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The Status of Students

During the winter of 1967/68 an article entitled "The Student as Nigger" was printed in a number of student newspapers in North America. As far as I know this article was never included in any of the more popular family publications which are currently engaged in exploring student unrest, presumably because the author, Gerry Farber, used a large number of taboo words in making his point. Yet he made it very well indeed, and it is a pity that his piece is not generally available to the popular reader who is presently struggling to understand student behaviour.

Briefly, Mr. Farber drew an analogy between the way in which society presently regards the student and the way in which certain sections of society regard the Negro. He pointed out that in institutions of higher learning, the separate and unequal classes of faculty and students are a close parallel to the Southern distinction made between whites and "niggers." For example, segregation on the campus is carefully observed. There are separate and unequal dining facilities, parking areas, and library privileges. Any student who ventures to infringe upon the privileges of the faculty is considered "uppity" and any faculty member who panders to student popularity by inviting students into the faculty dining room is considered the equivalent of the "nigger-lover." Certainly dating between the two classes is regarded with as much horror as is miscegenation in the deep South.

Furthermore, Farber claims, most students have long been disciplined to accept their inferior status and rarely question it. There are plenty of undergraduate "Uncle Toms" who look with distaste and anger upon those student radicals who attempt to change the system. While students vary in awareness of their slave status, most have a slave mentality which prompts them to accept without question such controlling mechanisms as examinations and grades. Indeed, such devices are used by faculty to breed both fear and respect for authority, because they themselves are generally fearful of confrontation with the uppity slave who is inclined to challenge that authority. Farber concludes by pointing out that you can't educate slaves; you can only train them to do

certain tasks under continuous supervision. So students are not permitted (and do not even consider as desirable) the freedom to explore questions which interest them and which are not set down as permissible and necessary by "the plantation manager" at the head of the class.

Mr. Farber's analogy was much more pungent and descriptive than my resumé, not wholly because he used more descriptive words. He certainly intended it as a polemic, to shock students to a realization of their status. Yet I think that equating students to niggers is not entirely accurate, although certainly colourful. Niggers as a class were considered to be members of a race which was either inferior by nature or which at least needed generations of careful tutelage by their betters before they could take a position of equality. If they were capable of emancipation to full citizenship at all, it would have to be under a gradual process.

In contrast, students are considered capable of acquiring citizenship in a few short years, if not in the time it takes to receive a sheepskin and a handshake from the chancellor. Their inferiority is temporary, and the experience of being inferior is considered a healthy factor in their development into full fledged citizenship. Until they are emancipated, it would be more accurate to consider them not as niggers or slaves but as wards: wards of their parents, the state, or of the particular institution which has been given the task of their development. The period during which they are wards usually ends rather abruptly when they are granted a diploma and they are then allowed some kind of equality with their elders. Until then they are subject to the authority of their betters and within the custody or under the control of their guardians. Obedience and docility rather than initiative and responsibility are the appropriate characteristics of a ward.

This view of the status of the student has been common throughout history, although there have been exceptions. For instance, in socratic Greece, many students were clients, who paid their teachers, the sophists, whatever they felt the teaching was worth. A respected and consequently well paid sophist gained his respect not because he had the authority of power but because he had the authority of knowledge. If he didn't have the knowledge he would starve to death, since he was completely unable to coerce his clients into attending his classes. Therefore he not only required knowledge, but also a capacity of demonstrating to his client the value of that knowledge. In the contemporary situation, however, the teacher or professor has as a client not the student, but rather the taxpayer, the state, or industry. When the taxpayer or the state are the clients, there is frequently a very vague idea concerning the kinds of knowledge or skill they wish provided to the ward. It is clear, however, that they rarely consider that part of the task of the teacher is to demonstrate to his ward the value of what he teaches. Wards are not supposed to inquire about such values but

simply to obey their guardians. Industry, on the other hand, is much more single-minded about the function of the guardian. When industry is the client, the student becomes not so much a ward as a future product, to be processed in a particular way to serve a particular function, designated by particular industries.

The approach to the status of a student as a product rather than as a ward is one which probably prevails more in practice than in theory, and in theory I would assume it would find few defenders. However there are many proponents of the view that the student is a ward; read any contemporary newspaper for letters to the editor which advise that students should cease agitation and do as they are told, since not they but the taxpayers have financed the institution, and therefore the taxpayers alone or their appointed guardians should be the ones who have the right to control such wards.

