

# The Function of the University in a Time of Crisis

Noam Chomsky

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Writing 150 years ago, the great liberal reformer and humanist Wilhelm von Humboldt defined the university as “nothing other than the spiritual life of those human beings who are moved by external leisure or internal pressures toward learning and research.” At every stage of his life, a free man will be driven, to a greater or lesser extent, by these “internal pressures.” The society in which he lives may or may not provide him with the “external leisure” and the institutional forms in which to realize this human need to discover and create, to explore and evaluate and come to understand, to refine and exercise his talents, to contemplate, to make his own individual contribution to contemporary culture, to analyze and criticize and transform this culture and the social structure in which it is rooted. Even if the university did not exist formally, Humboldt observes, “one person would privately reflect and collect, another join with men of his own age, a third find a circle of disciples. Such is the picture to which the state must remain faithful if it wishes to give an institutional form to such indefinite and rather accidental human operations.”<sup>1</sup>

The extent to which existing institutional forms permit these human needs to be satisfied provides one measure of the level of civilization that a society has achieved. One element in the unending struggle to achieve a more just and humane social order will be the effort to remove the barriers, whether they be economic, ideological, or political, that stand in the way of the particular forms of individual selffulfillment and collective action that the university should make possible.

It is the great merit of the student movement of the 1960s to have helped shatter the complacency that had settled over much of American intellectual life, both with regard to American society and to the role of the universities within it. The renewed concern with university reform is in large measure a consequence of student activism. A great deal of energy has been directed to problems of “restructuring the university”: democratizing it, redistributing “power” in it, reducing constraints on student freedom as well as the dependence of the university on outside institutions. I suspect that little can be achieved of real substance along these lines. Formal changes in the university structure will have little effect on what a student does with his

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<sup>1</sup> Wilhelm von Humboldt, “On the inner and outer organization of the higher institutions of learning in Berlin,” parts translated in Marianne Cowan, ed., *Humanist Without Portfolio*.

life, or on the relation of the university to the society. To the extent that reform does not reach the heart of the university, the content of the curriculum, the interaction between student and teacher, the nature of research, and, in some fields, the practice that relates to theory, it will remain superficial. But it is doubtful that these matters will be significantly affected by the kinds of structural reforms that are now being actively debated on many campuses.

It is pointless to discuss the "function of the university" in abstraction from concrete historical circumstances, as it would be a waste of effort to study any other social institution in this way. In a different society entirely different questions might arise as to the function of the university and the problems that are

pressing. To one who believes, as I do, that our society must undergo drastic changes if civilization is to advance, perhaps even to survive, university reform will appear an insignificant matter except insofar as it contributes to social change. Apart from this question, improvements in the university can no doubt take place within the framework of the presently existing institutional forms, and drastic revision of these forms will contribute little to it.

It is never an easy matter to determine to what extent deficiencies of a particular institution can actually be overcome through internal reform and to what extent they reflect characteristics of society at large or matters of individual psychology that are relatively independent of social forms. Consider, for example, the competitiveness fostered in the university, in fact, in the school system as a whole. It is difficult to convince oneself that this serves an educational purpose. Certainly it does not prepare the student for the life of a scholar or scientist. It would be absurd to demand of the working scientist that he keep his work secret so that his colleagues will not know of his achievements and not be helped by his discoveries in pursuing their own studies and research. Yet this demand is often made of the student in the classroom.

In later life, collective effort with sharing of discovery and mutual assistance is the idea; if it is not the norm, we rightly interpret this as an inadequacy of those who cannot rise above personal aggrandizement and to this extent are incompetent as scholars and teachers. Yet even at the most advanced level of graduate education, the student is discouraged by university regulation from working as any reasonable man would certainly choose to do: individually, where his interests lead him; collectively, where he can learn from and give aid to his fellows. Course projects and examinations are individual and competitive. The doctoral dissertation not only is required to be a purely individual contribution; beyond this questionable requirement, there is a built-in bias toward insignificance in the requirement that a finished piece of work be completed in a fixed time span. The student is obliged to set himself a limited goal and to avoid adventurous, speculative investigation that may challenge the conventional framework of scholarship and correspondingly, runs a high risk of failure. In this respect, the institutional forms of the university encourage mediocrity. Perhaps this is one reason why it is so common for a scholar to devote his career to trivial modifications of what he has already done. The patterns of thinking imposed in his early work, the poverty of conception that is fostered by too-rigid institutional forms, may limit his imagination and distort his vision. That many escape these limitations is a tribute to the human ability to resist pressures that tend to restrict the variety and creativity of life and thought. What is true even at the most advanced levels of graduate education is far more significant at earlier stages, as many critics have eloquently demonstrated. Still, it is not evident, even in this case, to what extent the fault is one of the universities and to what extent it is inherent to the role assigned them in a competitive society, where pursuit of self-interest is elevated to the highest goal.

