SEEDS OF ANARCHY:
A STUDY OF CAMPUS REVOLUTION

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REBELLION AGAINST BOREDOM

War in Viet Nam, Black Power, "authoritarianism" at universities, opposition to the "military-industrial complex", and other pretexts for students' rebellion are pretexts only. Really, the principal reason for discontent among college and university students is boredom: boredom among the better students because the modern American unversity offers too little for mind and conscience; boredom among the poorer students because they never should have enrolled at all.

"I'm not surprised at all that many young people – those who are naive and searching for identity, as well as those who are quite mature and clearly motivated – 'drop out' of their studies." So writes to me a well-known editor and critic, professor and formerly administrator at a large middlewestern state university. "Professor Bruno Bettelheim's recent statement before a Congressional committee was entirely accurate. As you know from your own past experience, many of our faculty have good reason to be disaffected, and their common reason is similar to the reason the students are unhappy and unruly.

"One can easily lose his identity, even before he becomes aware of it. The facelessness and namelessness of the modern university are horrifying. I just heard today that the appropriate Presidential commission in Washington is prepared to recommend that no universities be established and allowed to grow over a student body of ten thousand. But what about the present monstrosities?"

Amen to that. Student and professor are victims of what Dr. Ernest van den Haag calls "America's Pelagian heresy." Old Pelagius, so drubbed by St. Augustine, declared that all men will be saved eventually, without the operation of divine grace. The average American in our century has come to believe that all men may be saved through educationism, without necessity for thought. Mere enrollment in a college, the American Pelagians have been convinced, will assure a lucrative salary upon graduation, no really hard work, acceptance at the country club, tolerable manners, participation in middle-brow culture, exemption from military service, and moral equanimity.

Ever since the end of the Second World War, therefore, our campuses have been flooded by the ineducable; young persons uninterested in abstractions, and consequently incapable of profiting from years in college, because the higher learning necessarily has to do with abstractions. What once was academic community has become academic collectivism.

In this mob, the better students are resentful and frustrated, for general standards have been lowered below their interest and capacity. In this mob, the inferior students are bewildered and afflicted with ennui, for even degraded standards are too high for them. In this mob, the learned professor is deprived of dignity and influence, though he may lecture little and be paid much. In this mob, the teaching-assistant and the research-assistant are worked to the bone, paid a pittance – and develop the mentality of proleterians.

Sixteen years ago, this writer became an academic drop-out, in protest against the deliberate lowering of academic standards

and the insensate swelling of campus enrollments; since then, I have offered a seminar at this college or that university, but wild horses couldn't drag me back to permanent residence on the typical campus. At that time (in the pages of *Collier's Year Book)* I gave some account of the reasons that had impelled me to resign from the faculty of Michigan State College. Some brief passages from my article on academic freedom and academic standards in 1953 must suffice here:

"In March, 1953, many of us were shocked to learn that a further lowering of standards was contemplated. Though Michigan State College had an enrollment (13,000) scarcely inferior to its post-war peak, the administrators manifested an eagerness to expand at a great pace, so that the College would accommodate 17,500 students by 1960, 25,000 by 1965 and over 30,000 by 1970. (Actually, these expectations were modest: at this writing, there are some 43,000 students at Michigan State, and certain zealots for aggrandizement talk of 100,000 before the end of the century.) This program of aggrandizement met with no open criticism: that would have been imprudent. A range of immense flat-roofed dormitories was built at the western end of the campus, very like so many cell-blocks. Now how were young people to be persuaded to fill these dormitories? One way a college can solve this problem is to make matters easier and more entertaining and less scholarly, so that more young people will wish to enter and fewer will have to leave because they do not read.

"Those of us who believed in the maintenance of some standards in American education, on Jeffersonian principles, were sure that this new proposal to lower the system of grading was calculated to fill the new dormitories. This was denied by the dean with such heat that we were more convinced than ever. At a staff meeting of the Basic College, the administrators brought forward a mass of statistics, calculated to demonstrate that the standards of the Basic College already were higher than those of some other state universities in the Middle West, and higher than those of the upper schools at Michigan State – and that, therefore, the standards of the Basic College ought to be

reduced. In point of fact, the statistics were questionable, and interpretations placed upon them often inconsistent. But the shocking thing, to those of us who still believed that a state college has a high duty to the state and ought not to squander public funds, was that deans and heads of department actually could propose to lower standards in order simply to 'keep in step.' Their constant apology was that somehow the Basic College had got 'out of step', and must now conform to the allegedly general lowering of educational aims in America. . .

