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THE CRISIS IN THE UNIVERSITY

Especially Columbia University, in Retrospect

Being a somewhat cynical appraisal of a few of the many works dealing with the Columbia uprising that began in April of 1968, to wit:

Jacques Barzun. *The American University: How It Runs, Where It is Going*, New York: Harper and Row, 1968, xii + 311 pp.

The Cox Commission. *Crisis at Columbia* — Report of the Fact-Finding Commission Appointed to Investigate the Disturbances at Columbia University in April and May 1968, New York: Vintage Books, October, 1968, xiii + 222 pp.

Charles Frankel. *Education and the Barricades*, New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1969, 90 pp.

James Simon Kunen. *The Strawberry Statement: Notes of a College Revolutionary*, New York: Random House, 1969.



Dust settles, smoke clears — it's only a matter of time. By now we seem to have a fairly reasonable perspective on what occurred on Manhattan's Morningside Heights during the dramatic days of April to August, 1968. It's not only that things have been fairly quiet around Columbia since then, it's more a matter of having had *everything* put in writing. We academics are not likely to recognize the reality, much less the significance, of any event until it has been elevated to print. But now we can look at it with academic detachment. I treat here only four books that, to a greater or lesser degree, were products of the uprising at Columbia University. Any reader of this *Journal* who doesn't agree with my interpretation of what happened may find many other documents to sustain his case.

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But he should also give due attention to these four, for each of them presents a controlling point of view which any overview must take account of.

Jacques Barzun added a postscript to the preface of *The American University*:

The completed typescript of this book was in the hands of the publisher six weeks before the student outbreak of April 23 that disrupted the work of Columbia University. I have since then found no reason to change or add to the substance of what I had written months earlier.

That postscript was dated May 3, 1968. During the early morning hours of April 30, 1968, police had entered the campus of Columbia to expel students from five buildings. Six hundred ninety-two persons had been arrested, over a hundred hospitalized for more or less severe injuries; and the campus was in such a state of physical and social disarray that the "disrupted" work of the university was not to be resumed until the following fall. One might expect Mr. Barzun to find *something* in his book that he might wish to change as he pondered what was going on around him. But Mr. Barzun's decision to leave his work intact was exactly correct; we are all the better for the stern stuff of which Mr. Barzun is made. For a careful reading of Mr. Barzun's book reveals that the American University is not run at all and that it is going to pieces. The student outbreak was merely the form which disaster happened to take. But the root causes of disaster are portrayed so clearly by Mr. Barzun that he should not have been surprised, however much he may have been shocked, by what actually happened. One is left with the tantalizing question: Was Mr. Barzun fully aware that his book predicts the dissolution of what he calls the New University? Or was his apparent equanimity genuine? When he describes the inner working of the higher councils of Columbia with such composure, is he deliberately adopting a tactic which makes his revelations all the more startling? Or does he believe that the American University actually *can* act on the sixty-eight "suggestions" that form the last chapter of his book? And, even if the University did so act, that those reforms would cure the disease he had so persuasively diagnosed in the first seven chapters of the book? Perhaps it doesn't matter: Whether Mr. Barzun believes that the institution to which he has devoted his life has any chance to survive its present malaise, he would be less than a man if he failed to give Alma Mater the

wisest counsel he can summon from nearly a half century of devotion to her.

The basic disease, according to Barzun, is fragmentation, the absence of "a center" around which the university can order a limited set of related activities, such that the whole has something like organic unity. Lacking that center, the university pursues a variety of activities, the putative purpose of which is to advance some particular field of knowledge while the actual purpose is often to get money which will enable some professor and his retainers to escape the regular discipline of the university and establish a secular institute, laboratory, or special "studies" program. And it turns out that money got for such purposes *always* costs the university more than it returns, with the result that the university is always in serious financial trouble. (Even if the university gains "prestige" from the project. Barzun's most immediately practical suggestion is that we substitute the Hindi word "izzat" for "prestige," thus calling attention to the phoniness of all our talk on that subject.)