Some of the pressures that impoverish the educational experience and distort the natural relation of student and teacher clearly have their origin in demands that are imposed on the school. Consider, for example, the sociological problem defined by Daniel Bell: “Higher education has been burdened with the task of becoming a gatekeeper, perhaps the only gatekeeper, to significant place and privilege in society;... it means that the education system is no longer geared to teaching but to judging.”<sup>2</sup> Jencks and Riesman make a similar point: “College is a kind of protracted aptitude test for measuring certain aspects of intelligence and character.” The result: “Reliance on colleges to preselect the upper-middle class obviously eliminates most youngsters born into lower-strata families, since they have ‘the wrong attitudes’ for academic success.”<sup>3</sup> The effect is that the university serves as an instrument for ensuring the perpetuation of social privilege.

The same, incidentally, holds for later life. To achieve the Humboldtian ideal, a university should be open to any man, at any stage of life, who wishes to avail himself to this institutional form for enhancing his “spiritual life.” In fact, there are programs for bringing corporate executives or engineers from industry to the university for specialized training or simply for broadening their cultural background, but none, to my knowledge, for shoemakers or industrial workers, who could, in principle, profit no less from these opportunities. Evidently, it would be misleading to describe these inequities merely as defects of the university.

In general, there is little if any educational function to the requirement that the university be concerned with certification as well as with education and research. On the contrary, this requirement interferes with its proper function. It is a demand imposed by a society that ensures, in many ways, the preservation of certain forms of privilege and elitism.

Or consider the often-voiced demand that the universities serve the needs of the outside society, that its activities be “relevant” to general social concerns. Put in a very general way, this demand is justifiable. Translated, into practice, however, it generally means that the universities provide a service to those existing social institutions that are in a position to articulate their needs and to subsidize the effort to meet these needs. It is not difficult for members of the university community to delude themselves into believing that they are maintaining a “neutral, value-free” position when they simply respond to demands set elsewhere. In fact, to do so is to make a political decision, namely, to ratify the existing distribution of power, authority, and privilege in the society at large, and to take on a commitment to reinforce it. The Pentagon and the great corporations can formulate their needs and subsidize the kind of work that will answer to them. The peasants of Guatemala or the unemployed in Harlem are in no position to do so, obviously. A free society should encourage the development of a university that escapes the not-too-subtle compulsion to be “relevant” in this sense. The university will be able to make its contribution to a free society only to the extent that it overcomes the temptation to conform unthinkingly to the prevailing ideology and to the existing patterns of power and privilege.

In its relation to society, a free university should be expected to be, in a sense, “subversive.” We take for granted that creative work in any field will challenge prevailing orthodoxy. A physicist who refines yesterday’s experiment, an engineer who merely seeks to improve existing devices, or an artist who limits himself to styles and techniques that have been thoroughly explored is rightly regarded as deficient in creative imagination. Exciting work in science, technology, scholarship, or the arts will probe the frontiers of understanding and try to create alternatives to

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Bell, “The scholar concerned,” *American Scholar*, vol. 37, no. 3 (1968).

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, *The Academic Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), pp. 104, 100.

the conventional assumptions. If, in some field of inquiry this is no longer true, then the field will be abandoned by those who seek intellectual adventure. These observations are clichés that few will question, except in the study of man and society. The social critic who seeks to formulate a vision of a more just and human social order, and is concerned with the discrepancy, more often, the chasm, that separates this vision from the reality that confronts him, is a frightening creature who must “overcome his alienation” and become “responsible,” “realistic,” and “pragmatic.” To decode these expressions: he must stop questioning our values and threatening our privilege. He may be concerned with technical modifications of existing society that improve its efficiency and blur its inequities, but he must not try to design a radically different alternative and involve himself in an attempt to bring about social change. He must, therefore, abandon the path of creative inquiry as it is conceived in other domains. It is hardly necessary to stress that this prejudice is even more rigidly institutionalized in the state socialist societies.

