

NOTES

(The Faculty of Political Science at Columbia University invited its Departments to canvass members as to their views on future tasks of the University. The following notes were submitted to the Department of Economics.)

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It is desirable that Universities in the free democracies of the world should shoulder the task of counteracting the tendency towards cultural conformity which seems almost inherent in modern complex society. The force of these tendencies has become more and more apparent. They have not been created, they have only been strengthened by recent political developments. Means and methods should be studied by which the health of the community can be protected against their enfeebling influence. It would be illusory to expect free institutions as such to achieve this, for our justly prized safeguards of freedom may themselves be subject to excoriation by the silent pressure of the intolerance emanating from modern mass democracy. In effect, it is public opinion itself which must be prevented from becoming a vehicle of standardization of attitudes. Admittedly this is a task of supreme difficulty. The University may be the one social organ capable of tackling it. Its very name implies a brief to protect human existence from departmentalization. Catholicity of valid knowledge endows it with a political exterritoriality which, in this crisis of our civilization, may be of utmost service to the national community and, indirectly, to mankind as a whole.

Admittedly, any discussion of the tasks of the University in regard to the maintenance of a sound public opinion on cultural and intellectual matters is beset at the moment by the dilemma of national security versus civic liberties. The dilemma is undoubtedly a real one; to ignore it is to bury one's head in the sand. Yet it need not prove quite insoluble, if tackled in a judicious spirit which is open both to the obvious realities of the situation and the transcendent principle of political freedom.

The point raised here is an altogether different one, and rather tends to be obscured by topical issues. The danger is no less grave for lying in the future. In order to meet it, the Political Science Faculty might help to formulate the tasks falling to the University in these next years.

It might be right to accept explicitly the responsibility of the University towards the political community of which it forms a part. Its functions in the community should be envisaged in the light of this responsibility. For health and morality, prosperity and safety of the body politic depend upon the spirit animating it. The University as a powerful factor in the formation of that spirit is committed to act as a guardian of the ideal of culture in a free society.

Assuredly, the organization and functioning of most Universities, and certainly of Columbia University, is an embodiment of these liberal principles. What more could Columbia do to serve them in the future than it has traditionally done in the past, it may be queried.

The answer, or at least the method of finding it, is implied in the question. The liberal influence of Columbia University must in future be made into an active force, consciously maintaining that which up till now was only an underlying premise of its existence.

The spirit of an institution manifests itself through the aggregate of the assumptions which regulate its everyday activities. Clarity on these assumptions is all important. Culture involves today valuation of manifoldness for its own sake; defense of non-conformity on principle; protection of minorities in every sphere of man's organized existence, in the interest of all and as the irreducible will of the overwhelming majority; the ideal of a national society which is free by virtue of its diversity and articulation.

A declaration of principles along lines such as these might form the first, in itself a most weighty step towards implementation.

New York, March 12, 1948

Karl Polanyi

Any discussion of the tasks of the University in regard to the maintenance of a sound public opinion on cultural and intellectual matters, is beset at the moment by the dilemma of national security versus civic liberties. The dilemma is undoubtedly a real one; to ignore it is to bury one's head in the sand. ~~However,~~ ^{yet} it need not ~~per~~ ^{be} that reason prove quite insoluble, if tackled in a judicious spirit which is open both to the realities of the situation and the transcendent principle of protection of minority views.

The point raised here is an altogether different one, and rather tends to be obscured by topical issues. ~~It~~ It is no less grave for lying primarily in the future. I mean the pressure unconsciously exerted by modern public opinion in favor of a standardized culture.

It is highly desirable, I submit, that Universities in the free democracies of the world should shoulder the task of counteracting the tendency towards cultural conformity which seems almost inherent in modern complex society. The force of these tendencies has become more and more apparent. They have not been created, they have only been strengthened by recent political developments. Means and methods should be studied by which the health of the community can be protected against their enfeebling influence. It would be illusory to expect free institutions as such to achieve this, for our justly prized safeguards of freedom may themselves be subject to expropriation by the silent pressure of the intolerance emanating from modern mass democracy. In effect, it is public opinion itself which must be prevented from becoming a vehicle of standardization of attitudes. This is admittedly a task of supreme difficulty. The University may be the only social organ capable of tackling it. The very name University implies a brief to protect human existence against departmentalization. Catholicity of valid knowledge endows it with a political exterritoriality which, in this crisis of our civilisation, may be of utmost service to the national community, and, indirectly, to mankind as a whole.

In this spirit it is submitted that the Political Science Faculty formulate what the University might try to accomplish in the next years.

In doing so it might be right explicitly to accept the responsibility of the University towards the political community of which it forms a part. It is in ~~fulfillance~~ ^{fulfillance} of this responsibility that its special functions should be envisaged. Health and morality, prosperity and safety of the body politic depend upon the spirit animating the community. It is as a powerful factor in the formation of ~~this~~ ^{that} spirit that the University is committed to act as ~~the repository of the ideals of~~ ^{a guardian of the ideal} culture in a free society.

Assuredly, the organisation and functioning of most Universities, and certainly of Columbia University, is an embodiment of these liberal principles. What more could Columbia do to serve them in the future than it has traditionally done in the past, it may be queried.

The answer, or at least the right method of finding it, is implied in the question. The liberal influence emanating from Columbia must in future be made into an active force, consciously maintaining that which up till now was ~~only~~ an underlying premise of its existence.

The spirit of an institution manifests itself ⁱⁿ through the aggregate of the assumptions which regulate the working of its everyday activities. Clarity about these assumptions is all important. Culture involves today valuation of manifoldness for its own sake; defence of non-conformity on principle; protection of minorities in every sphere of man's organised existence, in the interest of and as a irreducible part of the will of the overwhelming majority; the ideal of a national society which is free by virtue of its diversity and articulation.

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