

Inner City: The University's Challenge

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The Land-Grant College is characterized as not having fulfilled its original mission but, instead, of having triumphed in the field of farm technology. The author challenges the American university to use its resources to alleviate city conditions of tension, blight, and human decay—a challenge far greater than that faced in relation to agricultural technology. According to the author there are four things a university should and must do: (1) stop teaching students to distrust the city, (2) develop programs in urban affairs, (3) produce teachers with the knowledge and insight required to handle education in America's ghetto schools, and (4) use research resources to investigate causes of and solutions for present city problems.

YOU WHO ARE in the Land-Grant Colleges can understand well both that applied knowledge may have uncertain results and that it may prove controversial. The Land-Grant Colleges, created to serve an agricultural society, had an exceptionally clear definition of their goal—to preserve the family farm. We can see today that the Land-Grant Colleges with their great schools of agriculture have done little to achieve this objective and unwittingly have done much to destroy it.

The great triumphs of the Land-Grant Colleges were their contributions to farm technology, and we all stand in awe of these; but we can see today that this technology, by creating unexpected economic and financial pressures, contributed and continues to contribute to the destruction of the family farm. The schools of agriculture developed new crops and new methods of cultivation, but they did not develop a rural sociology or a rural economics for understanding social change in the rural community. We did not foresee what was happening, and a great uncontrolled agricultural revolution swept away the family farm, creating waves of migration of dis-

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placed rural peoples to the cities. They have become one of our major urban problems.

The difficulties in dealing with urbanization seem even greater than those in agriculture. First, in the city we have no easy agreement on goals. A multitude of voices speaks for a multitude of interests. There is no consensus, only the recognition that we must get at more than the technology of city life; we must understand and attempt to direct social change.

We hardly need to be told that we are undergoing an urban revolution. It is happening all around us. The statistics on this revolution give us some impression of its scope, although they have the aspect of unreality. I question that anyone can develop a satisfactory mental image of a billion dollars or 20.99 per cent of a million people. But the real difficulty about urban statistics is that you cannot comprehend them until you get out and drive or walk around the city where the statistics become real people—and all too often you will see real people becoming statistics.

Yet we must admit that the city's statistics are impressive, particularly as they reveal the accelerating pace of urbanization. In 1800, only 5 per cent of our population lived in cities. In 1960, 70 per cent lived in urban communities. Today the communities of intense urbanization (the large cities and their suburbs) cover only 0.7 per cent of the land area of the United States but contain more than 50 per cent of the people.

The present pace of urban growth is expected to continue. It is predicted that the U.S. will have a population of 320 million by the year 2000. The Urban Land Institute tells us 85 per cent of these will be living in cities. The Institute foresees that three megalopolitan urban strips (each more than 100 miles long) will develop. One 450 mile city will exist between Washington and Boston, an "Industrial Riviera" will exist on Lake Michigan shore stretching from Gary, Indiana, to beyond Milwaukee, and a combined fun and retirement center will develop between Jacksonville and Miami.

URBAN PROBLEMS EMERGE

Since we all seem to be rushing to the city, I suppose this revolutionary urban world offers some joys, some occasional satisfactions. It may even offer some promise of beauty, well-being, and social order. But pick up a newspaper or turn on TV and all you are likely to learn about is the problems and miseries of the city. This has become a favorite topic. Salisbury of the *New York Times* sees the revolutionary flow of people to urban areas as "a heedless movement

whose catalytic agents are big-city decay, rural blight, and sponge-like population cancers spreading remorselessly along the arteries of the great motorcar routes."¹

Harrington,² in his book *The Other America*, warns that large numbers of victims of the urban revolution have become invisible: The American city has been transformed. The poor still inhabit the miserable housing in the central area, but they are increasingly isolated from contact with, or sight of, anybody else. Middle-class women coming in from suburbia on a rare trip may catch a glimpse of the other America on the way to the theater, but their children are segregated in suburban schools. The business or professional man may drive along the fringes of slums but the experience is not important to him. The failures, the unskilled, the disabled, the aged, and the minorities are right there, across the tracks, where they have always been. But hardly anyone else is.