Obviously, a free mind may fall into error; the social critic is no less immune to this possibility than the inventive scientist or artist. It may be that at a given stage of technology, the most important activity is to improve the internal combustion engine, and that at a given stage of social evolution, primary attention should be given to the study of fiscal measures that will improve the operation of the system of state capitalism of the Western democracies. This is possible, but hardly obvious, in either case. The universities offer freedom and encouragement to those who question the first of these assumptions, but more rarely to those who question the second. The reasons are fairly clear. Since the dominant voice in any society is that of the beneficiaries of the status quo, the ‘alienated intellectual’ who tries to pursue the normal path of honest inquiry, perhaps falling into error on the way, and thus often finds himself challenging the conventional wisdom, tends to be a lonely figure. The degree of protection and support afforded him by the university is, again, a measure of its success in fulfilling its proper function in society. It is, furthermore, a measure of the willingness of the society to submit its ideology and structure to critical analysis and evaluation, and of its willingness to overcome inequities and defects that will be revealed by such a critique.

Such problems as these — which will never cease to exist, so long as human society continues, have become somewhat more critical in the last few years for a number of reasons. In an advanced industrial society, the linkage between the university and external social institutions tend to become more tight and intricate because of the utility of the “knowledge that is produced” (to use a vulgar idiom) and the training that is provided. This is a familiar insight. Half a century ago, Randolph Bourne noted that the world war had brought to leadership a liberal, technical intelligentsia “immensely ready for the executive ordering of events, pitifully unprepared for the intellectual interpretation or the idealistic focussing of ends,” pragmatic intellectuals who “have absorbed the secret of scientific method as applied to political administration” and who readily “lined up in the service of the war technique.” Turning to the university, and taking Columbia University as the prototype, he described it as “a financial corporation, strictly analogous, in its motives and responses, to the corporation which is concerned in the production of industrial commodities...The university produces learning instead of steel or rubber, but the nature of the academic commodity has become less and less potent in insuring for the academic workman a status materially different from that of any other kind of employee.” The trustees, he claimed, define their obligation in this way: “to see that the quality of the commodity which the university produces is such as to seem reputable to the class which they represent,” “Under trustee

control,” Bourne went on “the American university has been degraded from its old, noble ideal of a community of scholarship to a private commercial corporation.”<sup>4</sup>

Bourne’s characterization of the university can be questioned in many respects, but it nevertheless has an unpleasant ring of authenticity, today even more than at the time when he wrote. It will not escape the reader that the student movement of the past few years has, quite independently, developed a very similar critique, often with the same rhetoric. Again, one can point to exaggerations and even flights of fancy, but it would be a mistake to overlook the kernel of truth within it.

A further reason why the problems of the universities have become a more urgent concern than heretofore is that the universities have, on an unprecedented scale, come to the center of intellectual life. Not only scientists and scholars but also writers and artists are drawn to the academic community. To the extent that this is true, to the extent that other independent intellectual communities disappear, the demands on the university increase. Probably this is a factor in the university crises of the past few years. With the depoliticization of American society in the 1950s and the narrowing of the range of social thought, the university seems to have become, for many students, almost the only center of intellectual stimulation. Lionel Trilling, in a recent interview, pointed out that he cannot draw on his own experience as a student to help him comprehend the motivation of the “militant students” at Columbia: “Like all my friends at college, I hadn’t the slightest interest in the university as an institution: I thought of it, when I thought of it at all, as the inevitable philistine condition of one’s being given leisure, a few interesting teachers, and a library. I find it hard to believe that this isn’t the natural attitude.”<sup>5</sup> This is an apt comment. In the past, it was for the most part the football and fraternity crowd who had an interest in the university as such. But in this respect there have been substantial changes. Now it is generally the most serious and thoughtful students who are concerned with the nature of the universities and who feel hurt and deprived by its failings. Twenty years ago [in 1949], these students, in an urban university at least, would have looked elsewhere for the intellectual and social life that they now expect the university to provide.

