

DOES ALTERNATIVE HIGHER EDUCATION NEED AN ALTERNATIVE?

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ABSTRACT: The present movement in alternative higher education is predominantly an accommodation for the unrest which surfaced during the sixties. Generally, the creators and participants of alternatives, both inside and outside of conventional universities, fell comfortably into a process of cooptation which alleviated the more obvious symptoms of alienation and silenced dissent. This paper discusses alternative higher education in light of 1) improvement of communication within the "alternative community" and with others in the larger society, 2) attention paid to critical analysis, theory and research, to avoid the pitfalls of subjectivism, 3) development of the organization and power to survive, rather than becoming trapped by excessive preoccupations with criticizing the conventional or with justifying ourselves to those in positions of power, and 4) creation of an integrity in our purposes and methods by fashioning a systematic and socially critical methodology of theory-and-practice, involving in part a serious consideration of Marxist thought.

Since the proliferation of private liberal arts colleges in the early 1800's, colleges and universities in the United States have been established as alternatives to the conventional (e.g. Goddard, Antioch, St. Johns, Reed). However, the birth of the present movement in alternative higher education is rooted in the historical changes precipitated by the events of the 50's and 60's. At that time, many Americans began seriously to question the values underlying "business as usual" in their society. The civil rights movement, for instance, spotlighted blatant racial injustices and the Vietnamese war exposed the

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moral bankruptcy of U.S. foreign policy. The old habit of reflex acceptance of institutions and their practices began to break down and myths were shattered. The workings of a larger part of the social fabric came under closer scrutiny. Dissatisfaction, previously buried beneath a veneer of social alienation, surfaced and changed the way many people thought about a wide range of American life.

Higher education was not immune to this questioning. The alternatives which arose were spawned by people within the traditional universities, for radicals and liberals alike were critical of higher education. The hypocrisy of the system had become embarrassingly transparent. The university was not providing students with learning which was relevant to the society in which they lived, let alone relevant to creating a new one. It was not educating the whole person, not developing those abilities which would enhance their feelings of self-fulfillment throughout life. It was not democratic, nor did it provide equal opportunity for all. And the university system was not being that dispassionate, morally incorruptable, truth-seeking institution it had been purported to be, an image which had lent unimpeachable credence to its institutional utterances. At least to some extent, higher education was stripped of its mythological wrappings and what it was became clear the intellectual arm of the imperialist establishment, a buffer zone between the power structure and the populace, a training camp for that populace whose labor serves the power structure.

It was in this climate of dissatisfaction that alternatives were born. Student activists initiated classes and alternative programs within and without the universities. Free universities flowered in counter-culture gardens. Minorities and women created programs for themselves. Disciplines previously locked out of colleges—like Eastern religion and growth psychology—began their own institutes. Education was aflutter with activity.

In some ways, this activity has been tremendously successful. Today, the numbers of alternative colleges, institutes, programs and free universities in California are so numerous as almost to defy a complete cataloguing. It is likely that the number of people pursuing post-secondary alternative programs in California would exceed the number enrolled in traditional colleges and universities, if these institutions received even one-third of the public financing poured into community colleges, the State University system, and the University of California. Alternative ways have been tenuously embraced by the traditionalists themselves. Both small private colleges and large public universities have seen alternatives as a means of energizing their systems and attracting new populations and funds. Also, entrepre-

neers have discovered and exploited the lucrative market for alternative routes to academic degrees and professional credentials among the upwardly mobile middle class.

There has definitely been a change in the face of American education. Yet, what is the nature of this change? Does it represent something fundamental or is it merely a face lift for a disintegrating system? Basically, we agree with Bowles and Gintis (1976) that movements of reform are born from the need of capitalists to respond to political conflict and social unrest. A case can be made for the argument that alternative education is just such an accommodation. The alternatives that came into existence did not have, for instance, a political vision. Nor did they respond to political realities—to the fact that the university is “the intellectual arm of the imperialist establishment, a buffer zone between the power structure and the populace, a training camp for that populace whose labor serves the power structure.” Furthermore, they did not discuss, in any meaningful way, if it is possible for conventional or alternative universities to be “dispassionate, morally incorruptible, truthseeking institution(s)” within the capitalist system, or within any other political-economic system presently in existence.

