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# The University as a Mass Organization

Recently the term "crisis of legitimacy" has come into use to question the relevancy of the university to modern mass society. It is our purpose here to explore some of the changes in the social structure of the university and the discontinuities between the needs of emergent groups — clients, employees, and critics of the university — from the perspective of theories of mass society.[1]

Mass organizations occur most readily in situations of drastic and sudden social change, when traditional regimes are unable to cope effectively in terms of their traditional frames of reference with demands which clients have thrust upon them.[2] Rapid change in the universities is correlated with changes in the social structure and the aspiration of citizens in modern, industrial societies.

Traditionally, universities were far removed from the life of the common man and from the main stream of society. They served the limited education needs of the aristocratic elites or of a few secular and religious professional groups.[3] In Britain, until the nineteenth century, Oxford and Cambridge held a monopoly on higher education. The educated gentleman, not the highly trained technocrat, was the goal of college education.

In North America in the twentieth century — with the emphasis on an equalitarian ideology and with abundant resources to implement, at least partially, the ideology of "equal opportunity for all"—university education became a possibility for many groups who formerly were excluded. These groups included children of working-class parents or of middle-class families of modest means, those students with average intelligence, women, Negroes, and other minority groups.

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[1]The author is indebted to the following for the theoretical ideas presented here: Philip Selznick, "Institutional Vulnerability in Mass Society," *American Journal of Sociology* 56 (January, 1951), pp. 320-331; Edward Shils, "The Theory of Mass Society," *Diogenes* No. 39 (Fall, 1962), pp. 45-66.

[2]Selznick defines a mass organization as " . . . one in which participation is segmental, mobilization is high and membership is relatively unstructured save through the formal devices of managerial control and through unmediated emotional attachments to a centralized elite."

[3]A. Flexner, *Universities: American, English, German* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1930).

Beside these groups of students and their parents, who make increasing demands on university facilities and faculties, other groups in the society (e.g., government agencies and private businesses) have made demands on the universities in terms of their own needs for basic research and technological innovation. The success of the university as a "knowledge organization" has contributed to its vulnerability as a mass organization. For example, the growth of the semi-autonomous research institutes and centers, supported by funds from foundations or governments, has accentuated the fragmentation of the universities. Not only have these institutes entered into the competition for staff, but they have injected a new element in the prestige hierarchy within the university and have increased the stresses on the old order in the organization.

The expansion of graduate education has also wrought considerable change in universities. Traditionally, medicine, law and theology were the only professional schools. Now, business, government, and other organizations are requiring highly trained, specialized personnel in a variety of new disciplines ranging from soil technology to hospital administration. The emphasis on graduate education and the prestige among faculties of teaching graduate students have contributed to the view of university departments as professional communities whose first task is to train their own graduate students and then to give service to the total university in terms of undergraduate education. Only those resources demanded by the dean, or surpluses of faculty time and talents, are devoted to the education of undergraduates.

These changes are compounded by the displacement of goals and means by significant groups which use the university. The university, instead of being a highly valued organization in its own right, is considered instrumental for other goals in the society. Students and employers think not in terms of "education," but in terms of credit hours and grade-point averages. The quality of one's education is considered less important than having a college degree. Indeed, some businesses don't care as much *what* a person's major was in college as what his grade point average was, and what extra-curricular activities the prospective employee engaged in while in college. University values of scholarship and leisurely investigation are transmitted into vocational goals which are demanded by other agencies.

Combined with these shifts in demands placed upon the universities by divergent constituencies, the universities must adapt to the changing moral climate of society. Increasingly the cry of "freedom" and "rights" is raised by subordinate members in a wide variety of organizations. In universities, along with churches, factories, families and governments, the rights of subordinates have noticeably increased during the past generation. Subordinates want freedom, within organizations, to lead their private lives without the restraints of the organization but with all of the advantages of the organization. At the same time, subordinates, through their self-defense organizations like labor unions, agitate

for a more important role in the policy boards and committees which govern their activities as subordinates.

Students, *having* more "freedom" of choice than ever before in a contemporary university, demand something more. "Give us a challenge," they say, "give us adventure, give us ideals, give us a place on faculty councils and administrative boards"; and when professors lecture them on "the responsibilities of freedom" and the problems of government, the students dismiss their ideas as "hackneyed" and "old fashioned."