It is this view of the student as a financially-dependent ward, which I wish to question. A clearly expressed example of such a view is offered by L. B. Mayhew, in a recent issue of the *Saturday Review*:

Institutions also fail to recognize that in many respects college students today represent a new kind of adolescence, requiring a special kind of response. (It is also true, of course, that students have not faced the fact that they are still not adults in the full sense of that concept.) Adolescence may be defined as that period between childhood and the time when the individual assumes adult responsibility for himself, his mate, his children and society. It is, to be sure, a biological phenomenon involving the advent of puberty, but in an even more significant sense it is a cultural phenomenon involving both status and function.¹

There you have it; students have neither the same status nor the same function as adults, and this is because they lack adult responsibilities. According to Mayhew, these responsibilities result from economic independence. He defines an adult as an "economic unit," independent by virtue of his productive labour, and responsible for the control of his society because he contributes a portion of his labour, in the form of taxes, towards the maintenance of that society. It is a variation of that old saw "He who pays the piper calls the tune" stated as if it were some kind of natural law. Since students are not financially independent, since they do not contribute to the construction and maintenance of the university, they should neither have nor expect a degree of control over what happens within it. Their dependent financial position makes them wards of those who do support them. Such is the refrain of the irate citizen writing to his local newspaper after a vivid description of the latest student unrest. When students begin to pay taxes, the refrain continues, their status will change and they may then be allowed a voice, but not before. Thus their emergence from the status of ward to that of citizen is based on a financial criterion.

¹Mayhew, L. B., "Changing the Balance of Power," *Saturday Review* (Aug. 14, 1968), pp. 48-9.

There are obvious flaws to this argument, some minor, some crucial. A minor flaw is involved in the fact that students do, of course, pay taxes. The only tax which they clearly do not pay is the corporation or excess profits tax, and if a voice in control of social institutions is to be limited to those who do, then the vast majority of honest taxpayers will lose their vote. If the student makes over the taxable income, and many do during their between-term labours, then they pay income tax. If they do not, then their position is the same as that of any other person with a very low income or a very large family, and few these days would claim that the indigent or the prolific should lose the right to participate in the decisions regarding social institutions. Certainly students pay sales tax and tariffs; and they also contribute to property tax through a portion of their rent. In our society it does not seem to be a common claim that control over social spending should be proportionate to the amount of taxes one pays. Until that view returns in full force, it is illogical to deny the student the status of citizen in the corresponding control over the way taxes are spent, on the grounds that he is not a taxpayer.

But there is a deeper, more elemental reason why it is claimed that students are adolescents without full social responsibility, and that involves the notion that only those who are producers should have a say in how the produce is used. Students do not produce, it is claimed; they only consume. Until they become productive members of society instead of non-productive parasites, they cannot claim a voice. This position requires a rather simplistic notion of what constitutes gainful employment. Certainly it cannot be based upon immediate returns to society. If this were the case we could make no salary grants to scientists engaged upon research which has not yet borne practical fruit and which may indeed never bear such fruit. Such scientists are certainly working, but they are not producing in the sense that a farmer is producing. Students are also working, usually harder and under more stress than most skilled labourers, but the productive aspect of their labour is deferred until they put the results of their labour to use upon graduation. In fact their labours and their source of income differ very little from those of the teacher. Both receive financial assistance from the government, the student in terms of scholarships, loans and assistantships, the teachers in the form of a salary. Yet one is said to receive a subsidy and the other gets a remuneration for services. If anything, the teacher is even further from actual production than a student, for the results of his labour can only be productive through the labour of his student after graduation.

It would seem then that the relegation of a student to the status of ward on the basis that he is not an "economic unit," because he is not financially independent, and because he is being subsidized, is difficult to sustain by any consistent form of argument. At this stage, therefore,

the taxpayer usually shifts to the claim that students cannot expect a voice in control of the university, not because they are financially dependent (who is not these days?) but because they are immature. They cannot, it is claimed, know as much about running a university as do their elders. It must be clear here that the taxpayer's argument is that students cannot know how a university *ought* to be run, rather than that they do not know how it *is* run. Clearly the student is more familiar than most about what *is* going on in his particular institution. He certainly knows far more about it than does the average taxpayer who reads about it in the paper; and indeed than does the industrial magnate upon the Board of Governors, who attended a vastly different institution of the same name forty years ago, and who now returns once a month for the Board meeting. But the argument rests on the claim that, while a student certainly knows how his institution is being run, he is really too immature to know how it ought to be run.

This is the argument of the faculty member. In his view the student must be considered a ward, not because he is financially dependent, but because he is not yet in possession of the body of knowledge and skill possessed by the professor. In the view of the faculty member, a student is not so much a ward as an apprentice. The master possesses a discipline which involves a body of knowledge and a skill in its application. It is accepted by the master that the apprentice is frequently unable to understand why he should absorb certain portions of a body of knowledge or why he should labour long hours in developing a skill which the master knows is required. However, if the student does not understand he must be coerced into acquiring both. Unquestioning obedience is desirable when an apprentice is being trained. Only after he emerges into the status of master will he really be able to understand the need for the drill to which he has been put.