Barzun wrote this work with very little of the verbal brilliance and acerbity that we have learned to expect from his writings. There is wit, but it is infrequent. He is reticent on the identity of the authors of the preposterisms he devastates in his footnotes. But without embellishment, the story he tells is engrossing. Columbia came to recognize that rapid growth had rendered its inherited organizational form inadequate. A faculty committee labored from 1955 to 1957 and produced the Macmahon Report: *The Educational Future of the University*. Mr. Barzun, Dean of Faculties and Provost prior to 1967, sometime Dean of Graduate Faculties as well, devoted himself to translating that Report into reality, to simplifying, ordering, arranging, regulating . . . to make Columbia a reasonably *functioning* organization. The time, the patience, the self-control, the sheer drudgery required for doing those tasks are all clear enough in Mr. Barzun's book, but there's never a whimper from him. For

administration is not troubleshooting, and these feats, though incessant and grueling, are only incidental. Administering a university has but one object: to distribute its resources to the best advantage. (p. 25)

And making a difference in the way a great university allocates its intellectual and physical resources is an activity in accordance with the highest public virtue. Despite the pain, a man might find hap-

piness doing it.

Indeed, the job of administration, so defined, is big enough to engage a man's entire being; a man who can get the job done is not likely to worry about public relations. Of course, professors enjoy the feeling that they participate in the decision-making process, whatever that phrase might mean, but more than that, they want chalk in the holder when they enter the classroom. Students of all times and places have had complaints, those of today's students are merely more frequent and more pointed. But the administrator is not obliged to give those complaints any serious attention unless the students have a valid case that their academic fare is of poor quality or not delivered so that they may receive it. Otherwise, an administrator may hold his personal opinion of the "pig-style of living" (p. 81) which is characteristic of the "new ethos," but the students' concerns and his duties have no rightful point of contact.

If this brief summary of Barzun's thesis is accurate, one can see immediately why Columbia was on a collision course with disaster. For there must be a known, accepted, and independently-measured criterion of "best advantage," else Barzun's definition of administration makes no sense at all. That criterion of best advantage derives from the central concern that individuates *this* university from all others and (dialectically, not paradoxically) relates this university to a whole civilization in which The University has been present — sometimes nobly, sometimes not, but always present. But if the New University lacks a central focus and concern, then there can be no criterion of "best advantage" independent of faculty will and student desire; hence the whole conception of administration practiced by Grayson Kirk and expounded by Jacques Barzun is hollow idiocy.

The case against Barzun is clear, but it would have to be qualified in detail. For Barzun knows that the dynamism of any university comes from its faculty's involvement in worldwide movements of ideas. His practice of administration was intended to open doors quickly and efficiently to faculty who needed encouragement and resources to pursue their scholarly activities. But which faculty? Which activities? Those involved with the infamous Institute for Defense Analysis? Those which led to the infiltration of Columbia's School of International Relations by CIA projects? There is in Barzun's administrative *morality* for the university no reason for denying those things. Barzun has expressed often and

well his distaste for generalities, for moral principles at one or more degrees removed from the world of human events and actions. And when the crunch came, Columbia University could find neither general principles nor partisan loyalty among faculty and students to sustain the institution. If you want to know the antecedent conditions for its turning out that way, read Barzun.

If you want to know the consequences, read Kunen and the Cox Commission *Report*. The title of Kunen's book comes from an incident recorded in the *Columbia Spectator* and reprinted in the Cox Commission *Report*, the *CCR*. Herbert Deane, the Vice-Dean of the Graduate Faculties

was said to have asserted that a consensus of students and faculty should not, in itself, have any influence on the formation of administrative policy: "A university is definitely not a democratic institution. When decisions begin to be made democratically around here, I will not be here any longer." On the importance of student opinion to the Administration, he stated "whether students vote 'yes' or 'no' on an issue is like telling me they like strawberries." A short time later, Dr. Deane wrote that his remarks were "elliptically reported" by *Spectator*.

Dean Deane was giving a very accurate, albeit colorful, portrayal of Barzun's philosophy of administration. You don't need democracy when you have, e.g. as De Gaulle believed he had in 1958, great historical imperatives which you must achieve by efficient and just admiration. When you have neither democracy nor transcendent historical principles, your administration is not likely to be just *or* efficient. Rather, improvisation and rigidity — those two banes of all large scale social organization come into clear dominance. The two look contradictory at first glance, but actually they are two sides of the same coin. If one has neither fundamental principles against which to test a policy nor a democratic process to revise policy when it becomes obsolete, one acts as the Columbia administration acted throughout the period preceding and after the student revolt: one hangs on rigidly to a previous policy until events have made it useless, and then one improvises. The *CCR* is mostly a documentation of some two dozen occasions on which the Columbia administration went through that cycle.