A crisis of legitimacy is a mood, a feeling in society, or among many major sectors of society — like students, parents, businessmen, government officials, and those many others who demand the services of universities — that the universities are not trustworthy to fulfill their needs. Along with the feeling that the universities are not legitimate agencies of acculturation, there is a growing feeling of distrust. The major interest groups accuse the university of being confused in its goals and unresponsive to its clients. But the universities, with the drastic increase in the scope of new demands thrust upon them, and without the structure to cope with the demands, are forced to exist from one year to the next in a constant atmosphere of turmoil, sometimes with only *ad hoc* solutions to major organizational dilemmas.

This crisis in legitimacy has been most dramatically revealed at the University of California during the now famous "Berkeley Riots."[4] In the name of "freedom" students questioned the ancient verities of the university but accepted uncritically new doctrinaire solutions. Lipset feels that "a high incidence of political activity among students indicates a failure of the university as an academic community, rejection of the intellectual leadership of faculty, and denigration of scholarship to more lowly status than politics within the university."[5] Not only does a vocal minority of students question specific rules and procedures within the university; they question the concept of the university itself. The university has lost its moral authority while its intellectual leadership is being questioned.

Besides the crisis of legitimacy and the moral shifts in society which are expressed in relations within the university, relations between significant sectors of the organization have changed from an intimate, personal basis, to relationships based on stereotypes. Students, faculty, administrators and their publics react to each other not as people but as categories. Impersonal audiences replace face-to-face, expressive groups. To faculty, students are dull, lazy and indifferent. To the students, faculty members are cold, unresponsive, abstract, demanding and arrogant. As with all stereotypes, there may be a germ of truth

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[4]S. M. Lipset, *The Berkeley Riots* (Garden City: Doubleday-Anchor, 1965).

[5]*Ibid*, p. 9.

in those which are prevalent in universities, but the reactions of participants in an organization, in terms of stereotypes alone, leads to shallow and indifferent relations which are particularly harmful in an organization whose ideology stresses the importance of "individuality" and "personal development."

We do not imply here that all large-scale universities can be considered as "mass organizations" nor that all sections of a university are equally vulnerable to these stresses. Some sectors of the university are more susceptible to mass behavior than others. And in certain universities, radical departures in structure may inhibit the development of a mass organization. Generally, it is among undergraduate students that the strains toward mass movements within the university are most extreme, particularly among those students who have placed such high hopes in the university and have felt so isolated from centers of activity that they have become disillusioned, disinherited, and powerless within the organization.

Having rejected the "old life," the fraternities and beer parties, the football team and the Spring Prom — those facets of the university which gave a richness to the social life of undergraduates, regardless of how trivial the content of these activities — and having rejected professors as arbitrators of culture, but still expecting the university to *give* them a sense of meaning and purpose, the disaffected students are disappointed and restless. This restlessness may be transformed into hostility against the authority of the university.

The image of the university as a gigantic factory which Mario Savio, one of the spokesmen of the "prophetic minority," has described, embodies this mood of distrust and disillusionment.

> The American university is a factory that turns out a certain product needed by industry or government. Because speech does often have consequences which might alter this perversion of higher education, the university must put itself in a position of censorship. . . .
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> Many students here at the university, many people in society, are wandering aimlessly about. Strangers in their own lives, there is no place for them. They are people who have not learned to compromise, who for example have come to the university to learn to question, to grow to learn— all the standard things that sound like clichés because no one takes them seriously. And they find at one point or other that for them to become part of society, to become lawyers, ministers, businessmen, people in government, that very often they must compromise those principles which were most dear to them. They must suppress the most creative impulses that they have; this is a prior condition for being part of the system. The university is well structured, well tooled, to turn out people with all the sharp edges worn off, the well-rounded person. And this means that the best among the people who enter must for four years wander aimless much of the time questioning why they are on campus at all, doubting whether there is any point in what they are doing, and looking toward a very bleak existence afterward in a game in which all the rules have been made up, which one cannot really amend.[6]

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[6]Mario Savio, "The End of History," in S. M. Lipset and S. Wolin, *The Berkeley Student Revolt* (Garden City: Doubleday-Anchor, 1965), p. 219.

The university as a factory emphasizes the commonness of participants, not the uniqueness of a human intellect.