Personally, I feel that the sharp challenges that have been raised by the student movement are among the few hopeful developments of these troubled years. It would be superficial, and even rather childish, to be so mesmerized by occasional absurdities of formulation or offensive acts as to fail to see the great significance of the issues that have been raised and that lie beneath the tumult. Only one totally lacking in judgment could find himself offended by “student extremism” and not, to an immensely greater extent, by the events and situations that motivate it. A person who can write such words as the following has, to put it as kindly as possible, lost his grasp of reality: “Quite a few of our universities have already decided that the only way to avoid on-campus riots is to give students’ academic credit for off-campus rioting (“fieldwork” in the ghettos, among migrant workers, etc.).”<sup>6</sup> Consider the assumptions that would lead one to

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<sup>4</sup> *The world of Randolph Bourne*, ed. Lillian Schlissel (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1965), pp. 198, 85, 87. I do not intend my citation of these remarks to suggest approval of what is asserted or implied, as that universities were once a noble community of scholarship, or that the “academic workman” should have a status different from other employees. The “academic workman” is not the only one who should be freed from serving as a tool of production.

<sup>5</sup> *Partisan Review*, vol. 35, no. 2 (1968).

<sup>6</sup> Irving Kristol, “A different way to restructure the university,” *New York Times Magazine*, Dec. 8, 1968. No less revealing is his next sentence: “And at Harvard, of all places! , there is now a course (Social Relations 148) which enrolls several hundred students and is given for credit, whose curriculum is devised by the SDS, whose classes are taught by SDS sympathizers, and whose avowed aim is ‘radicalization’ of the students.” Why, in fact, is it so scandalous

describe work in the ghettos or among migrant workers as a form of “rioting,” or, for that matter, to regard work of this sort as necessarily inappropriate to a college program, as distinct, say, from work on biological warfare or counterinsurgency, which is not described in these terms.

Less extreme, but still seriously distorted, is the perception of the student movement expressed by George Kennan, who is concerned with what he sees as the extremely disturbed and excited state of mind of a good portion of our student youth, floundering around as it is in its own terrifying wilderness of drugs, pornography, and political hysteria.<sup>7</sup> Again, it is striking that he is so much less concerned with the “extremely disturbed and excited state of mind” of those responsible for the fact that the tonnage of bombs dropped on South Vietnam exceeds the total expended by the U.S. Air Force in all theaters of World War II, or with those responsible for the anti-communist “political hysteria” of the 1950s, or, for that matter, with that great mass of students who are still “floundering around” in the traditional atmosphere of conformism and passivity of the colleges and whose rioting is occasioned by football victories.

The irrationality which has been all too characteristic of the response to the student movement is itself a remarkable phenomenon, worthy of analysis. More important, however, is the effort to take the challenge presented by the student movement as a stimulus to critical thinking and social action, perhaps of a quite radical nature, a necessity in a society as troubled as ours, and as dangerous. Since World War II we have spent over a trillion dollars on “defense” and are now spending billions on an infantile competition to place a man on the moon. Our scientists and technologists are preparing to construct an antiballistic missile system [ABM] at an ultimate cost of many billions of dollars though they know that it will contribute nothing to defense, that in fact it will raise a potentially suicidal arms race to new heights. At the same time, our cities crumble, and millions suffer hunger and want, while those who try to publicize these conditions are investigated by the FBI. It is intolerable that our society should continue to arrogate to itself, in part for consumption, in part for unconscionable waste, half of the far-from-limitless material resources of the world. There are simply no words to describe our willingness to destroy, on a scale without parallel in the contemporary world, when our leaders detect a threat to the “national goals” that they formulate, and that a passive and docile citizenry accepts. It may appear to be an extreme judgment when a social scientist, a native of Pakistan, asserts that “America has institutionalized even its genocide,” referring to the fact that the extermination of Indians “has become the object of public entertainment and children’s games.”<sup>8</sup> A look at school texts confirms his assessment, however. Consider the following description in a fourth-grade reader of the extermination of the Pequot tribe by Captain John Mason:

“His little army attacked in the morning before it was light and took the Pequots by surprise. The soldiers broke down the stockade with their axes, rushed inside, and set fire to the wigwams. They killed nearly all the braves, squaws, and children, and burned their corn and other food. There were no Pequots left to make more trouble. When the other Indian tribes saw what good fighters the white men were, they kept the peace for many years.”

