

The argument of this paper is that universities are not politically neutral and cannot become so, and if this argument can be sustained it should be evident that arguments about whether or not they ought to be neutral are utterly mistaken. While there is a legitimate concern to have an open and critical university where freedom of inquiry is protected, it will be argued that because universities in North America are already politicized and still manage to allow tolerably well for freedom of inquiry there is nothing in that direction to fear from politicization *per se*.

POLITICIZED UNIVERSITIES

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I

It is not necessary to assume what may be 'the myth of political neutrality' to defend the value of free inquiry or the need for objective research, that is, research as free as possible from propagandistic demands. Such inquiry and research are quite compatible with a self-consciously politicized university as long as this politicized university is also a university which is committed to the ideals of a critical university in which there is an attempt to discover the truth (or at least truth) about politics and society. What needs to be feared is not a political university but a political university which would deliberately accept propaganda and deny the ideals of open and fairminded inquiry. The important thing is not to fight against the politicization of the university but to fight for a politicization of the university which takes a humane and rational direction—a direction in which, among other things, the ideals of free and rational inquiry are defended and 'cooking of the evidence' to fit ideological preconceptions is not tolerated.

To deal at least briefly with these claims it is necessary to first set out what is meant by 'a politically neutral university' and then give reasons for saying that universities are not and cannot become politically neutral. It is more convenient in terms of exposition to do this negatively by specifying what it is for a university not to be politically neutral, but if we can say what it is for a university *not* to be politically neutral, we will also have in effect specified what it is for a university to be politically neutral.

To say that a university is politically non-neutral is to say that the administration and official spokesman of the university tend to endorse the ideology of a distinctive social system and indeed to do so in their official capacities either directly or by indirection (by taking certain actions and the like) and/or the resources of the university tend to be used to

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support or reinforce a given social system. Where nothing of this order obtains a university is politically neutral. It is important that this characterization covers both overt and covert neutrality, for in the more sophisticated places it is unlikely that university officials will publically endorse political platforms or overtly take ideological stands. Indeed, it is typically the case that much energy is spent on proclaiming their neutrality. Rather the characteristic pattern in the non-Neanderthal institutions is to be overtly neutral while actually lending their resources to support and reinforce the *status quo*.

This assertion brings to the fore certain implications of Clarke Kerr's statement that the university is a prime instrument of the national purpose. Apart from some caveats about the word 'prime' in this context, it may be admitted that such a function of the university has come to obtain in North America. Universities work in a troika with business and the government. This practice is most accelerated in the United States where "more than two-thirds of the university research funds come from the Department of Defense, the Atomic Energy Commission or the National Aeronautics and Space Administration."¹ The Americans have such things as the Jason Division of the Institute for Defense Analysis which is a think tank for the Defense Department run by twelve universities. There studies are made in counter-insurgency, tactical uses of nuclear weapons, missile re-entry and the like. In addition, there are in the United States, Federal Contract research centres which forge links between defense agencies and the universities. There are forty-seven such centres doing in one year 1.2 billion dollars worth of research and development work for the American Defense Department and the Atomic Energy Commission.² Indeed, in 1968 the Department of Defense in the United States spent 50 million dollars in the universities for projects related to developments in U.S. foreign policy.³ This 50 million dollars does not include scientific projects for military hardware (much more money goes into them), but only money spent on matters relating to foreign policy such as studies concerning how to use propaganda devices to manipulate the internal policies of foreign countries. Even here in Canada, we have—to cite some instances—psychology professors at McGill who do psychological indoctrination projects for the American Pentagon and we have engineering professors, again at McGill, who sit on the boards of war-producing electronics corporations.⁴ And it is not only the Military-Industrial Complex that universities serve, but rather more straightforward business interests as well. Research has been done in chemistry to enlarge the profits of pulp and paper companies and of oil companies, and research has been carried out in economic depart-

¹James Ridgeway, *The Closed Corporation* (New York: Random House Inc., 1968).

²*Ibid.*

³*Ibid.*

⁴Stan Gray, "For a Critical University," in Bryan Finnigan and Cy Gonick eds., *Making It: The Canadian Dream* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972), pp. 114-15.

ments to "explain the depression and make it palatable to its victims."⁵

When we consider where the research money comes from and what effects it has on the direction and type of research done in universities, and when we further keep in mind the fact that the boards of governors and trustees of most North American universities are composed almost wholly of financiers and businessmen, we have very powerful reasons for concluding that our universities are effectively and conservatively politicized and are indeed anything but politically neutral institutions. In the light of such facts, Stan Gray's conclusion seems a perfectly just one: "To maintain that the university is neutral because it may not take direct and public political stands, is to engage in the worst sort of mystification. For by the very operation of its internal educational processes and its research for the government and corporations, the university makes its solid contribution to the Establishment."⁶

II

There are those who will agree that something of this sort is so, but will argue that such lamentable facts as these give us the strongest of reasons for working to de-politicize the university and to make it a genuinely politically neutral place of intellect. The position here taken is that while such a university may not be logically impossible, it is practically impossible and indeed undesirable.

Education generally, and a university in particular, is one segment of an interrelated cultural pattern. The values and commitments in the university and, indeed, the needs of its community and those who will come into its community, are not separated off from the values and commitments of the community as a whole. Moreover, the modern university is an enormous force in the life of society; what it does affects deeply the rest of the society and much of what is done in the rest of the society deeply affects it. We can hope, if we are lucky and the societal conditions are right, to have a few relatively independent critical minds in the university who will jog the rest of the society and not be utterly caught up in the dominant ideology, but we cannot reasonably hope to have a university community which will have a set of values, commitments and aims which do not bear the stamp of the ideology of the community within which the university exists.