The unrest of the sixties stemmed from social dissatisfactions which had been accumulating over the years and which, when vented, had run smack into an unresponsive system. To preserve the present social fabric to any extent, something had to give. The middle-income, middle-aged individual who had entered the job market in the days before the universal B.A. needed to have a means to attain a degree, whether for advancement or just to hold down his/her job. Dissatisfied workers, including those in the ranks of white collar employees and service professionals, needed the hope provided by access to the education necessary for embarking on new careers. Third World peoples, most of whom had been denied adequate secondary education, were clamoring for access, and programs had to be found to accommodate them. Idealistic youth, demanding education with personal meaning and social relevancy needed to be divested of their visibility. In the face of growing emotional unrest, a quick substitute for religion had to be found to soothe the restless back to sleep, and the education of therapists became a pressing need.

Despite popular analyses pointing to the many social functions of higher education (e.g., Kerr, 1963), the conventional system had remained quite limited in its structure and purposes. As a result, change within the traditional universities was too slow and too limited to provide the necessary accommodations. For example, the system of

undergraduate education had developed from needs to process 17 to 22 year-olds from a particular socio-economic background for the labor market. Everything from course content and class schedules to housing and the computation of financial aid was predicated on the processing of that specific population for that purpose. To adequately accommodate any one of the other groups within that system could only mean sweeping changes throughout the entire system. Yet *not* to accommodate these pressuring groups meant increased social unrest. Thus, came alternative education.

The continued existence of these alternative programs provided a social solution. Since they were often begun by liberals and radicals of protesting populations, the programs attained a legitimacy in the eyes of their constituencies. To a certain extent, they identified with the needs of these constituencies. And, because each alternative was relatively small, existing only at the periphery of the traditional academies or totally outside the academic community, their impact on the system as a whole was severely limited. Their impact was also limited by their lack of power. As the stepchildren of education, their funding was marginal and insecure, their visibility minimal and, for the most part, their continued existence and the conditions for their existence determined by various academic committees and accreditation associations. Under these circumstances, the alternatives could function not only to quell or dissipate unrest, but they also could be quickly and effectively eliminated once the unrest diminished or if they got "out of hand" (Wolfe, 1970; Bilorusky, 1972).

The creators and participants of these alternatives, lacking a perspective on themselves and on their relationship to the social fabric as a whole, fell comfortably into this process of cooptation. Flexible degree paths and the processing of nontraditional students (under the guise of access/equality), the emphasis on contractual and other innovative procedures of degree-granting and degree/seeking (never mind learning), the emphasis on relating to the community (never mind the content, quality, and actual consequences of the relationship or the community being related to) all became common themes in alternative higher education (Bilorusky & Butler, 1975; McDonald *et al.*, 1975). So, we must raise the serious question, are these new forms of higher education meaningful and significant alternatives to the conventional?

With their new methods, alternative higher education has helped to make socialization palatable and even desirable. For the most part, these alternatives have helped, not to change conditions, but to better conceal their alienating aspects. They represent new ways to desen-

sitize people to these aspects. In effect, alternatives repair the American dream by giving new "meanings" to peoples lives, by creating new and satisfiable wants to replace deeply rooted and still unmet needs. Alternative routes provide a way out for the most dissatisfied by creating a space for them on the outskirts of the society, thus silencing dissent and undermining pressures for change of the society as a whole. They add to the "brain drain" of the ethnic communities and help in the cooptive transformation of individual minorities. They help people to adapt to economic disruptions, technological unemployment and unfulfilling work by promoting "future shock" as the new "good life." For many middle class youth, the emptiness of the collegiate rituals which would be followed by the materialistic good life in adulthood had been exposed. And, alternative higher education helped to fashion a new cover cut from the multi-splendored cloth of growth psychology and spiritual pursuits—narcissism in new clothing (Lasch, 1976).

