

Preface to the issue "American Academic Culture in Transformation: Fifty Years, Four Disciplines"

Daedalus

Boston

Winter 1997

Authors: Graubard, Stephen R

Volume: 126

Issue: 1

Start Page: V

ISSN: 00115266

Copyright American Academy of Arts and Sciences Winter 1997

Full Text:

THIS ISSUE OF DAEDALUS owes a great deal to two historians, Carl Schorske and Thomas Bender, who persevered in believing that this is a propitious moment to consider the changing nature of American academic culture—a "culture" too rarely acknowledged or investigated—whose character and complexities it behooves us to understand. American society, as it struggles with its many domestic and international problems, and not only those created by a new appreciation of what is commonly called diversity, has made urgent and new claims on its educational and scholarly communities. Inevitably, these have intensified the need of the American academic profession to have a greater self-consciousness of itself, its nature, and its roles. These are not matters easily explained. The world of scholarship is generally oriented towards the production of new disciplinary knowledge. It rarely pauses to take itself as its subject, to examine its own transformations. This issue of Daedalus presents the yield of a collective attempt at such an examination. It needs to be read as an initial effort in an inquiry that ought to be pursued both in other particular disciplines and on a wider spectrum. Indeed, it is our hope that this will be done.

If we have witnessed the introduction of new subjects and new modes of inquiry in recent decades, fundamentally changing the balance in course offerings but also in research, this merely continues a trend that has existed in American academic institutions from almost the time of the Civil

War. No one who has seriously studied academic course catalogs from 1950 imagines that they resemble those that existed in 1900, let alone in 1850. Nor, for that matter, do the library card catalogs of yesterday suggest that the American research enterprise was fundamentally unchanged after World War II from what it had been when Franklin Roosevelt entered Harvard early in the twentieth century. Change has been a constant in the last century, but it is possible to argue that it has never been more rapid or more argued over than in the last fifty years. Whether the war in Vietnam, the civil rights struggles, the "Cold War," the vastly transformed condition of women, or some other major national or international development is given principal credit for compelling the reevaluation within the academy of what passes for legitimate and creative scholarship, each has had some influence in contributing to the unprecedentedly passionate debates over what individual disciplines should concern themselves with, what content is appropriate to any of them.

Changes have been numerous, but they do not derive only from the extraordinary political, social, and economic transformations of the period. Who can doubt, for example, that the refounding of certain of the disciplines in the Cold War era owed a great deal to what can only be described as attempts to model themselves on what some saw as the epistemologically more secure and rigorous methods of the natural sciences? Who can question that the adoption of such methods increased the autonomy of certain of the disciplines, and that they generated many reactions, including a growing antipathy to what some saw as a failure to address certain of the more burning issues of the day? The intellectual quarrels became significant; many were rooted in fundamental political and ideological differences. To understand these changes, to explain why they occurred at this time, how much they reflected changes in the professoriate itself, how much they derived from the vastly expanded and altered nature of student bodies, undergraduate and graduate—all these are legitimate subjects of inquiry, worthy of close investigation. Did these disciplinary changes, these expansions, resemble the ones that had occurred regularly in the past, or do they have certain unique features, reflecting the altered character of contemporary American society and indeed of a changed international society?

If much of the discussion today is about multiculturalism and interdisciplinarity, with a new emphasis given to specific groups and ideas once marginalized or thought to be worthy of little if any attention, it is characterized also by a new concern with theory. All kinds of traditional institutional study appear to be scanted today, at least in the view of many of an older generation in the professoriate, even as new theories or new hypotheses are advanced to explain human activity and behavior.

Those who helped frame this issue of *Dedalus* had a simple strategy: to seek contributions from living witnesses, from individual scholars who participated as outstanding contributors in their several disciplines, who were present not at their creation but at critical moments in their mid- and late twentieth-century development. Given the impossibility of including the full spectrum of academic disciplines (the omission of the natural sciences is immediately apparent), the decision was made to select two disciplines from the humanities, two from the social sciences. Literature and philosophy were chosen as the representative disciplines in the first category; economics and political science in the second. In each group, one discipline was chosen for its intellectual unity and tight professional control over the last half century; this appears to have been the situation in economics and philosophy. If one looks at political science and literature, however, the conditions have been markedly different. Those fields were selected for their tendency to division and fragmentation.