In contemporary life in particular, the universities' influence is too great and its connections too pervasive, for it ever to be the case that the university can be a politically neutral place. It will bear the *Imprimatur* of the dominant ideology of its culture. What critical intellects can hope for and work toward is that under favourable conditions, it will leave space for at least certain heretics and that it will incorporate a sense of the past and

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 114.

something of a critical spirit with some awareness of alternatives such that the hand of the dominant ideology will not be utterly crushing. But to seek in such a situation for politically neutral universities is utter folly. Indeed if the myth of neutrality becomes pervasive, it will have the effect of reinforcing the dominant political ideology by making actual substantive political and social argument taboo for fear of bringing politics into the classroom. Politics is already in the classroom, the point is to make it conscious and explicit and to make the political and social options open and carefully argued and researched.

III

Finally, consideration must be given to a reasonable worry of those who are caught up in the myth of neutrality. People who say they want a politically neutral university and are honest about it are unwittingly expressing what may be a quite understandable worry. As intellectuals and scholars, they do not want a university which is a propaganda institute committed to creating and mouthing slogans. Surely this a commendable wish. What we must want, if we are genuine intellectuals, is a university where there is a sense of scholarly care and responsible scholarship coupled with full freedom of inquiry to teach academic subjects in any way a qualified academic sees fit. In addition, we want a cultural environment in which there is a freedom to read, say and publish what we please. We want no pressure, direct or indirect, toward ideological conformity; we do not want to teach with even a lingering fear that we will be discriminated against because of our political beliefs and commitments.

What we should aim for as a heuristic ideal, knowing that at least in class divided societies we will only approximate it at best, is a cultural environment in which we can do objective research on topics of academic interest without being forced, or even simply strongly induced, by some social system to turn our inquiry in a certain direction or, even worse, to cook the results to fit certain ideological commitments or pressures. That these should be our ideals should be a commonplace.

However, what we need to see is that the liberal is mistaken in thinking that we must have a politically neutral university for this ideal to be a governing ideal of university life. In fact, just the reverse is more likely to be the case. Given that the universities are actually politicized—though they profess the myth of neutrality—and that this myth is reinforced by such liberal arguments, then, since ideological questions will not be persistently asked, there will, where it holds sway, in reality be little questioning of the research priorities and the curriculum structures of the university and its effects on our community life. With, by contrast, a *self-consciously* politicized university, the resultant lively and serious ideological debate and argument will help clear the air and enhance our understanding of society. Moreover, it will enhance our freedom by giving us a clearer understanding of the alternatives to the *status quo*. We will understand better

both the rationale for the established order and the claims against it. If they are probed honestly and forcefully in the universities, such that universities will come to give people a political education, we will come to have a more responsible citizenry and indeed human beings capable of a greater degree of self-direction.

It is perhaps natural to ask: but cannot this research be done in a neutral manner? To demand or to ask for neutrality here is not identical with demanding or requesting that this research be done in as objective a way as possible with an unequivocal commitment to the search for truth. To ask for objectivity need not be to ask for neutrality. One should not forget C. Wright Mills' remark concerning his study of Marxism: "I have tried to be objective. I do not claim to be detached."⁷ One can be objective without being neutral or disinterested.

Indeed, where we have ideological matters which effect the passions, one of the best practical devices for attaining or approximating objectivity is to have individuals committed in different ways in the same university and in the same department. One is much more likely to gain some reasonable understanding of religion if in a religious studies department one has committed Jewish, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist scholars, along with atheist philosophers and a sceptical anthropologist deeply informed about and interested in religion. (Just any old atheist or sceptic will not do. They can, along with some believers, be incredibly Neanderthal.) Parallel things obtain in the study of politics and society. What we need is men who are a) deeply interested in the subject matter, b) informed, c) committed to the search for truth, and d) willing to say what they think and argue for it even if it involves substantive, and often anxiety arousing, political and ideological matters. Where in such matters everyone is actually neutral, it very likely will be the case that no one will care enough about the issues to examine them in depth. If, instead, the 'neutrality' is in reality just a methodological stance imposed by a certain liberal ideology, then the actual distortions of perception engendered by one's normative stance will very likely not be discovered and a distorted normative commitment will be uncritically and often unwittingly superimposed on the situation.

However, the things listed in a), b), c), and d) above are perfectly compatible with a politicized university and indeed with a radically politicized university. After all, as Chomsky has remarked, why should we not assume that objective scholarship will not often and perhaps even typically turn out to have radical conclusions.⁸ The worry should *not* be about whether the university is political, but about whether it has, as its dominant political powers, narrow-minded men afraid of a search for truth,

⁷C. Wright Mills, *The Marxists* (New York: Dell Publishing Co. Inc., 1962).

⁸Noam Chomsky, "The Student Movement," in R.E.A. Shanab and G. Jay Weinroth eds., *Present Day Issues in Philosophy* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company, 1971), pp. 93-95.

contemptuous of scholarly and intellectual virtues and suspicious of radicals. There are people on both the left and the right who suffer from such disabilities and are genuinely to be worried about. But is it not more generally and more typically a defect of the propertied defenders of the *status quo* than of left intellectuals? Is it not more pervasively a fault of financiers on governing boards of universities and of business and religious powers in the community at large than a fault of left intelligentsia?