This reads like the script of innumerable John Wayne movies where the hero is a tough, sadistic and very capable sergeant who drills his raw recruits to distraction in preparation for the coming cataclysm. While the recruits loathe the sergeant during training, almost immediately after the real bullets began flying they realized that what he had been doing had been done for their good and they begin to worship him. Much the same thing is commonly said to happen to students some years after they emerge from university. It is said that they begin to realize the values of the courses that they hated while they were taking them, and that they begin to thank God and the professor who forced them to do so.

I must admit that I have never met any recent graduates whose views about the caliber of an instructor or a course had changed drastically since they had graduated. Such a transformation is much more common among the aged. After a number of years, a certain nostalgia for the halcyon days of college, blended with a desire to maintain the status

quo, seems to take over. I am informed by earnest greybeards that they now realize just how wrong they were in hating an old professor because it now develops that he was the one who really forced them to learn what they needed. Recent graduates tend to snigger a bit at this idea and disclaim any feelings of the kind. Who knows which impression is correct, the one which is fresh in the mind but lacks years of invaluable experience away from the scene, or the one which is dim and rose-coloured by those same years.

Accuracy aside, the latter view is the one which is held by most faculty members. They find themselves teaching the same kind of materials which they found so dry and difficult when they were learning it. They hated it then, but it must be necessary because after all now their living depends upon their offering it. They can hardly expect students to appreciate it since they themselves did not. Therefore they must demand explicit obedience from students and must force them to absorb such valuable information. One can see why the faculty member requires obedience from his apprentice and also why he is horrified by any suggestion that the apprentice should have some say in how the discipline is provided him.

This authoritarian approach has some dangers both to the discipline itself and to the kind of learning that the apprentice is getting. Consider the discipline first. If it is a cut and dried sort of affair, where the possibility of change or improvement is pretty well out of the question, then there is little point in having anyone rock the boat by asking critical questions. Certain disciplines are so finished. Plumbing and undertaking leap to mind. More involved and less finished disciplines, such as mathematics or history, need constant enquiry. They cannot be considered as complete and unquestionable. Furthermore, it is not enough to restrict the questioning to those who are already admitted into the charmed circle of master scholars. Innumerable struggles, such as those of Galileo or Darwin, demonstrate what happens when disciplines are protected from questions and criticism from outside and even from those who are partially inside by virtue of their apprenticeship. Such disciplines become ingrown and defensive bastions of the status quo, where those who claim competence resent any questions which might reflect upon that competence. Many the rebel from outside the discipline who has seen the error of his ways when admitted, and come to identify his welfare with a group of experts he has joined. He then sees the danger of questioning the wisdom which he shares with them. Times change but vested interests attempt to hold the line.

This is especially the case when the master of a discipline does not happen to be able to combine his mastery with an ability to teach. By teaching, I am referring to an ability to arouse the interest of the learner in the subject in question, and to explain to the learner the value of what he is supposed to learn. The good scholar is not necessarily the

good teacher. And if he is not, he tends to exert the authority of his position rather than the authority of his discipline in order to get students to listen to him. In other words he must coerce them to learn. Theirs not to reason why, theirs but to absorb. Such coercion corrupts the learning process.

Some disciplines are corrupted more than others by such coercion. Most corruption occurs in disciplines in which questioning and evaluation are essential. One of the key platitudes of our day, in education, is the saying that we wish children to learn to think for themselves, to question, to inquire. Thinking and questioning citizens, we are told, are the mainstay of the democratic society. Therefore, the major task of the educator is that of training a child to think. On the other hand, a student who can think and who is inclined to ask questions is very threatening indeed to the faculty member who is unprepared to defend his expertise or for the average citizen who is unprepared to defend his own value system. Students who have been taught to question do not know where to stop. They tend to ask questions about everything and to continue to ask questions until they receive some answers which satisfy them. Unfortunately this is just what many faculty members (and a great many citizens) find themselves unable to provide. Hence they claim that the answers will not be apparent until about ten years after graduation.

Here there are two principles of education working at cross purposes. Professors profess that they cannot give reasons acceptable to students as to the content and method of their teaching, because students, as apprentices or wards, are incapable of understanding them. Hence students must cease questioning and obey. On the other hand, students are told it is their duty to question and seek reasons for various situations, and that the development of such a rational ability is the heart of a good education. Now I tend to think that the conflict is only apparent, because I believe that a good teacher must be both prepared to answer such questions regarding his discipline and must be moderately successful in providing answers which are satisfactory to students. Hence, I tend to take the view that if a scholar is insufficiently adept at explaining to students the reasons why he does what he does to them, then he should quit teaching and get on with his scholarship, and leave the teaching to those who can do it.

