Tasking the American University: The 1990s

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> The concepts of race, nation, folk, and culture contain questions and not answers; they are not sociological elements, but rather complex results. Nevertheless, people refer to them as if they were unities.
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> Robert Musil

I take it that one of the urgent questions for the university in the 1990s is: When does the insistence on ethnicity become productive, and when counterproductive?

The question, you may think, is an impossible one, because it would be answered differently, even divisively, depending on whether one belongs to a community still seeking to present its ethnic credentials or to an established group. Yet if a general agreement exists on what is productive, a conversation can take place. I think there is such an agreement and want to state it as follows. The insistence on ethnic factors intends to further *autonomy* in both the psychological sense and cultural sense of the word: the fullest development of each person/family within the community, and of the community within a multicultural state. I assume, at the same time, that we are not in a "Balkan" situation, where ethnic groups are striving for political independence through secession.[1]

Even though this definition of a common aim is not conceptually precise—it does not pause to ask who is a person, what is meant by a community, what is autonomy—if you respond to the definition something is gained. Instead of the word "autonomy," which I use here in the Kantian sense of an ideal situation, in which individuals feel that the laws of the state or the rules of society are *their* laws and rules, in *their* interest rather than somebody else's, you could use words from

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1. Still one of the best descriptions of the multicultural state is one of the earliest: Randolph Bourne's "Trans-National America," printed in the *Atlantic Monthly* of July 1916; reprinted in Randolph S. Bourne, *War and the Intellectuals: Collected Essays, 1915-1919* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

the Declaration of Independence, citing the right of every citizen to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Let me start with what is counterproductive. Counterproductive, in my view, is the pressure within each group for ideological conformity or an outright profession of loyalty. This would make the group a cult rather than a culture-bearer. It is important that the group tolerates bystanders who are neutral or still in a reflective stage, that it does not force acts of witness from its members. The tendency toward the compulsory profession of loyalty was a factor that eventually drove Nazi Germany into a warlike mentality; in wartime, loyalty must be close to unconditional. Coming to power, the National Socialists introduced a *Bekenntnis* mystique that politicized scholarship and discouraged free inquiry. *Bekenntnis* (confession of loyalty) determined *Erkenntnis* (cognition and knowledge acquired through scholarship). For example, relativity theory was despised because a Jew, Einstein, had formulated it. Everything Jewish was denounced as abstract, rather than vital, as injurious to the day-to-day concerns of the new German ethnic community, the *Volksgemeinschaft*.

Counterproductive also is a confusion between ethnic and racial. Nazi Germany is again the extreme and cautionary, *though far from singular*, instance. (I have no wish to abuse analogy and identify the present with the past.) The Germans knew perfectly well that they were genetically and culturally a mixed bag. But instead of simply urging a restitutive inward turn, or an anti-cosmopolitan stance (suasions dangerous enough), Nazi ideology, through no fewer than two ministries, promulgated a deliberate fiction. It claimed that there was an Aryan character-type, and that Aryan blood was exclusively the creative force among all ethnic strains.[2]

Mere assertion, however, can only do so much, even when the future rather than the past is appealed to. Aryan purity was also presented as a project, a political fiction that had reconstructive power, not only for Germany but for the world: "Today Germany, tomorrow the world." This appeal to the future erased a mixed and humiliating past or explained it away by race pollution and the conspiracy of nations lower in the racial scale against the dominance of Germany. This so-called *Weltanschauung* had nevertheless to find philosophical backing. It did so by resorting to the genius-idea:

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2. Hitler's declarations in *Mein Kampf*, though based on nothing but declarative whim, became dogma. "What we today see before us of human culture, events in art, scholarship or technology, is almost exclusively the creative project of the Aryan." Göring, in justifying the Nüremberg racial laws, adds a religious twist. "God created the races. He did not intend equality . . . There is no such thing as equality. We . . . must fundamentally reject it in our laws and pledge ourselves [*bekennen*] to the purity of the race as established by providence and nature." *Das Dritte Reich und seine Denker: Dokumente*, ed. Leon Poliakov and Josef Wulf (Berlin-Gruenewald: Verlags-GmBH, 1959), 5, 7.

genius, the argument held, could not be reduced to rule because it acted in harmony with an unknown law of nature. It was not imitative but foundational and nomothetic. (This was an important Romantic idea, supporting art's inarticulate reason, its *"différend"* as Lyotard might say.) Transferred to the corporate and mystical base of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, genius was then identified exclusively with the Aryan character-type, becoming thus not only ethnocentric but also racist. The boast that the Germans were a *Kulturvolk* of *Denker und Dichter* (Thinkers and Creators), which contributed to the greatest massacre of modern times, found its support in this racialization of creativity.