In the end, however, the Commission could find no more justification for the students' actions than for the administration's. "Resort to violence or physical harassment or obstruction is never

an acceptable tactic for influencing decisions in a university." For such tactics "contradict the essential postulate that the university is dedicated to the search for truth by reason and civility." (*CCR*, pp. 196-7). As such, the university is a fragile institution whose only safety lies in a consensual rejection of the use of force to achieve political objectives. The *CCR* is no doubt correct on that point, but the students are unlikely to achieve such a moral consensus so long as the government of the United States kills, threatens to kill, and helps others to kill all over the world. But that's another issue.

What the *CCR* did not include, because it was prepared too close to the event, was the *real* reason why Columbia exploded in 1968 and will henceforth enjoy peace, and stagnation, unto *rigor mortis*. Although Barzun had yielded the office of Vice President and Provost to David B. Truman, the Kirk-Barzun style of administration still dominated in all dealings with the faculty. And despite a very earnest and persistent effort by faculty groups and official faculty committees, all well documented in the *CCR*, there seemed little chance of changing that style of administration within normal academic procedures.

Then the students started rumbling; their rumble amounted to a promise to get rid of Kirk, even if it took procedures that could never be described as normal or academic. The not-so-surprising thing happened: a large proportion of that part of the faculty who were really involved in the politics of the university supported the students. And the students knew it. Faculty support was a blank check they could fill out and cash whenever the right moment arose. It was to cover the cost of getting rid of Grayson Kirk. But when the students actually filled in the amount, it covered a lot more. Its face value was turning control of the whole university over to the students. The faculty had a chance to see what it would look like, and they stopped payment. If Caligula should be appointed to the presidency of Columbia tomorrow, he could count on overwhelming support from the faculty in any conflict with the students.

Why should that be so? Why are those faculty members who were once willing to interpose their bodies between the students and the charging police now unwilling to make the slightest move outside the normal channels. Well, for one thing, Kirk *was* fired, and the normal channels have been dredged to the point that faculty opinion can move to the Administration within them. But more importantly,

the faculty had a chance to see what student control might really mean. It might mean that people like James Simon Kunen would define that center, that focus, which gives point and direction to the existence of the university. That is to say, people like Mr. Kunen and, say, Professor Charles Frankel would find it difficult to join the same polity except on terms prescribed by the latter. And even then it's dicey that any such relation would be of profit to either side.

For Mr. Kunen approaches the world with a general cognitive stance very different from that of Professor Frankel or the Cox Commission. The latter went to elaborate lengths to explain the sequence of human actions that led from one event to another in the "Crisis." Their concept of explanation is a simple one; applying it to particular cases is enormously time-consuming. If you want to know why Dean Coleman acted as he did, you first find out *what he did*. He entered a building, left a building, made a statement, carried a message from X to Y, etc. Then you ask him *why he did it*. What end or goal did he have in mind? What reason did he have for believing that doing *this* will achieve *that* end? It's difficult. People's memories tend to invent plausible reasons for actions taken for no reason at all. But it's not impossible. It takes care, and probing, and 3534 pages of testimony (if we may, for once, take Kunen literally) to establish the story as a sequence of human actions. But it can be done.

But Mr. Kunen sees things very differently. He sees these events as things that happened; by coincidence, they happened to happen to him. He warns us not to take his book seriously, but his warnings are in vain. As Dorothy Parker once said, "We always write the best we can, and that's the tragedy of it." Kunen recounts a few months in his life, months in which he got himself together and his university came apart. Both are serious events, and Kunen made the best effort he could to let us know how they happened.

The contrast between the *CCR* and Kunen's book could scarcely be more extreme. They never disagree on the facts, but their modes of explanation are radically disparate. They have no common scale of importance. It's important enough for Kunen to report that he "liked" Archibald Cox; for Cox it was important to report that students were cooperative and communicative. One wants to say that the contrast is between an objective and subjective account of the events. But I believe it goes much deeper than that.

At one point in his book Kunen describes his reactions to a

new thought, that the war in Vietnam is bound up with the internal problems of an economically advanced, capitalistic society:

That may not be terribly surprising, but it hit me kind of hard. Like it dispelled my dominant illusion.
(We youths say "like" all the time because we mistrust reality. It takes a certain commitment to say something *is*. Inserting "like" gives you a bit more running room.)

The feeling is similar to what one experiences when smoking (grass, marijuana). One acts as does an actor, perhaps a "method" actor. One really feels, decides, moves, believes; but in doing all these things one follows a script that someone else wrote, as Kunen's friends say, a script They wrote. There are moments when Kunen does not seem to be following a script, when he *knows* that he is an agent, not merely an actor. But those moments are few. And, interestingly enough, they are not those moments when he exhibits formidable physical courage and endurance.