"Anything that encourages growth of enrollments must be good, in the judgment of educationists of this breed; and if a man dissents, let him be anathema. After all, larger enrollments may bring larger salaries and occasional promotions and more instructors under an administrator's thumb. Some nights, possibly, doubts may assail such an administrator; he may have been confronted briefly by the abysmal ignorance of some confused and unhappy student; and a headache may remind him that conscience, even though the vestige of a human existence less sophisticated, still cannot be amputated as if it were a vermiform appendix. . . . After all, none of us has much difficulty in remembering that he has emoluments to receive, or in forgetting that he has duties to perform. And is not the Wave of the Future on the side of the big dormitories? And will we not have a great many more unsuspecting young people to be processed through our plant by 1960? And twice as many by 1970? And Lord knows how many by 1984?"

So it has come to pass. Once upon a time, it was easy to love *alma mater:* then there existed a humane scale upon the campus, and genuine principles of learning might be discerned. But in the academic lonely crowd, little love is lost; and that crowd easily is converted into an academic mob. The student sansculotte and the instructor-ideologue readily find followers in such a collectivity. What wonder that the campus turns anarchic? The wonder is that inchoate and violent protest against academic anonymity and academic fraud did not burst forth earlier.

Professor Bruno Bettelheim, mentioned a few paragraphs earlier, has described perceptively, in a Viennese psychologist's terms, the mentality of campus rebels. They are led, he says, by students intellectually precocious but emotionally immature – little knots of bright young people, permissively reared, imperfectly educated, and altogether unacquainted with the limitations of human action. These, I may add, feel (with reason) that the typical mass campus has lost ethical purpose, intellectual relevance, and personal relationships: it has been perverted from its ends. They ask the right questions, though they know few answers.

Around themselves, those brighter students who play the role of revolutionaries gather the paranoiac students. (Dr. Bettelheim uses his terms carefully, and when he says "paranoiac", he means precisely that.) Out of the American Pelagian heresy, again, fond mothers and fathers have shipped off to the campus certain young persons who belong in a different sort of public institution, if they are to be institutionalized at all. Really, the university is no place for a cure of souls; but President Boomer offers all things to all men; and it is hoped that the young paranoiac may sink comfortably into the campus ethos of sociability. At Behemoth University, however, the student with serious psychological disturbances is given not bread, but a stone. Intellectually rootless, and depersonalized by the vastness of the campus crowd, if he has a proclivity toward violence that tendency is roused by the ideological sloganizing of the smart young theoretical revolutionaries, whose willing storm-trooper he becomes. He meets no Professor Mark Hopkins; the imperfectly-schooled young instructors whose lectures he attends offer no normative guidance. He grows bored; he grows angry; and a latent impulse toward destruction soon finds a vent.

Though the two classes of students described by Dr. Bettelheim (with flosses by myself) form no large part of the typical student-body, their immediate power is disproportionate to their numbers. They are unopposed, and sometimes abetted, by that large proportion of the students who have known

nothing outside college but the Permissive Society, in which nearly every appetite is gratified without labor, and in which authority (though unconsciously nearly everyone yearns after just authority) is resented. Such students do not find it unpleasant that administrators and professors are reviled publicly; they know no strong loyalties, and have been taught to reverence nothing; so long as their own campus pleasures are not seriously interrupted, they will not support an academic order.

Add to these the mass of "students" apathetic and indifferent to the life of the mind, present on the campus only to avoid the rigors of Viet Nam, or for the prospect of a snob-degree, or for certification as potential employees. Most of these never will be graduated, anyway; they could not care less what happens to the higher learning; and they will adventure nothing in defense of the Academy.

To this pass, we have been brought by the educationist empire-builders, by those professors who prefer governmental and industrial research-contracts to the pursuit or dissemination of wisdom, and by the American Pelagian heresy – which last has produced, also, the degradation of the democratic dogma in public primary and secondary schooling, so that the representative college freshman is wretchedly prepared for higher studies. Preoccupied with vocationalism and sociability, many colleges and universities have neglected both the development of right reason and of those ethical principles that we apprehend through the rousing of moral imagination. After enormous bricks-and-mortar expenditure, after infinite bragging about democratic culture, after promising a pleasant and affluent white-collar career to every boy and girl who can be lured into the degree-mill–why, we find that we have alienated both the enterprising talents and the mediocrity of the rising generation. Mankind can endure anything except boredom. For two decades, at least, we have bored undergraduates and graduate students; we have bored many professors; we have been smug and self-congratulatory about educational quantity. And now the paranoiacs are smashing the computer, while the ideologues are busy abolishing the liberties of the mind.