One could say that the unrest of the 60's with its dramatic potential for raising consciousness was a result of the fact that "education" and "society" were slow in developing (and are still in the process) new forms of socialization which could conceal alienation and/or make it tolerable. Further, the potential of this era has not come to fruit because, in part, the methods of the alternatives were redirected toward symptomatic solutions to the underlying problems. One difficulty has been that alternative education often deals with the subjectively experienced symptoms of the problem rather than focusing on its objective causes. Process has been more important than content. Methods have been devised to combat the most immediately felt dehumanizing outcomes of the system (e.g., mass impersonal education) while having neglected the study of the causes of these outcomes.

Numerous mini-programs, for example, have been designed either to aid the low income and/or minority or female student to "adjust" to the college curriculum or to help the faculty confront the problem of cultural/sexual differences such as tutorial and special guidance programs, or community action projects. Although these programs are undeniably helpful to some students, they are basically "band-aid" measures which leave the underlying educational and social problems untouched.

Others have responded to the dehumanization of the conventional system by developing programs which emphasize feelings and human values, never examining the effect that a profit-oriented, mechanistic society necessarily would have on the expression of feelings or development of values. These educators have assumed that the fault lies with the individual rather than with the structure of the society. In an

increasingly brutalized milieu where inflation and recession hold hands and occupational health is a serious concern, they have developed methods to teach sensitivity without considering that "more sensitivity . . . means revolution or madness" (Jacoby, 1975, p. 105).

Subjective experience should not be ignored. In light of student experiences, 60's radicals sometimes saw the socialization process performed by the universities to be one of education's most culturally dangerous characteristics. The process of education itself was viewed as responsible for the authoritarian, robot-like character of the American college graduate. A need existed for alternative process—for methods and techniques which would, at best, be liberating for the student, and at worse, allow him/her to be no more distorted and alienated on leaving than he or she was when entering.

Nor is it that content or the objective should replace the focus on the subjective process. Both subjective and objective process need to exist in any meaningful alternative. For the process reflects and shapes the content to an important extent. The methodology of any system portrays the ways one thinks about reality within that system (McDonald *et al.*, 1975). And the methodologies themselves can be analyzed with regard to the content of those systems.

The old university tradition, for example, teaches along authoritarian lines and encourages authoritarian thinking. Contractual education teaches one to think in formal, legalistic relationships without a systematic and critical examination of the power structure and the content of learning—perfect training for people who are to take their places within the corporate state, whether in business and industry or the social services.

Too often, while faculty at alternative colleges have been quite aware of the problems and shortcomings of conventional learning methodologies, they have not scrutinized their own (new) methods for the content these practices convey. Social alienation and subjectivism, for example, are perpetuated in individualized programs which isolate each student from others and by educational processes which allow the student's beliefs or theories to go unchallenged. The absence of some collective approach to learning helps the student to "sever himself from the mass of his fellows and to draw apart with his family and his friends, so that . . . he willingly leaves society at large to itself" (De Tocqueville, 1957, p. 104). Through their participation in these methods, faculty, too, easily become isolated from each other and from the society as a whole.

What can we in the alternative higher education movement do to overcome these problems and to move in a more creative direction?

Critical thinking, analysis, theory, research—all need to be incorporated in the alternative movement. The education of the whole person requires that significant attention be paid to critical thinking and the development of the mind. Critical analysis is a necessary first step in changing a society which fosters individualism at the expense of each individual's potential, and perpetuates the existing power structure while discouraging political struggle. Far more substantial changes have arisen from the thoughtful consideration of the implications of one's actions in the light of existing political and economic structures than from spontaneity alone.

