus would not be disturbing and it would not prejudice the struggle for academic freedom if it were just the end product of free discussion, argument and persuasion. But too often it is achieved by other means. The same conditions which promote concurrence of opinion in respect to professional



dogmas promote such concurrence in respect to social and political questions. The adoption of a liberal orientation is an important method for getting on in the academic world. A young professor has often learned as a graduate student, if not as an undergraduate, that being a liberal is very good politics. In the right environment he can, if he is not very bright, enjoy a feeling of heroic non-conformity in perfect security. He can be a dissenter in Philistia, even flirt with eventual revolution without sacrificing a single item of bourgeois comfort or status—indeed, his liberalism will consolidate his possession of these valuables.

The world of academic liberals, in short, is saturated with careerism. There is a kind of liberal who cannot conceive a greater tragedy than to lose his job or fail of promotion. When he feels, as he occasionally does when someone is sacked because of his politics, that America is no better than Russia, he is being quite sincere. For him nothing could be worse than to impede a man's advancement in the world. But this sympathy does not extend to conservatives—businessmen, professional men and publishers, for instance—whose views conflict with his. He will merrily cheer a boycott among their customers, clients and subscribers.

But there is another characteristic of campus liberals which bears upon academic freedom, and that is their moral complacency. More often than not, they are individuals who may make mistakes but who never sin—for sinning involves personal guilt and responsibility which, despite their sloganeering about the dignity of man, they do not acknowledge.

The morally complacent, since they feel that they are never *really* wrong, easily become morally authoritarian. One of the expressions of this authoritarianism has been the cry of anti-intellectualism which academic liberals have raised. Sometimes this cry is a genuine plea for freedom of thought and speech. But sometimes it sounds like nothing less than an angry insistence that America should (1) protect intellectuals from the consequences of their folly, even to the point of sparing them any loss in public esteem; (2) accept their doctrines without waiting to be convinced; (3) deliver the country's system of higher education into the hands of an autonomous, self-perpetuating academic bureaucracy, and then seal the latter off from any outside influence. All this in the name of freedom and democracy. The fact is that at the present time there is more diversity of social and politi-

cal thought outside the academic world than there is within it.

Liberals have done superb service in scrutinizing the moral foundations of American business, with great benefits for both the society as a whole and for American business itself. But on a liberal campus a professor would feel a decided coolness in the atmosphere if he made a similar scrutiny of the practices of labor unions. And, since a closed-mouth policy prevails on most conservative campuses, the result is that labor unions receive their principal moral challenge from Westbrook Pegler.

Liberals deserve the utmost credit for subjecting to analysis and pressure the relations of the older American population with newcomers to this country. But there is only one important *minority* group in America with whose cultural imperatives they will tolerate a moral argument. That group is the Roman Catholics. Criticism of Catholicism, in fact, is more or less expected if not demanded by academic liberals and will make one's membership in their club more secure. The criticism is discreet—it rarely if ever occurs in the classroom—but it is persistent and effective. Furthermore, it is reasonable. Whether ultimately correct or not, it has raised questions which must be taken into account. Consequently, it has helped American Catholics perfect their moral position. It has enabled them to carry on an unending Socratic dialogue. But Catholics are the only minority group that receives this salutary service. Paul Blanshard's *American Freedom and Catholic Power* enjoyed a deservedly wide circulation among academic liberals. But substitute for the word *Catholic* the name of any other minority group in America and see how illiberal the title will sound. Insofar as the main stream of American intellectual life is concerned liberals have consigned the other minorities to a moral vacuum.

BUT the strangest symptom which afflicts the typical campus liberal, and the one that has embarrassed the cause of academic freedom most acutely in our day, is the discomfort which he exhibits when confronted with an outspoken critic of Communism, however intellectual that critic may be. I am certain that there are not many Communists in the academic world. How could there be? There are not many in the whole United States. I myself have never met, on a campus or off, one person who I felt certain was a member of the Communist Party. But if we disregard what is said in the classroom, where Communism is seldom discussed, and consider only what professors say to one another, here are some statements that are too often true in departments and on campuses ruled by liberals: It is infinitely easier in these environs to denounce Joseph McCarthy than it is to denounce Joseph Stalin (at least until recently). It is easier to belt Chiang Kai-shek and Syngman Rhee than it is to abuse any Russian or Red Chinese leader. It is easier to hammer on American foreign policy in general than it is

to defend it, but especially at those points where it is most militantly anti-Communist. It is safer to sympathize with Alger Hiss than with Ezra Pound. It is more politic to respect Robert Hutchins, heretofore no idol of liberals, than Sidney Hook, a rugged centurion of liberalism but queasy about Communists. In fact, about the only evidence that will convince many liberals that an individual is *soft* toward Communism is conclusive evidence that the individual *is* a Communist, does not regret it, and has no intention of leaving the Party in the foreseeable future.