Here I have been writing about Behemoth University, or ıe typical overgrown and flatulent campus, where the boast "service" – service to industry, to government, to popular fatuation, service to anything except Veritas. Service to ing Numbers has been especially sycophantic. But King Num-ɜrs is easily bored, and ungrateful for flattery.

There survive, nevertheless, some colleges and even univer-ties that have yielded relatively little ground before King Num-ɜrs, and that have made comparatively few concessions to pres-ıre for reduction of intellectual standards. Some of these better ımpuses, true, also are beset by rebellion. Yet at such in-ɨtutions, the violence is imitative of graver troubles elsewhere, ɔr the most part, and is short-lived; it is repudiated by the ırge majority of students and professors. The University of hicago, and Harvard, for instance, have put down the leologue and the paranoiac after minor difficulties. Where the ecay of principle and discipline has not proceeded inordinately, ɔyalty to genuine academic community can withstand the ıntastic.

At Behemoth U., then, and at smaller institutions of small ıerit, the causes of rebellion are not difficult to discern. ɨnormousness in scale, with promiscuity in enrollment, destroys ersonal relationships in the Academy; it is inimical to intel-ɜctual love; and without love, there cannot be loyalty.

Among the better young minds, the development of a de-ecated rationalism, unchastened or uninformed by the moral ımagination, produces ideological yearnings and literally burn-ng impatience with the old imperfections of man and society.

Among students bored, ill-prepared, or emotionally distrubed, ıne may perceive a transference of personal discontents to the ıearest symbol of authority and order; the college or university. Jnable to integrate their souls, these discontented assault the ery liberal establishment – particularly on the campus – that et them adrift upon the raft of autonomy.

Schooling without discernible standards, from kinuergarten through college, has left the typical collegian nowadays ignorant of principle, vague of aspiration, and imperfect in any intellectual discipline. University and college now bear the brunt of a half-conscious resentment at this shoddiness.

American affluence and a fatuous social permissivism have produced a college-age population often intellectually flaccid and insulated against the harder aspects of the human condition (though sentimentally lachrymose whenever the "underprivileged" or "culturally deprived" are mentioned). Roughly speaking, the higher the students' background of prosperity, the higher the rebelliousness. These "revolutionaries" would demolish their own economic foundations. On the other hand, where most students are children of hard-working parents, the radicals are unpopular: consider the eviction of Mark Rudd from Brooklyn College by Brooklyn undergraduates no sooner than he had set foot on their campus, and similar resistance to ideologues and fanatics at Queen's College and City College.

Finally, as for causes of rebellion, the campus troubles in part result from conscious emulation of recent "activism" elsewhere: the "civil rights" movement, Black Power aggressiveness, protest against the war in Viet Nam. When undergraduates are unutterably bored, any varsity rag will do; the ideological trappings are incidental. Nor should we forget that young people between the ages of seventeen and twenty-one, in this year of Our Lord, have been fed the pabulum of television all their days. The TV producer must solve every personal or social problem within half an hour, or an hour at most; and students are indignant when the difficulties of the college, or the nation, or the world, are not resolved with equal celerity by the possessors of power. Man and society are perfectible on the flickering screen: surely we all would be utterly happy if only some wretched university president or some crepuscular military-industrial cabal were brought to heel.

By its nature, the college is a place for academic leisure and reflection, not for action; a place for preparation, not for

domination. Only when courses of study have grown boring altogether – or when the campus is packed with undergraduates who would be bored by Socrates, Abelard, or William Morris – do the students, and some of the professors, turn out of ennui, or out of a species of despair, to utopian notions of flopping society topsyturvy. So if we look for remedies to present academic discontents, it will not suffice to exhort the rising generation to discover diligence, patience, and one-hundred-percent Americanism. If there exist cures or palliatives, they are far more difficult and complex than mere admonition. To conserve the Academy, we must turn radicals, in a fashion: that is, we must go to the root of the troubles.

First, we must restore the humane scale, at every level of schooling. We must discourage the gigantism of Behemoth U., and shore up the small, independent university and college. We must repudiate the American Pelagian heresy, and admit to real colleges only real students. There is nothing dishonorable about abstaining from college; for those who desire action, the way should be cleared for them to act, rather than to languish in the quadrangle; for those who desire gainful employment, rather than lectures and books, impediments (including the fetish of a college degree for every straw-boss) should be removed, that they may find satisfying work.