In short, the very development of the American city has removed poverty from the living, emotional experience of millions upon millions of middle-class Americans.

THE UNIVERSITY'S ROLE IN URBAN TROUBLES

Most of the urban problems we talk about so freely do not touch us directly. They are remote and have little immediate impact. In all of this the universities—so wrongly called Ivory Towers—have a significant role to play. Inevitably the concerns and goals of society are reflected in the American university. But it is not certain that this will occur quickly—or accurately—or constructively. There is some doubt in various quarters that the American university generally is in a position to see the urban community from any position other than Harrington's "other America." It is argued by some that the powerful state universities, which developed out of rural needs and traditions and which are all too frequently located in rural communities, show little interest in adjusting their programs of instruction and research to meet the needs of the urban communities which tend now to dominate the states they serve.

Certainly there are counter trends. Of the 58 largest universities in the country today, 44 are located in urban communities. Also of great significance is the establishment of city campuses by state university systems, as the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, or the University of Illinois at Chicago. One feels that rather soon the ur-

¹ *New York Times Book Review*, October 5, 1958, p. 1.

² Michael Harrington, *The Other America, Poverty in the United States* (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 12.

ban-centered university (at least in geographical terms) will be a dominant element of American university life.

Traditions Are Agrarian

But being in the city has not necessarily meant being part of it. The traditions of American university life have been strongly agrarian, middle class, Protestant, and white. They have reflected the prejudices dominant in the influential sectors of American society. Hostility to the city and city-folk has prevailed in American thought. This tradition is based on reflections of some of our most revered heroes. Thomas Jefferson in his *Notes on Virginia* referred to farmers as "the chosen people of God," concluding that "the mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government as sores do to the strength of the human body."

America's intellectual traditions, which have been so strongly focused in its universities, have indeed been hostile—or at best unresponsive—to the city. Great city universities such as Columbia and Chicago have frequently given little heed to the urban blight, debilitating human decay, and destructive ethnic tensions in their immediate neighborhoods. This is true in spite of the fact that resulting conditions threatened the very existence of the universities themselves. This is changing, although slowly, and these city universities still appear reluctant to give any large share of their resources or energies to attempts to solve urban problems.

But what can universities do about the city? And I ask this question of all universities, because whether physically in the city or not, most students already are or soon will be urban people. They will be coming to us, if we have a rural setting, for a brief moment in their lives, to return to the city. The people coming to us from rural backgrounds are not likely to return to their farm communities. They will probably go to the city, and we should prepare them for the adjustments the new environment will require of them.

Future Teaching Philosophies

Clearly the first thing we can do is to stop teaching our students to suspect or dislike the city. All too often we have been taking students from the city and turning them into "other Americans"—people who cannot go home again. Physically they go home, but to be *in* the city and not *of* it. The clash of misunderstanding between the city and the suburb today is partly a product of this. A considerable number of suburbia's citizens are city-bred, university-trained folk.

Whatever they learned at college, it wasn't understanding of the city, its people, and its problems. When these people graduate from college, they usually try to escape the city. But not entirely. They want the best of two worlds, the city and the suburb. They put themselves in a position in which they have the benefits of the city's jobs, financial opportunities, and cultural life, but they know they need not share its insupportable miseries and horrors. Into the city every day by train and car—out again at night to the suburbs. Whisked quickly and unheedingly through the great city. As Jacobs³ points out in her angry book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, even when these people are professionally engaged in dealing with the city's problems, as urban planners or urban developers are, they do not understand the city. They refuse to deal with it in its own terms, and approach it instead in terms of their own suspicions and fears of it. Thus attempts at reform and planning have too often been gigantic disasters.

