The American Scholar Forum

THE FUNCTION OF THE LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

The Problem of the Liberal Arts College

John Dewey

Nothing is more striking in recent discussions of liberal education than the widespread and seemingly spontaneous use of liberating as a synonym for liberal. For it marks a break with the traditional idea that a certain group of studies is liberal because of something inhering in them—belonging to them by virtue of an indwelling essence or nature—as opium was once said to put persons to sleep because of its narcotizing nature.

This latter view of the liberal arts has the merit, for some writers and educators, of rendering it unnecessary to inquire closely into what the subjects actually accomplish for those who study them. If a particular group of studies is "liberal" in and of itself, such an inquiry is irrelevant. Failure to exercise a liberating educative effect in given cases is not the fault of the studies but of external conditions, such, perhaps, as the inherent incapacity of some students to rise to a truly "intellectual" level. To define liberal as that which liberates is to bring the problem of liberal education and of the liberal arts college within the domain of an inquiry in which the issue is settled by search for what is a crucial accomplishment. The test and justification of claims put forth is found in observable consequences, not in an a priori dogma.

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The concrete significance of the foregoing generalities in locating the present problem of the liberal arts college is found in outstanding historic considerations. The theory that certain subjects are liberal because of something forever fixed in their own nature was formulated prior to the rise of scientific method. It was consonant with the philosophical theory which was once held about every form of knowledge. For according to that doctrine if anything is knowable it is because of its inherent nature, form or essence, so that knowledge consists of an intuitive grasp by pure "intellect" of this nature. This doctrine is completely repudiates in the practices which constitute the scientific revolution.

In the second place, the traditional doctrine was embodied in educational institutions in a period that was pre-technological as well as pre-scientific. The liberal arts were sharply contrasted with the useful arts. This contrast had its basis in social and cultural conditions. The useful or industrial arts were acquired by means of sheer apprenticeship in fixed routines in which insight into principles played a negligible part. The industrial revolution which marks the last few centuries is the result of the scientific revolution. Only the most backward "useful" arts are now matters of empirical routine. They are now technological, a fact which signifies that they are founded in scientific understanding of underlying principles.

In the third place, and most important of
more new scientific and semi-vocational courses to an already swollen curriculum. The danger, to my mind, lies elsewhere. It is possible to freeze existing illiberal tendencies and to intensify existing undesirable splits and divisions. At a time when technical education is encroaching in many cases upon intelligent acquaintance with and use of the great humanistic products of the past, we find that reading and study of "classics" are being isolated and placed in sharp opposition to everything else. The problem of securing to the liberal arts college its due function in democratic society is that of seeing to it that the technical subjects which are now socially necessary acquire a humane direction. There is nothing in them which is inherently exclusive; but they cannot be liberating if they are cut off from their humane sources and inspiration. On the other hand, books which are cut off from vital relations with the needs and issues of contemporary life themselves become ultra-technical.

The outstanding need is the interfusion of knowledge, of man and nature, of vocational preparation with a deep sense of the social foundations and social consequences of industry and industrial callings in contemporary society. On the face of this need we have urged upon us a policy of their systematic separation. I lately received from a man distinguished in public life, not a professional educator, a letter in which he writes: "Millions of our soldiers are coming back re-actions of a kind through their lack of cultural education to appraise their surroundings and the events that are taking place." I would add that there are many other millions who are confused and bewildered, at the mercy of drift and of designing "leaders," because of their lack of an education that enables them to appraise their surroundings and the course of events. The present function of the liberal arts college, in my belief, is to use the resources at our disposal alike by human literature, by science, by subjects that have a vocational bearing, so as to secure ability to appraise the needs and issues of the world in which we live. Such an education would be liberating but in spite of the fact that it appears widely from the seven liberal arts of the medieval period, but just because it would do for the contemporary world what these arts used to do for the world in which they took form.