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that Harvard (“of all places!”) should have a student-initiated course offering a radical critique of American society and its international behavior?

<sup>7</sup> George Kennan, speech to the International Association for Cultural Freedom on Dec. 2, 1968, at Princeton, N.J.; *New York Times*, Dec. 4, 1968. Zbigniew Brzezinski, who interprets the student movement as basically “Luddite,” describes Kennan as “in a mood of rage at the young.”

<sup>8</sup> Eqbal Ahmad, in Richard M. Pfeffer, ed. *No More Vietnams?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 18.

“I wish I were a man and had been there,” thought Robert.<sup>9</sup>

A child who acquires such attitudes in the school will become the man who can behave in the way described by a British eyewitness:

I asked one American who had just ordered a strike on some huts and sampans (blowing the latter to bits with parts of the boat and the bodies flying in all directions) if air attacks like that did not kill many harmless civilians. “But people shouldn’t continue to live here,” he said.<sup>10</sup>

It is hardly necessary to add that attitudes created in the schools are supported by the mass media, not only directly but by their encouragement of a general passivity. There is much truth in the observation of Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton that:

these media not only continue to affirm the status quo, but in the same measure, they fail to raise essential questions about the structure of society. Hence by leading toward conformism and by providing little basis for a critical appraisal of society, the commercially sponsored media indirectly but effectively restrain the cogent development of a genuinely critical outlook.<sup>11</sup>

This is not the place for an extended discussion; it is enough to point out that, for reasons suggested in these few remarks, it is a matter of great urgency, for ourselves and for world society, that our institutions and ideology be subjected to serious critical analysis. The universities must be a primary object of such analysis and, at the same time, must provide the “institutional form” within which it can be freely conducted. In these specific historical circumstances, it is useful to recall a remark of Bertrand Russell:

Without rebellion, mankind would stagnate, and injustice would be irremediable. The man who refuses to obey authority has, therefore, in certain circumstances, a legitimate function, provided his disobedience has motives which are social rather than personal.<sup>12</sup>

It is these historical circumstances that define the context for a study of the function of the university and the current challenge to the university.

Reactions to the recent wave of student unrest throughout the world have varied widely. Nathan Glazer asks “whether the student radicals fundamentally represent a better world that can come into being, or whether they are not committed to outdated and romantic visions that

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<sup>9</sup> Harold B. Clifford, *Exploring New England* (Chicago: Follett: 1961), p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Richard West, *Sketches from Vietnam* (London: Jonathan Cape, Ltd., 1968), pp. 97–98.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton, “Mass Communication, popular taste, and organized social action,” in W.L. Schramm, ed., *Mass communications* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949); quoted by D. W. Smythe and H. Wilson in a study in which they conclude that “the principal *function* of the commercially supported mass media in the United States is to market the output of the consumer goods industries and to train the population for loyalty to the American economic-political system” (“Cold War-mindedness and the mass media,” in *Struggle against history*, ed. N. D. Houghton, pp. 71–72).

<sup>12</sup> *Power* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1938), p. 252.

cannot be realized, that contradict fundamentally other desires and hopes they themselves possess, and that contradict even more the desires of most other people.” He tends toward the latter view; the student radicals remind him “more of the Luddite machine smashers than the Socialist trade unionists who achieved citizenship and power for workers.<sup>13</sup> Consider, in contrast, the reaction of Paul Ricoeur to the massive rebellion of French students in May 1968:

The signs are now eloquent. The West has entered into a cultural revolution which is distinctively its own, the revolution of the advanced industrial societies, even if it echoes or borrows from the Chinese revolution. It is a cultural revolution because it questions the world-vision, the conception of life, that underlie the economic and political structures and the totality of human relations. This revolution attacks capitalism not only because it fails to bring about social justice but also because it succeeds too well in deluding men by its own inhuman commitment to quantitative well-being. It attacks bureaucracy not only because it is burdensome and ineffectual, but because it places men in the role of slaves in relation to the totality of powers, of structures and hierarchical relations from which they have become estranged. Finally, it attacks the nihilism of a society which, like a cancerous tissue, has no purpose beyond its own growth. Confronted with a senseless society, this cultural revolution tries to find the way to the creation of goods, of ideas, of values, in relation to their ends. The enterprise is gigantic; it will take years, decades, a century...<sup>14</sup>