Second, we must prune and vastly improve curricula. The students' strident demand for "relevance" has point, even if the protesting students are not fit judges of standards of relevance. Departments of education and of sociology, for example, should offer only a tenth of the courses they offer now – and should put some vigor and purpose into those surviving courses. Undergraduates should not be burdened with mere antiquarianism (a hobby for the educated, not a discipline for the pupil); still more important, undergraduates should be emancipated from the dreary and interminable survey-courses that they loathe. (This can be done if secondary schooling is improved.) Pseudo-vocational departments like business administration (for undergraduates), hotel administration, and all that, either should be abolished or should be transferred to distinct vocational or

technological institutes.

Third, we must work for greater diversity in schooling. As T. S. Eliot said, there should be many different kinds of education for many different kinds of people. Multiversity is a delusion. Apprenticeship, specialized training, part-time employment, and projects of the sort that William James called "the moral equivalent of war" would be far better for most young people than four years of fun and games, or (more commonly) four years of sullen resentment, in a nominally liberal college or a nominally philosophical university.

Fourth, we must improve the professors and instructors. The American graduate school is an archaic abomination, with few honorable exceptions, turning out neither truly learned scholars and gentlemen, nor yet competent teachers of undergraduates. The doctoral degree should not be conferred before a candidate has attained the age of thirty-five years, and then preferably only after he has had some experience of the world beyond the Ivory Tower, and has accomplished something or other.

Fifth, we must reinvigorate the moral imagination, in humane studies and in the natural sciences, so as to diminish pedantry and academic arrogance, and to inform our time that we are part of a venerable continuity and essence. We must remind ourselves that wisdom did not commence with our generation, and will not perish when we are buried. We must renew our understanding of the ethical ends of all formal learning. (Many radical undergraduates nowadays sense our deficiency here, even if their own ethics are naive in the extreme.) We must rededicate the Academy to wisdom; we must cease whoring after the strange gods of isolated fact and arid specialization.

Last, we must rescue students from the snares of the ideologue and the fanatic activist. (A scholarly radical, Professor Herbert Marcuse, tells his disciples to refrain from "activism" in college: their task is to study and talk now, if they are to act effectively later. Had Marx spent his years parading with a

placard round Trafalgar Square, rather than burrowing in the British Museum, he would have been altogether ineffectual.) It is quite possible to convince students, I find, that college and university are places for acquirement of intellectual disciplines, sober meditation and inquiry, and pleasant discourse; but that is possible only when courses offer something for the mind, and when professors are something better than dry sticks or frustrated soap-box exhibitionists. When the Academy ceases to be boring, the student will cease to wave the bloody shirt.

Some of our present distresses will evaporate with the alteration of circumstances outside the Academy. When the war in Viet Nam ends, much protest will end. (Incidentally, either students ought to be subject to conscription as are other young men, or else no one ought to be conscripted, a volunteer army developing instead.) The Selma notion of instant social reform is waning as the "civil rights" movement is fulfilled or else drifts into the hands of demagogues. Communist, anarchist, and Black Power movements on the campus generally have disgraced themselves, and hereafter will be increasingly detestable to the strong majority of students. As administrators and professors recover (by shock) from the feebleness of what Dr. Sidney Hook calls "ritualistic liberalism", the paranoiac and the professional inciter of violence on the campus can be dealt with through half-forgotten disciplinary processes or through the ordinary operation of courts of law. On many campuses, students have gained some degree of participation in administrative decisions: once possessed of this, they are unlikely to exercise it often, for campus committee-meetings are inordinately dull and time-consuming.

Yet let us not permit cheerfulness to break in overmuch. One set of students' ideological slogans and disruptive actions will give way merely to another set, unless the smug gentlemen who make up the majority on most boards of college trustees begin to think; unless President Boomer is supplanted by President Socrates; unless Behemoth University is chastened by its present adversity; unless faculty and students become aware that the pursuit of wisdom is preferable to the pursuit of power; unless

the American public awakes from its educationist trauma of salvation through endless schooling.

Who wouldn't rebel against the domination of dullness and mediocrity? Who shouldn't? There is this to be said for the antics of the student radicals: any human body, or any human institution, that cannot react is a corpse. By their reaction against boredom, the students militant have waked us somewhat from the deep intellectual doze into which plump democracies periodically sink.