THE UNIVERSITY IN THE 1980s: AN ANACHRONISM?*

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ABSTRACT

The purposes of universities as traditionally defined and as specified in both the Carnegie Commission in the USA and the Loi d'Orientation de l'Enseignement Supérieur of 1968 in France, are considered in the context of the profound changes which have occurred in western industrialized societies in recent decades. Some of these changes may make it more difficult for universities to fulfill properly such traditional purposes as providing an independent critique of society's evolution, asking questions about the ways in which moral, material and technological problems are handled and the maintenance of that spirit of free enquiry which is an essential part of human freedom.

In this discussion I wish to consider the interplay between universities and the society in which they exist and by which they are sustained. Some of my remarks may be applicable to less developed countries, and some to the communist world, but my focus is more generally on western industrialized societies, and more particularly on Britain. The period of time with which I am concerned is the two decades or so between, shall we say, 1964 and 1984. I propose summarily to identify the purposes which universities are traditionally supposed to serve, and to speculate about the relevance or appropriateness of these purposes in the context of social and economic trends in the two decades in question.

But when one refers to "traditional" purposes, the time-scale in question is in fact quite short. Until the nineteenth century many universities, including Oxford and Cambridge, were mainly knowledge-transmitting institutions, with primary concentration on the fields of law, medicine, philosophy and theology. Among the many responses to the flow of the French Revolutionary armies over Europe was the rejuvenation of Prussia

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and the foundation in 1810 of the University of Berlin by Wilhelm von Humboldt with a reformulated ideal of serving a free humanity by educating the nation to free moral responsibility. In the social and economic changes following technological innovations which combined to form the industrial revolution there was added to this reformulated ideal the impulse to search for ever newer and better and more efficient ways of doing things. Universities in these circumstances came to be seen as places for seeking out new knowledge, and for fostering man's moral and spiritual progress, as well as for handing on existing knowledge. Thus were conceived the modern inseparably-conjoined twin purposes of teaching and research, and although the notion of community service was never altogether lost, it is only recently that it has come to reassume the importance that Humboldt gave it, though in rather different guise. In perhaps the most elaborate contemporary statement of the purposes of a university, the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education in the United States listed the following: "the provision of opportunities for the intellectual, aesthetic, ethical, and skill development of individual students, and the provision of campus environments which can constructively assist students in their more general developmental growth; the advancement of human capability in society at large; the enlargement of educational justice for the postsecondary age group; the transmission and advancement of learning and wisdom; the critical evaluation of society — through individual thought and persuasion — for the sake of society's self-renewal" (Carnegie, 1975). France's Loi d'Orientation de l'Enseignement Supérieur of 12 November 1968 echoed two of these purposes in simpler language — the transmission of knowledge, the advancement of research — but formulated a third with a rather different flavour: contributing towards the education of man "in order to give him greater control over his destiny" (France, 1976). In what follows I shall have particularly in mind the three purposes spelled out in the French Loi, and the first and last of those listed by the Carnegie Commission.

Of course it is not possible in the space that is available to me to attempt a rigorous analysis of the underlying formative trends and processes in contemporary society which impinge upon universities and which they in turn may in some degree reciprocally affect. I propose therefore arbitrarily to isolate and crudely to delineate some four or five features of industrialised but particularly British society that seem to be of significance to universities, and in the light of these to review the purposes which I have just described.

First let us take sin. Everyone is against it. The trouble is that not everyone agrees about what is sinful. David Miller, formerly of Lancaster University, has recently published a book on social justice (Miller, 1976) in which he discusses the ways in which different connotations given to the concept of justice (which most people would agree is a good thing) may be related to different types of society. In Britain in this score years it seems to