WHEN reproached for his failure to criticize Communism and his distaste for listening to such criticism, an academic liberal will retort: "Just because I don't shout about Communism doesn't mean that I think Communists should be coddled." That depends. If a scholar is not interested in politics, this defense is a good one. But if he is the shouting type, as many liberals are, then his silences are significant. They at least signify—and where the average liberal is concerned this is all they signify—that he has absorbed willy-nilly the convention that it is not in good taste to be a vigorous and outspoken critic of Communism. This convention developed momentum in the 'thirties and 'forties and now roars through the academic world largely out of sheer inertia. The average liberal professor has probably never shaken hands with an actual Communist. Furthermore, he may count among his friends various of his conservative colleagues. But where our liberal represents the ruling sentiment in his department or college, his conservative friends are too apt to keep their conservatism to themselves, satisfied with the occasional statement that they are not ashamed of being black. They know on what conditions the atmosphere will remain friendly and when it will turn ugly. The Uncle Toms know their place, and the result once again is that the liberals largely succeed in relegating an important Socratic dialogue, this one with Communism, to the least intellectual segments of the population. They themselves are chiefly responsible for McCarthyism.

The sins of academic conservatives against free inquiry may be as numerous and grievous as those of liberals. Furthermore, departments and colleges ruled by conservatives abound in America, even though they are more likely to be small, obscure, and less important in setting the tone of American intellectual life than those where liberals proliferate. But my subject has been freedom, and the extent to which the professions of one of these groups—the one that regards itself as preeminently the protector of academic freedom—matches its practice in respect to that commodity.

One reason the public has responded sluggishly to the cry of academic freedom is that it has sensed the ideological unanimity that exists in many academic

circles. That unanimity, only possible among intellectuals where clubbiness, self-interest, and conformism enter the picture, converts professors into just another pressure group bent on freedom for the sake of power instead of freedom for the sake of truth. If professors made better use of their own opportunities to promote effective debate on all important questions—within the individual department and college, where all contestants can confront one another—the public might find it easier to stomach Communists, confident that their conspiratorial techniques will not work.

The objective circumstances which nourish conformity, discussed earlier in this article, are formidable indeed. But they can be conquered if enough professors decide, as David Riesman would say, that henceforth they are going to be inner-directed. The traditions of individual freedom and responsibility still exist around which they can integrate themselves. In fact, they pay lip service to them—a not entirely useless kind of service—all the time. They need only prevent their devotion to them from becoming so incandescent that the light blinds them to the reality it is supposed to illuminate.

II. "The Devil It Is!"

by IRVING HOWE

MR. CRONIN's main point seems to be something like this: Liberals, just because they are committed to democratic values and occupy so prominent a place in the American universities, are most in need of moral self-scrutiny. They should beware of the smugness of their virtue; they must guard against the "repressive impulse" (as Lionel Trilling calls it) that may be lurking behind their militant claims to enlightenment.

Now it is hard to disagree with a warning against the possible righteousness of one's rightness. It is also hard to know what to do with one's agreement. Warnings against righteousness are like sermons against sin. Though I enjoy my modest share of sin, I hope, when the final roll is called, to be counted among its opponents. But if I can't quite tell what is happening in the preacher's mind, I want at least to know in which direction his finger is pointing. And I want to listen carefully, to hear whether warnings against pride are being spoken in accents of pride. Mr. Cronin does not strike me as a St. Francis.

Mr. Cronin presents his indictment of liberal professors in the rhetoric of liberal self-chastisement; but when one looks a bit closely at the specifications of his argument, it becomes clear that he is really a neo-conservative guerrilla in academic robes. For if half of what he says is true, then we liberals and radicals (I propose a temporary united front against Mr. Cronin) had better close shop and admit that the *National Review* is right. Liberalism is open to deep criticism and I, for one, have tried to make some of it; but things are not quite so bad as Mr. Cronin would have you suppose. Not even half of what he says is true.

That academic life can be petty, mean, anxious, competitive; that some professors, like many other people, feel uneasy in the company of brilliant colleagues; that

there is a drift in the universities, as in all institutions, toward the psychology of self-approval—none of these quite comes to a remarkable discovery, especially when advanced in the free-floating generalities that Mr. Cronin favors.

But, let us grant it, there is *something* to what he says. The question then arises: what is the necessary connection between such faults of academic life and the faults of liberalism? Skating from phrase to phrase, Mr. Cronin never so much as asks himself this question. Instead, he presents a string of assertions as if the mere fact of their sequence were evidence of causality. For even if academic life were what Mr. Cronin says it is and liberals were a dominant force in the large American universities, it would still constitute an elementary error in logic to assume that the one is due to the other. Had Mr. Cronin been seriously concerned with investigating a problem rather than throwing spitballs at liberals, he would have had to note that:

1. All institutional life, if only in order to perpetuate itself, tends to generate inner patterns of conformity and complacency. This is true regardless of the ideological bias—liberal, conservative, radical—that may dominate a given institution. To show that liberalism in any significant way helps to speed or intensify such a trend would require analysis of the *specific* nature of American liberalism today. Such evidence might well be available; but Mr. Cronin is too concerned with large blinding thrusts (or large blinding phrases) to be able to find it.

2. Professors may not earn as much money as they think they should, and they may not be as consciously motivated to live by the dollar as are other people; but most of them remain subject to the mores and imbued with the values of a commercial society. It is therefore at least possible that much of what Mr. Cronin finds disagreeable in the academic world needs to be related

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