Turning more directly to what is productive, it would seem that just as the general culture must be acquired or reacquired through university study, so must the particular culture of ethnic groups. We are not in a traditional society where ethnicity is everywhere handed down through the family and its close coordination with social practices. The university is essential as a place where one can learn to recover a heritage that was interrupted or marginalized and to study the history and literature of other cultures and ethnology generally.

Here we encounter, at the same time, campus activism. How productive of autonomy is it to spend time at college this way? Many students and teachers feel that the extension of ethnic consciousness to every sphere of life, to every aspect of the university, is called for. With my question I do not look for a "yes" or "no" but wish to stimulate an analysis of the university as a social structure somewhat offside to society, or to the achievement of specific social reforms. The situation is complicated by the fact that the university is itself not of one type. European universities are different from each other as well as from the American academy, in the United States, moreover, we have a variety of institutes of higher education: community, city, state, and private colleges.

In all of these, however, a contradiction is present which may be anthropologically founded rather than peculiarly American. University study is liminal in Van Gennep's sense: according to this great ethnographer, the candidate who is tested by initiatory "rites of passage" must be provisionally separated from his social group before being accepted in (aggregated) once more. The academy, I suggest, inserts a second latency period at the very point when adolescent and social identity-pressures reach a flash point. It is a latency period vis-à-vis social obligations yet an arousal period vis-à-vis the intellectual development of the candidate. This sends a mixed signal. Anthropologically it is a time for separating from family and group, a time to go into the wilderness or through a deliberately induced danger period. But the academy converts this time into a "moratorium" to allow a

protected and structured stage of development away from home. The contradiction that besets university life as an institutionalized rite of passage lies in the fact that in traditional societies rituals of initiation expose the young person to powerful demons in the absence of social mediation, while in a university setting the danger of direct exposure is modified by a protective system. This protection guarantees (and often helps to pay for) an "academic freedom" in which unorthodox as well as traditional knowledge may be pursued. There is bound to be confusion, then, when the threshold separating society and university is crossed by campus reformers who protest against the society affording them protection and tolerating their liminal status. It is unclear, in short, whether universities, as presently organized, are in fact the ideal places to learn about either (intellectual) freedom or (social) obligation.[3]

Yet they remain for the time being the best chance we have for promoting independence of mind while training the young for specific social roles. The change since the late 1960s is that it has become harder to separate university study as a learning opportunity, in which particular ethnic cultures become an important field, from a protest movement affirming descent cultures within an institution seen as predominantly hostile—as a *stepmother* rather than an *alma mater*. And when learning fails to be separated from activism, the result is omnipolitics. Everything is then subjected to a political test, including the curriculum.

As long as the general culture is not neglected or falsified, these intensities are for the good. They enact collectively a hermeneutics of suspicion directed toward the general culture, toward its covert assumptions or universalized standards, its smugness or ingrained xenophobia. But if the culture is perceived only as hostile, the motive for learning about it is pretty well destroyed. Activism will then increase that learning disincentive, and substitute a negative conviction for scholarship. A situation is created in which there is no call for a temporary suspension of judgment, or for comparative study that would restrain such dispiriting labels as repressive, racist, patriarchal, colonialist, etc. The activism coming from the right wing is equally unhelpful: blindly affirmative of the status quo, it also encourages labeling rather than thoughtful criticism. It confuses the questioning of common beliefs with subversion, forgetting Emerson's observation:

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3. The young in the inner city have less home-protection, but the relative security of university life is therefore all the more crucial for them. In their case, too, the protective structure is exposed to stress. A sense of having achieved maturity against terrible odds can make it more difficult to accept without challenge a protected status based on a second or extended latency. Those whose childhood has been curtailed by social circumstances may not only require more catch-up time; they may also fight this need in order to maintain self-reliance and a degree of separation from the general culture.

"We suspect our instruments. We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately. . . ."[4] I can also quote from Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*:

> To see more clearly the confusion into which our social and intellectual life has fallen represents an enrichment rather than a loss. That reason can penetrate more profoundly into its own structure is not a sign of intellectual bankruptcy. Nor is it to be regarded as intellectual incompetence on our part when an extraordinary broadening of perspective necessitates a thoroughgoing revision of our fundamental conceptions.

Most of the time it is not the general culture which is being criticized, for what students know of it is too sparse or disheartening; they see injustice around them, and they react accordingly. The general culture in its complexity and historical variety may even escape being explored for a usable past. Wishing to hold reality and justice in one thought, and having limited time in the university to do so, we are in danger of turning both reality and justice into very partial concepts.

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4. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience," *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Random House, 1992), 322.