If that happens, the status of students will change drastically. Instead of being apprenticed to a master who demands unquestioning obedience they become junior partners in an enterprise over which they are permitted a degree of control and in which they are engaged, not because they are told to be so engaged for some future reward, but because they can see the value of the enterprise itself. Such is the only kind of education suitable for future citizens of a democracy. An ability to behave in a democratic way is something which requires a great deal

of experience and learning. If such learning is left until some later stage in life, the person suddenly exposed to the manifest problems of democracy will have much difficulty in handling them. A tradition of obedience, wardship or apprenticeship develops habits which are difficult to break. The ward will tend to obey authority rather than think for himself.

The change from apprentice to partner involves giving the partner a say in the proceedings. Such a say is commonly said to be control. It simply will not do to give such a partner the opportunity to provide advice rather than to put him in a position of effective control. Too often such advice is ignored when it conflicts with the vested interests of those who actually have power. The technique of the master blandly asking his slaves to "come reason together" is a time honored means of avoiding any action which might disturb the master. However, it is a technique presently in vogue in a troubled university. Students are told not to threaten, not to demand, but to sit down calmly and reason with their masters. Such advice simply enrages students who attempted to do just that for many years without any noticeable effect. It is the old political problem of how one wrests power from a segment of the community which has it all. When reason conflicts with self-interest, reason is simply powerless. Only when the self-interest of those in power is threatened by threats of turmoil or by turmoil itself, do they succumb and eventually bargain in a semblance of good faith. Unless the natives are restless, the guardians have no reason to consider their emancipation.

The problems of convincing those in power that they should share it is by no means limited to the university. Students are faced with virtually the same problems, the same threats, and the same weary old arguments as, for example, the suffragettes of the early part of this century and the African majority in Rhodesia. In each case those asking for a share in control are treated to the retort that they will never be sufficiently mature or adult or rational to either deserve it or use it wisely. In this regard, the association of student with nigger rather than ward is most apt. The only hopeful distinction is that there are times when wards are more able than slaves to demonstrate by means of reason that their cause is just. At least students have a reasonable chance of getting the power they desire without shedding the blood of their masters.

It must be pointed out that opponents of the idea of giving students some control over how they are governed generally claim that students insist upon complete control. No student leader I have ever heard from has ever asked for complete power; they simply ask for a share of it. The most requested by the kind of student with whom I am familiar is the opportunity to place an equal number of students and faculty upon the decision-making bodies within the university, and the opportunity for the student body to veto certain important decisions such as

the selection of the president of the university. Anything less, they regard as 'tokenism' and I am inclined to agree. Placing three students upon a senate of forty can be little else than a desire by semi-liberal faculty members to assuage their guilt feelings without any danger to themselves, their positions or their disciplines. When such a token step is laughed to scorn by the students, the nervous members of faculty assure themselves that this is adequate evidence of the irresponsibility of students. Such reassuring evidence tends to make them less liberal in the future.

There is thus a very real division of opinion between students and even the more liberal of faculty members. To generalize, it is a question of gratitude. In earlier times students who were of the same opinion as their guardians concerning their status, were quite willing to regard themselves as wards to whom a benevolent society had extended the privilege of education. They were very grateful for this privilege and consequently tended to consider it in the worst possible taste to criticize the society which was willing to finance their education and the professor who was willing to share his knowledge. It is true that many students still retain this view of their status. The trouble is being caused by a significant and highly articulate minority who no longer look at themselves in this way. They tend to regard themselves as little less than full-fledged members of the academic community with the right not only to criticize but to help control the procedures and principles of that community. Furthermore, they consider their activities at the university to be of immense benefit to the larger community both immediately and in the future. Hence they do not feel particularly grateful to the community for making it possible for them to acquire the knowledge and skill which will benefit the community in the long run. Such students regard themselves as providing a service for the community by studying. Why they should be grateful for performing a service to the taxpayer is more than they can see. They are more likely to insist that the taxpayer's money is being used wastefully when what they find they are getting from the institution in terms of skill and information is frequently at odds with what they expected to get, and indeed, with what they feel this society requires. Hence they regard gratitude as completely out of place.

This lack of gratitude is just what most incenses a master or guardian or anyone who feels that he fits those rules. It is related to the old problem of a nobility which feels it has a right to the adoring gratitude of the peasantry. Few people can be more annoyed than one who feels gratitude is his due and who does not receive it. On the other hand there is no one less likely to feel gratitude than one who feels that promises made to him have been left unfulfilled. For my part, I must agree that gratitude is the last thing that the taxpayers or the professor should reasonably expect from a student. But then I don't feel that students should be considered wards.