Glazer (like Brzezinski, see note 7) sees the student rebels as Luddites, displaced and unable to find their role in the new society of advanced technology and complex social management. They “come from the fields that have a restricted and ambiguous place in contemporary society.”<sup>15</sup> Ricoeur, on the other hand, expresses a very different perception: in the advanced industrial societies in the coming years there will be a sharp conflict between the centralizing force of a technical bureaucracy, managing society for dubious ends, and the forces that seek to reconstruct social life on a more human scale on the basis of “participation” and popular control. Both interpretations sense that a major historical process is under way. They differ in their judgment as to where they expect (and no doubt hope) it will end, and correspondingly in the interpretation they give of student dissidence and rebellion. Both expect the university to be at the center of the conflict. Optimists may hope that it will be in the eye of the hurricane, but it is more realistic to expect that it will continue to be caught up in controversy and turmoil.

It is hardly in doubt that we are in the midst of a historical process of centralization and bureaucratization not only in the economy but also in politics and social organization. The crisis of parliamentary institutions is a worldwide phenomenon.<sup>16</sup> Reactions can be seen not only in the university rebellions but also in the search for forms of community organization and control, which have forced their way onto the front pages in recent months, and even, it seems, in tentative gropings toward more direct worker control, often in opposition to the highly bureaucratized trade unions that are increasingly more remote from the day-to-day concerns of those

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<sup>13</sup> Nathan Glazer, “Student Power’ in Berkeley,” *Public Interest*, no. 13 (fall 1968).

<sup>14</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Le Monde*, June 9–10, 1968.

<sup>15</sup> Glazer, “Student power’ in Berkeley.”

<sup>16</sup> For some illuminating discussion, see Michael Kidron, *Western capitalism since the war* (London: George Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1968).



whom the leadership claims to represent.<sup>17</sup> In Eastern Europe there are somewhat analogous developments. The student movement must, I believe, be understood in this more general context. The universities will not be able to isolate themselves from the profound social conflict that appears likely, though its course can hardly be guessed. The linkage of the universities to other social institutions, noted earlier, guarantees this. In fact, there may be very serious questioning, in coming years, of the basic assumption of modern society that development of technology is inherently a desirable, inevitable process; and with it, a critique of the role of the university in advancing knowledge and technique and putting it to use. When students in Western Europe take as their war cry the chant “Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh,” they are not merely protesting the Vietnam War and the crushing of the poor by the rich that it symbolizes; they are also reacting against the values of industrial society, protesting the role assigned to them as managers of this society, and rejecting the kind of rationality uninformed by any sense of justice, which, as they see it, with considerable accuracy, translates into practice as the knowledge how to preserve privilege and order but not how to meet human needs. The American student movement is also animated in part by such concerns.

In many respects, the university is a legitimate target for protest. The unflattering portrait given by such critics as James Ridgeway may be overdrawn, but it is basically realistic, and quite properly disturbing to the concerned student.<sup>18</sup> Recognition of these characteristics of the university leads to revulsion and often militancy. Nevertheless, the problem brought to the surface may be irresolvable within the framework of the university itself. Consider, for example, the matter of government contracts for research. It is a classic liberal ideal, echoed also by Marx, that “government and church should...be equally excluded from any influence on the school.”<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, there is little doubt that government research contracts provide a hidden subsidy to the academic budget by supporting faculty research which would otherwise have to be subsidized by the university. Furthermore, it is quite probable that the choice of research topics, in the sciences at least, is influenced very little by the source of funds, at least in the major universities. It is doubtful that scientific education can continue at a reasonable level without this kind of support. Radical students will certainly ask themselves why support from the Defense Department is more objectionable than support from capitalist institutions, ultimately, from profits derived by exploitation, or support by tax-free gifts that in effect constitute a levy on the poor to support the education of the privileged.<sup>20</sup>