DEVELOPING URBAN-CENTERED PROGRAMS

Universities can do better than this by their students and their society. They can develop faculties with competence in urban affairs. They can consider introducing urban studies into general education curricula. Some universities have been doing this, some with rural settings and traditions. A special urban studies curriculum has been in existence at Dartmouth College for some time. Another is being developed now at the University of North Carolina. At Rutgers University in New Jersey, the work of Livingston College (a new self-contained liberal arts college) will be integrated around urban studies. The existence of programs of this nature on a university campus will necessarily change the orientation of that campus. It will tend to modify the attitudes of all students who graduate from it, whether or not they may have been directly engaged in an urban studies program.

There is, and increasingly will be, a need for the university to produce specialists in urban affairs, particularly in the fields of the physical and social sciences. There is a shortage of people informed about and trained to work with urban pollution, sanitation, water supply, transportation, housing, social welfare, community and human dislocation, and community planning. It is supremely important that the university produce greater numbers of people who have developed special skills and knowledge in these areas along

³ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), pp. 3-25, 443-48.

with their general education. This will give them a comprehensively intelligent and sympathetic understanding of our complex urban world.

Greatest Need: Teachers

The greatest need of all is to produce teachers with the skills, understandings, and sympathies required to plant and nurture new gardens of educational opportunity in the gray educational wastelands that spread over vast areas of America's cities. It is frightening to see that the school system of every large American city is seriously in trouble. Clark⁴ reports that the segregation of Negroes into all-Negro schools is a well-established pattern in our large cities and that this segregation is growing at an increasing rate. It is now fact that all-Negro schools, almost without exception, are inferior schools. The quality of teachers, laboratories, libraries, and audio-visual aids is inferior; classes are larger, even though the cultural deprivation of the homes from which students come requires smaller classes than those prevailing in all-white or integrated schools. All too often these schools are antiquated, in bad repair, drab, and weather-beaten. According to Clark, "The further these students progress in school, the larger the proportion who are retarded and the greater is the discrepancy between their achievement and the achievement of other children in the city." In reading and arithmetic achievement levels, Harlem students in the third grade are one year behind achievement levels of New York City pupils generally. By the eighth grade, they are 2½ years behind New York levels and 3 years behind students in the entire nation.

Even more alarming is the drop in IQ level. Studies show a sharp drop in the IQ's of Harlem children between the third and sixth grades, with a slight improvement in the eighth, but in the eighth they have IQ's well below those they had in third grade. New York City pupils overall show a steady increase in IQ from the third to eighth grades. Clark's startling conclusion is that these Harlem schools are damaging the children they are trying to help.⁵

One of the great American ideals has been that of equal educational opportunity for all. This ideal has been the bulwark of the American educational system—and it is now floundering badly in the great city school systems. The university cannot ignore this. It must train people with special skills; it must conduct research; it

⁴ Kenneth B. Clark, *Dark Ghetto; Dilemmas of Social Power* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 111-53.

⁵ *Ibid.*

must, on occasion, move task forces into troubled communities in a massive program of assistance. A pilot program of this kind was recently adopted by Columbia University to attempt to alleviate some of the problems existing at Benjamin Franklin High School in East Harlem. Columbia University is sending in teams of specially prepared mathematics and reading instructors in a crash program to raise the critically low performance levels of the students in that school.⁶ In cities where several urban universities exist, as in New York and Chicago, it may be desirable for these universities to cooperate to carry out massive programs of remedial work. There are hundreds of thousands of innocent victims of educational deprivation to whom the universities ought to be extending all the assistance they can muster from their own resources and from outside agencies.

Increase Research Probes

Above all, we must turn our research resources upon this problem. There is so much we do not know. And we must learn fast, because we cannot stand by and watch an entire generation of Americans go down the drain, lost because the public school—the great achievement of American society—stood unconcernedly on the sidelines. We may well ask our colleges of education why their programs continue to orient toward the suburban schools. Colleges of education have a major job to do in the grimly underprivileged schools of the other America.