It is among undergraduate students, also, that the replacement of "high culture" by "mass culture" in the university is most accentuated. Under the impact of the mass media (particularly television), the "paperback revolution" (with its proliferation of summaries and reviews of basic academic source material in history, English, the arts and science), and the degeneration of the lecture system and introductory courses into "Appreciation of . . . ," the student market for ideas has become homogenized and independent of the direction of the faculty. Students are exposed to ideas and cultural events of which their professors, encapsulated in their own narrow intellectual specializations, may not even be aware. The culture-bearing ability of the university has become increasingly atrophied.

Instead of professors acting as arbitrators of ideas and cultural products on the basis of independent critical standards, the student market is the arbitrator of professors and their ideas. In the academic supermarket all the mechanisms of a popular market are articulated. Students "shop around" for courses that are "mickey mouse," or that are the most interesting because the professor is entertaining. They use "consumers' guides" like the *Students Guide to Professors and Courses,* published at more and more universities, before they buy a product. They make their schedules on the basis of how many term papers are assigned, how funny the professor is, and whether the course fits into their schedule so as to have all afternoon classes with Friday afternoon free to go skiing. With standardization and homogenization of undergraduate curriculum, marginal differentiation and packaging become more important.

The students admire pop art and underground movies and sneer at their professors who have not read the latest literary sensation or do not know the latest theory of interstellar travel.

Along with this change from high culture to mass culture, the change in the traditional relationship between students and faculty, from dialogues to performances, has altered the ties with the organization. Students complain that they never get to see their professors except during the performance in the lecture hall, and that they feel lost and aimless in the halls of academia. Their complaints about the remoteness of their courses to the careers they will lead after leaving school, are echoed by professors who complain that the university is not fulfilling their needs as professionals because it saddles them with huge lecture courses to teach, refuses to grant them enough time off from research and demands that they perform minor, time-consuming tasks like advising students.

The major participants, the students and faculty, react to this situation of a mass organization in a variety of ways.

For some students, sensing the irrelevance of their university courses for their post-graduate career but knowing the importance of the diploma as a prerequisite for a job, "getting out" and "getting by" in the university in the easiest possible way becomes the main goal. The university is not a central life interest for these students. Their social-recreational life is focused away from the university. Using the auxiliary services which have grown up around the mass universities — the published notes, the summaries and suggested analyses of required reading and the *Students Guide to Professors and Courses* — they can get by with a minimum of effort and a maximum of convenience.

Other students, who feel a need for "meaning" and "experience" and who also sense that the academic marketplace in displaying its products does not provide guidelines to students, turn against the university and the professors as "phony" or "superficial." They seek their experience in activities peripheral to the university and sometimes extra-legal — the drug scene, the hip scene, the radical politics scene or some other self-consuming, demanding activity. But these students harbor resentment against the university for letting them down, and support others who are critical of the universities for other reasons.

Indeed, it may be that most of the undergraduate students feel resentment against the faculty. Instead of actively participating in the classroom experience, the students sit like practised critics waiting for the professor to fluff a line or work himself into a logical paradox, waiting to ask the embarrassing question that will expose the professor as a "phony." Sophisticated and self-confident, having vast independent, intellectual resources at their disposal in the form of paperbacks, mass media, and pre-packaged cram courses, the students do not need the lecture system to transmit knowledge to them. Lectures are an imposition on their time.

Much like the French aristocrats in the eighteenth century who had given up their government duties to professional bureaucrats and professional armies, who had lost contact with their feudal dependents because they spent their time engaged in petty conspiracies at court, the contemporary professors as teachers and mediators of culture are a declining group in society. They have lost contact with their students and lost prestige in their eyes. They have given up many traditional privileges as teachers to graduate assistants and administrators, and they have allowed the traditional relationship between students and professors to deteriorate.[7]

When a group of people is declining in prestige in an organization, they are most exposed and vulnerable and most subject to resentment by subordinates who feel that the declining group is being rewarded for

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[7]See F. Bease and R. Dubin, "The Assistant: Academic Subaltern," *Administrative Science Review* 11 (March, 1967).

services they no longer can provide. Professors may react to this situation in several somewhat over-lapping ways. Some professors retreat into their profession. They see themselves as "cosmopolitans" who only use their university appointment as an excuse for practising their profession. They rush into the classrooms, read their lectures, and rush back into their offices or laboratories to continue their research or write letters to other professionals half way around the world. They protect themselves from students with a horde of secretaries and graduate assistants and feel their time is imposed upon if they have to interview a student.