Moreover, alternative universities have the potential for fulfilling a significant, albeit clearly insufficient, role in the development of personal and social change in this country.* We could make our programs and institutions focal points for theoretical discussions, as well as centers and models for generating possible solutions and critically evaluating the results of efforts to try out these solutions. (See Acosta *et al.*, 1977—the WRLC Self-Study—for some beginning thoughts on such a direction.)

Significant barriers exist to making this transformation, however. Our colleges are a diverse and motley group. Little communication exists between schools and between the schools and the community as a whole. The schools are few in number. Forums have to be developed which will communicate more broadly both inside and outside of the alternative academic community. Dialogue must occur between those who occupy different camps, such as between community development and personal growth people, or between women's and ethnic studies programs. We who are already involved in alternative education must encourage new alternative universities to develop and we must study ourselves in order to pass on to them the reasons for our successes and failures.

A related problem is lack of power. Alternative education must continually justify itself and its programs to accreditation associations, foundations, government agencies and prospective students. It is easiest to describe alternative higher education in terms of already accepted methodologies despite the irrelevance and/or destructiveness of the outcomes of those methodologies. And the very process of using such methodologies creates in us a mind set which changes our perceptions of reality in ways we might wish to avoid. This, in turn, dulls our

*This important educational function notwithstanding, class struggle and/or other forms of political conflict will necessarily be part of any fundamental and meaningful social change.

ability to develop new theory and practice as it locks our thinking into old ways of looking at problems. Privately, we may recognize the limitations of strictly linear thought. However, to have continually to use publicly that thought reinforces in us and in the culture as a whole its already dominant character.

To a certain extent, developed theoretical ideas about our purposes and methods, systematic efforts to achieve an integration of theory and practice, and some semblance of organization would give alternative education added power and integrity. However, the process of moving from the present state of the art to there is, by necessity, a struggle.

All of us involved with alternative education—students, faculty, administrators, community people, board members—most participate not only in seeking to create and preserve the power and integrity of our alternative programs, but we must also work to change the social realities which cause and perpetuate the problems we encounter. An isolationist position will be self-defeating. At the same time, too much time spent changing harsh external realities can be an overwhelming and risky diversion of energy. Subtle judgments and priority decisions must be made constantly and continually reevaluated. For example, in developing an independent alternative institution, the achievement of accreditation without compromising one's essential purposes is important, as is the transformation of the entire structure and context of educational accreditation. Both goals are integrally related, and, to a certain extent, both can be pursued by the same activities if the activities are carefully conceived and implemented. However, it is also true that the second goal is more long-term and will require more energy, and that this goal must then be pursued with an awareness of these realities.

In the process of working for such larger social transformations, we must necessarily improve our understanding of social injustices and contradictions, their roots and causes. No small challenge since the strongest area of repression in the United States is in the area of critical thinking. Anti-intellectualism is a norm (Hofstadter, 1963). The intellectual level of all media in the United States, for instance, falls well below their European counterparts. Many students leave high school (and college) without ever learning how to put two thoughts together, let alone learning how to analyze and compare. A technological capitalist society needs its people only to be technocrats. The care and feeding of machinery needs little thought. In this context, education for thinking is superfluous and possibly subversive.

Within the area of thought, there is one kind of thinking which is particularly actively repressed. This area is socialist thought. At a

time when "communism" is a household word in over two-thirds of the earth, the utterance of the word "Marx" in the United States, breaks a cultural taboo. This taboo, by itself, stops intellectual movement. The most dramatic social and personal changes in recent history have come from those countries where the intellectual leaders have adopted some form of Marxist thought. The taboo against this thinking stymies both theoretical and practical development as a significantly large and relevant body of ideas, and methodology of thought and action, is *a priori* excluded from consideration. For any alternative to develop, it must be an alternative that takes seriously the implications and relevance of this thought for American society.

Without critical but unfettered development of educational and social theory and practice, our alternative universities will be doomed to remain what they are—at best, intellectual backwaters, ineffectual/co-opted agents of change, pieces of flotsam floating on a polluted sea of radioactive oil to which a few survivors desperately cling.

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