One legacy of classical liberalism that we must fight to uphold with unending vigilance, in the universities and without, is the commitment to a “free market-place of ideas.” To a certain extent, this commitment is merely verbal. The task, however, is to extend, not to limit, such freedom as exists, and this freedom is not inconsiderable. Students are right to ask why faculty members should be permitted to contribute to the weapons cult or to work on counterinsurgency. They also point out, with much justice, that it is unreasonable to claim that this is simply a freely undertaken commitment. Access to funds, power, and influence is open to those who undertake this work, but not, say, to those who would prefer to study ways in which poorly armed guerillas might combat an enemy with overwhelming technological superiority. Were the university truly

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> James Ridgeway, *The closed corporation* (New York: Random House, 1968).

<sup>19</sup> Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *ibid.*: “If in some states of [the United States] the higher education institutions are also ‘free,’ that only means in fact defraying the cost of the education of the upper classes from the general tax receipts.”

“neutral and value-free,” one kind of work would, as noted earlier, be as well supported as the other. The argument is valid but does not change the fact that the commitment is nevertheless undertaken with eagerness and a belief that it is right. Only coercion could eliminate the freedom to undertake such work. Once the principle is established that coercion is legitimate in this domain, it is rather clear against whom it will be used. And the principle of legitimacy of coercion would destroy the university as a serious institution; it would destroy its value to a free society. This must be recognized even in the light of the undeniable fact that the freedom falls far short of the ideal.

In certain respects, the specific issue of Defense Department funding of research is a misleading one. Research on chemical and biological warfare or counterinsurgency would be no more benign if funded by the National Institutes of Health or the Social Science Research Council, just as work on high-energy physics is not corrupted if funding comes through the Department of Defense. The important question is the nature of the work and the uses to which it is likely to be put, not the bureaucratic issue of the source of the funding. The latter is of some significance, insofar as one might argue that the Pentagon gains respectability and power by its support of serious research. For American society as a whole, this development is a very minor symptom of a real tragedy, the ongoing and perhaps irreversible militarization of American society. But in the particular case of the universities, these considerations seem to me marginal. Another side issue, in my opinion, is the question of a campus base for military research. In fact, the Vietnamese care very little whether the counterinsurgency technology that is used to destroy and repress them is developed in the halls of the university or in private spin-offs on its periphery.<sup>21</sup> And to the victims of the endless arms race, the present victims of the waste of resources, material and intellectual, that are desperately needed elsewhere, or the possible future victims of a devastating catastrophe, it is of little interest whether their fate is determined in a Department of Death on the university campus or in Los Alamos or Fort Detrick, hundreds of miles away. To move such work off campus is socially irrelevant. It might, in fact, even be a regressive step. It might be argued that as long as such work continues, it would be preferable for it to be done on campus, where it can become a focus for student activism and protest that may not only impede such work but also contribute to growing public awareness.

One of the most hopeful signs, in my opinion, is the increase in concern among students over the problem of the uses of research. There are few today who would agree with the judgment of Edward Teller that “we must trust our social processes” to make the best use of technological advance and “must not be deterred by arguments involving consequences or costs.”<sup>22</sup> The question of the uses of technology is multifaceted: it involves complex historical and political judgments as well as technical issues. Properly, it should be faced by students at a time in life when they are free to explore the many dimensions of the problems and supported by a community with like concerns, rather than isolated in a competitive job market. For such reasons the problems of campus-based military research seem to me rather complex.

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<sup>21</sup> As it continues to be. For example, one of the initiators of Project Cambridge at MIT, Professor Ithiel Pool, states that this \$7.6 million project will “strengthen” research in counterinsurgency (*Scientific Research*, September 15, 1969). At the same time, he characterizes student protests that this will be the case as “a lot of hogwash.”

<sup>22</sup> “Teller urges strong nuclear management,” *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, April 23, 1963. We must push “scientific advancements to the limit,” Teller urges, “the military requirements will soon follow.” Concerns over “the best human use of the advances already achieved” is in his view “an extremely grave symptom,” which threatens the “whole dynamic civilization of the West, for which America is the spearhead.”