Other professors defect to the administrative scene. They work within the petty rivalries in the department or between deans to secure a place in the university hierarchy. They may be active "socializers" at the faculty club, and they and others on the faculty may look with nostalgia to the "good old days" when the university was smaller and the students "knew their place."

Some professors defect to the world of business or government where "things are really happening" and where they feel their talents are more rewarded, not only in terms of money, but in prestige and acceptance.

Finally, there are professors who defect to the students. Like the pre-Revolution French aristocrats who gave money to the revolutionists and cried against the evils of their own class, these professors spend their time advising students on how to manipulate the power structure of the university and on the tactics of demonstrations or protests. They publicly deplore the state of the university and act as professional front men for student activists by writing articles for the little magazines extolling the virtues of the "prophetic minority" of student intellectuals, giving interviews to the prestige journals like *Harper's* and the *Atlantic,* and preaching the demise of the university.

Amid all the controversy and turmoil, the universities appear more wealthy and extravagant than ever before, spending vast sums of money on new buildings, new campuses and elaborate academic extravaganzas like nuclear reactors, computing machines and radio telescopes. The football stadiums grow larger and competition gets more intense to secure season tickets for the games; the parking situation becomes more unbearable, and the competition for Nobel prize-winning faculty members increases.

Beneath this image of success, the universities rest on sometimes unstable financial grounds. Dependent on handouts from the federal government or state legislatures, they are afraid to raise tuition enough to offset the rapidly increasing costs of the organization, unable to fulfill the demands of their constituents, faced with a crisis of legitimacy, and unable to take the drastic measures necessary to improve their condition.

In this situation the appeal of radical solutions increases. Prophets preaching "new approaches" and critics searching for a scapegoat are accepted readily by many groups who are dissatisfied with the university.

A number of proposals for the wholesale reorganization of educational institutions have been advanced by these critics. Some suggest abandoning the universities much as the Maya Indians abandoned old shrines and old gods to build new temples to new gods. Other critics have suggested a return to the "classical" British model of a university as a collection of colleges, each with its own traditions and faculty, where participants share a communality of intellectual and social experience. This approach is being partially implemented at such places as the new University of California at Santa Cruz.

Paul Goodman and some of the critics in the "new Left" have expounded the concept of a "free university" to compliment the multiversity. In the "free university" students and faculty could share ideas in seminars outside the regular structure of courses with their routine of taking tests and the emphasis on "getting a good grade." (Although the idea is romantically appealing, the "free university" does not offer a viable approach to the question of the legitimacy of the university and its efficacy in an age of rapid social change.)

The vulnerability of the university to mass agitation can be reduced only when some basic questions have been decided: whether university admittance is a *right* for all citizens or a *privilege* granted by some official agency; whether a public university can be an instrument of the state and of big business to graduate "qualified personnel" to feed the ever-growing appetite of big corporations and the bureaucracy, and at the same time maintain the autonomous values of the university (of scholarship, of leisurely discourse, of the exploration of ideas); and whether teaching and research can be successfully wedded in the same organization in an age of increasingly complex technology.

There have been few studies of the administration of universities and the impact of large research centers upon the university.

In the end, however, legitimacy and trust rest on shared expectations of members of an organization. No matter how "efficient" or "well-run" a university is, if it has lost its moral authority, if the social distance between administrators, faculty and students has become so great that they react to each other only in terms of stereotypes, then the effectiveness of the university can be very low. If the faculty does not take the students seriously, if politics and career-building are more important than scholarship, then the university is failing in its purpose.

Students must be taught that the purposes of the university are limited, that a university education is neither the way to secular salvation nor just another means to avoid the draft. Faculty members must be interested in students as people and not consider teaching an arduous,

unpleasant job that takes time away from research projects and other tasks which are more important for a professor. And administrators must be as concerned with people as they are with buildings. Administrators are not just caretakers of parking lots and piles of concrete — they are caretakers of academic values of scholarship and freedom of inquiry and the right of dissent. If they are swayed by every pressure group, by every critic who takes a potshot at the university, then their inconsistency will be seen as a sign of weakness and their ineptness will be ever more evident.