The university's dilemma in dealing with education in the ghetto is that it knows so little about the ghetto child, about his environment, and knows so little about social change and how it may or should be controlled. Many questions need answers. What is the most impressionable age in the child's development, the age at which he is most subject to change by education? At what age can the child no longer be significantly influenced by the school? What role does the ghetto family play in child development? How far down the road shall we travel with those who suggest that we find a substitute for the family in raising ghetto children because the ghetto family is crippling its children instead of nurturing them?

FINAL ANSWERS NOT EASY

The urban scene continually poses such questions which are relevant to the university. They are difficult to answer, partly because

⁶*New York Times*, October 27, 1966.

they deal with problems long ignored, but mostly because they are related to evasive and highly complex processes of social change. One thinks of something technologically as simple as pollution. We now have the means, technically, to control pollution but it turns out that the chief problems in pollution control are public opinion and politics. Recently an air pollution expert from the Middle West said, "We know how to cure smog. It's not unduly difficult or expensive. The problem is getting the people in a community to support a cleanup program."⁷

The important problems in the urban revolution do not lend themselves to quick and easy answers, and it is an obligation of the university both to say this and to proceed to do something about it. The urgencies of urban problems cause people who work with them to jump at the first seemingly acceptable answer. All too often application of the quick and ready solution has resulted in new problems and no solutions for the old ones. A university which commits itself to research and study of such public problems, commits itself to controversy, and it must learn to live with controversy. It must learn to say "no" when public pressure is asking for a "yes" which has no validity in terms of established knowledge. It must learn to say "Wait until we have all the facts and have made the best possible judgment," to the impatient who have all the moral indignation of those who see civilization hanging upon the fast answer. And, finally, it must not spare the people and the politicians the full weight of the unpopular answer when study shows it to be the right answer.

Current City Planning Inefficient

In this generation we see ourselves as playing a big role in controlling social change through city planning. It is now apparent that our efforts have been ill-informed and impulsive. We have rushed into programs of urban renewal with inadequate understanding of all of its ramifications, and now we are living with too many ugly monuments to our errors.

We can give the computer vast masses of data and thus get a comprehensive understanding of what we are doing, what we ought to do, and what impact alternative courses of action are likely to have on the community. Such comprehensive analyses can go far toward eliminating mistakes. But like the pollution expert cited, we must confess that we know little about achieving political or social acceptability for a wisely-conceived course of action.

⁷ *Ibid.*, September 27, 1966, p. 1.

A CHALLENGE TO UNIVERSITIES

Here is the greatest challenge that the city poses for the university—to provide the knowledge and wisdom to guide those who plan the life of the city. To provide knowledge and wisdom—these are what the university does best, and at this moment these are what society needs most. When knowledge and wisdom are recognized to exist in the university community, a demand will arise that the university cooperate with public and private agencies in applying this knowledge to public problems; and it is proper that the university do so. But such public service is not the chief role of the university. The university's roles are research, the evaluation of research, and teaching. Universities so motivated will find the city lying invitingly before them, a great laboratory of humanity waiting to yield up its secrets to the scholar who seeks them out.

A PHILOLOGIST SAYS that nine words account for a fourth of all that we say or write, and that an additional 34 words account for half. The nine most used words are: and, be, have, it, of, the, will, I, and you. The 34 that, with these nine, do half our literary work are: about, all, as, at, but, can, come, day, dear, for, get, go, hear, her, if, in, me, much, not, no, one, say, she, so, that, there, they, this, time, though, we, with, write, and your. Because they get tired of looking at and speaking these one-syllable words, professional men have to spice their literary product with such words as proliferation, escalation, disestablishment, obfuscation, appendectomy, and ophthalmologist.

—WILLIAM FEATHER