Those who believe that radical social change is imperative in our society are faced with a dilemma when they consider university reform. They want the university to be a free institution, and they want the individuals in it to use this freedom in a civilized way. They observe that the university, or to be more precise, many of its members, is “lined up in the service of the war technique” and that it often functions in such a way as to entrench privilege and support repression. Given this largely correct observation, it is easy to move to some serious misconceptions. It is simply false to claim, as many now do, that the university exists only to provide manpower for the corporate system, or that the university (and the society) permit no meaningful work, or that the university merely serves to coerce and “channel” the student into a socially accepted lifestyle and ideology, even though it is true that the temptation to make choices that will lead in these directions is very great. To an overwhelming extent, the features of university life that rightly are offensive to many concerned students result not from trustee control, not from defense contracts, not from administrative decisions, but from the relatively free choices of faculty and students. Hence the dilemma noted above. “Restructuring the university” is unlikely to be effective in eliminating the features of the institution that have sparked student criticism. In fact, many of the concrete proposals that I have seen are, I suspect, likely to have the opposite effect; namely, they may lead toward a system of enforceable regulations that may appear democratic on paper but will limit the individual freedom that exists in an institution that is highly decentralized and rather loose in its structure of decision making and administration, hence fairly responsive to the wishes of its members.

It is possible to imagine useful reforms; I suspect, however, that they will have at best a small effect on the way the university functions. The real problem is a much deeper one: to change the choices and personal commitment of the individuals who make up the university. This is much harder than modification of formal structures and is not likely to be effected by such restructuring in any very serious way.

More to the point, I believe, is the view expressed in the Port Huron Statement of 1962, more or less the founding document of SDS [Students for a Democratic Society]:

The university is located in a permanent position of social influence. Its educational function makes it indispensable and automatically makes it a crucial institution in the formation of social attitudes. In an unbelievably complicated world, it is the central institution for organizing, evaluating, and transmitting knowledge... Social relevance, the accessibility to knowledge, and internal openness, these together make the university a potential base and agency in the movement of social change.

Any new left in America must be, in large measure, a left with real intellectual skills, committed to deliberativeness, honesty, and reflection as working tools. The university permits the political life to be an adjunct to the academic one, and action to be informed by reason.

University reform, in my opinion, should be directed toward such goals as these: not toward imposing constraints, but rather toward lessening them; not toward enjoining the work that now is often dominant, much of which I personally find detestable, but toward opening up alternatives. This can be done, I think, though it will require a degree of intellectual commitment that has, by and large, been lacking on the part of those concerned with university reform.

The university should compensate for the distorting factors introduced by external demands, which necessarily reflect the distribution of power in extra-university society, and by the dynamics of professionalization, which, though not objectionable in itself, often tends to orient study

toward problems that can be dealt with by existing techniques and away from those that require new understanding. The university should be a center for radical social inquiry, as it is already a center for what might be called radical inquiry in the pure sciences. For example, it should loosen its institutional forms even further, to permit a richer variety of work and study and experimentation, and it should provide a home for the free intellectual, for the social critic, for the irreverent and radical thinking that is desperately needed if we are to escape from the dismal reality that threatens to overwhelm us. The primary barrier to such development will not be the unwillingness of administrators or the stubbornness of trustees. It will be the unwillingness of students to do the difficult and serious work required and the fear of the faculty that its security and authority, its guild structure, will be threatened.

These, I think, are the real barriers to serious reform and innovation in the universities as matters now stand, though new barriers may arise if these are successfully overcome. These are the primary problems that should motivate and direct efforts to change the university. In general, I think that the so-called new left has a task of historic importance; and I think that this task was formulated quite fittingly in the Port Huron statement when it spoke of the necessity for “a left with real intellectual skills, committed to deliberativeness, honesty, and reflection as working tools,” committed to a political life in which “action is informed by reason.”

These are goals that can easily be forgotten in the heat of conflict, but they remain valid ones, and one can only hope that they will continually be resurrected as a guide to positive action.

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Noam Chomsky  
The Function of the University in a Time of Crisis  
1969

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This essay first appeared in Robert M. Hutchins Mortimer J. Adler, eds., *The Great Ideas Today Nineteen Sixty-Nine* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1969). The current version is excerpted out of Chomsky, *For Reasons of State* (1972).

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