In choosing to ask scholars of several generations to write, it is clear that establishing their "representativeness" is exceedingly difficult. Yet all have been associated with salient or dominant scholarly currents in their respective fields. Their "testimony," if it may be so denominated, provides a perspective on what may be called the temporal intellectual trajectory of their several disciplines from within. To provide a more synoptic, transdisciplinary view, three historians were invited to compare and integrate the several participant accounts in three successive phases of academic cultural development. As context for the whole, Thomas Bender offers in his introductory essay a broad picture of the changing American intellectual and social scene in which academic culture redefined itself.

If the four "case studies" suggest how different are the conditions that obtain in each, how much those entering the academic profession in any of these areas today are seized of subjects and accustomed to using methods and theories, addressing questions and problems different from those common half a century ago, it would be a mistake to imagine that all have been equally "revolutionized," that there is a generational gap between the younger and older members of faculties that cannot be bridged. The revolution in "methods" has been real in certain fields, considerably less substantial in others. Why this has been so, how it relates to the different and changing "publics" that these individual disciplines serve, how much it has been the product of a half-century of "cold war" and decades of civil rights agitation, whether the greatest changes do not relate to the growing role of women in many of these disciplines, both as teachers and scholars, are only a few of the many questions that need to be posed. They all derive from a more fundamental issue that has to be addressed. How probing have

academics been in recent years, refuting all manner of conventional explanations and seeking to view tradition in quite new ways? Have we, in the words of those who conceived this issue, moved to a new "elasticity" in our thinking about what an individual academic discipline may contain, about the value of simply accepting the priestly role of acculturating the young to what is conceived to be virtuous because it has been believed in for a time?

Unless the story of the individual disciplines is placed in a context that takes account of the changed political and intellectual culture of the United States, but also of the larger world that impinges on this country and is so fundamentally influenced by it, there is a danger of seeing the question of academic change too narrowly. It is not only the new technologies that are making scholarship more international, but the very concern with theory in numerous disciplines both in this country and abroad suggests a new concern with scientific precision, with developing concepts that can be understood without reference to the particular circumstances of an individual culture. For those who welcome the changes, who see it as a "liberation" from what is thought to have been a too-easy acceptance of any number of intellectual conventions, the auguries for the twenty-first century are all favorable. For those who are more dubious of a number of the new methods and stated aims of scholarship in certain of the disciplines, who regard them as deviations threatening to produce a new clerisy, too political and too ideological, there are periodic cries of alarm. Whether there is a need for a tocsin to be sounded within any of the four disciplines is a matter of no small importance. Inevitably, given the condition of American academic life today, opinions will differ.

It is to advance serious discussion of these and other such issues that the Guest Editors and those who have advised them are committed. They are aware, as is the Editor, that possibly too little attention has been given to how much research and scholarship in the humanities and the social sciences are today an international enterprise, and how much the influence of foreign contributions is shaping American scholarship, even as what is done in the United States affects what is studied and written abroad. The new scholarly trade routes merit much closer scrutiny. They also feel that inadequate attention has been given in the present account both to certain well-established areas such as political philosophy and the history of economic thought and to such newly emergent ones as studies of women and African-American culture.

This project depended on its authors but also on the assistance of many scholars who participated in two conferences, the first at the House of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in Cambridge, Massachusetts,

the second at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. In numerous ad hoc meetings, the major lines of the inquiry were developed, with all agreeing that men and women of several generations needed to be brought together as authors, with no effort made to blunt or minimize their intellectual differences. Those who contributed preliminary papers that importantly shaped our discussions and the final form of this project deserve our special thanks: they go to Marshall Cohen, Barbara Johnson, Mark Johnston, and Annette Baier. The extremely generous contributions of Michael Woodford and Alexander Nehamas were invaluable; they brought their particular expertise to bear on the sections on economics and philosophy, and were helpful in shaping the whole of the issue. Thanks are due also to Kenneth Prewitt, who contributed strongly to the effort made to explain American political science.

Finally, our sincere thanks go to The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for its help, intellectual and financial. The Mellon Foundation remains faithful to principles whose importance has never been greater than at this chaotic fin de siecle when such confusion reigns about what is consequential for the future. The Foundation's pride in American scholarship and learning, in the "life of the mind," and its commitments to universities as centers of tradition and innovation make it an appropriate "patron" for this issue of *Dadalus*. The gratitude of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences to the Mellon Foundation is very great.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner.
Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

=====
===== End of Document =====