(The main difference between Kunen's book and the usual drug-induced reverie is that Kunen's aphorisms frequently sound fresh and illuminating to a sober reader. The play one follows while stoned is never more than soap-opera next morning. But the basic form of experience is the same.)

But look again at the *CCR*. Cox presupposes freedom: his mode of explaining events assumes that men and women make decisions and act on them. Kunen presupposes determinism: one follows the script as it unfolds. Yet Kunen cries out for freedom; perhaps he "likes" Cox because the older man has what the younger desperately seeks.

Is it possible to establish a university and a world in which They would no longer write the play? In which Kunen and those who share his values would *have* to make commitments? It might be possible, but the first hurdle would be those who should be Kunen's most trusted allies — the faculty of humane letters at the great university. And when we look at Charles Frankel we sadly suspect that the first hurdle would be insurmountable.

What can you expect of a book that has a plug on the front cover from John W. Gardner, that charter member of the politico-intellectual Establishment, and another plug on the back cover from Noam Chomsky, who is both a genuine revolutionary and a brilliant scholar in the highly technical field of linguistics? You expect and get a "balanced" view on every issue that's raised, e.g.:

Discontinuity in policy is dangerous, but so is autocratic, thoughtless continuity. The long view is estimable, but impatience is useful too. And if inexperience is a handicap, so is experience: it dulls one to novelty. (Frankel, p. 57)

So far, so good: the balanced sentence and the balanced thought. Recognizing the need for a scheme of university governance which would strike a balance between these two poles, we might try to conceive forms radically different from those we now have. But Frankel's intent is definitely not that we should stretch our imaginations; the balance he seeks is found much more simply. Indeed, the passage quoted above is a justification of a very unimaginative proposal:

The idea of student membership on boards of trustees raises as many problems as it seems to solve. Nevertheless, the idea is worth experimentation, even though the number of students who belong to a board, or who sit with it when certain issues are discussed, should probably be small. And there is little question . . . that machinery for regular face-to-face meetings between students and trustees is desirable . . . Trustees could learn from students things they will never learn from administrators or other trustees.

This passage, like the book from which it came, is an eminently sensible answer to an obviously important questions.* The same good sense is shown in Frankel's other writings and in his career in public service. By chance, or maybe not by chance, Mr. Frankel was a member of the original Macmahon Committee whose policies Mr. Barzun tried to bring into being. The report of that committee, now buried alongside the Harvard Report and many other similar documents, was an eminently sensible response to the practical question of a great university's continued growth. Mr. Frankel's most distinguished contribution to philosophical scholarship, *The Case for Modern Man*, presents a well argued refutation of the attack on the liberal, democratic view of man and society, the attack emanating from Toynbee, Niebuhr, and other criers of doom and repentance. In 1967, when Mr. Frankel, then Assistant Secretary of State for

*Readers of this *Journal* may wish to refer again to the review of Frankel's book by B. Hendley, which appeared in the Fall 1969 issue, pages 221-2. Hendley writes: "His asking of the questions is itself a faith in reason, a commitment to rational inquiry as a means to lift us out of the morass into which we are sinking." Very well put. But notice, if you let Frankel frame the question, you've given away half the possible answers.

Cultural Affairs, was forced to face the question whether a man of conscience could continue to serve a government engaged in an unjust war, he gave the sensible answer: he resigned, quietly and without fanfare. In sum, Charles Frankel is a productive scholar and a sensible man. When he looks at "The American University in Trouble" (title of the introduction to the book), he translates "trouble" into practical questions to which he gives sensible answers.

But Kunen is not a question and Frankel's answers are in no way addressed to *him*. Remember, Frankel is a very superior specimen of Homo Academians. He is tolerant, open, very intelligent, and deeply devoted to the humane values his discipline exemplifies. When we can find no point of contact between Frankel and Kunen (who is also a superior specimen of whatever we may later wish to call his branch of the human species), then we know that not only Columbia, but a lot of other things as well, are in serious trouble indeed.

Is there a moral to be drawn from this curious tale? One might look back at Carlton Coon's beautifully irreverent *Columbia: Colossus on the Hudson*. This volume in academic history, published in 1947, begins most suggestively: "It is no accident, perhaps, that the present site of Columbia University was once occupied by the Bloomingdale Insane Asylum." What Coon says and shows is that transforming an insane asylum into a great university was primarily a matter of raising very large sums of money when potential donors were either robber barons or their next-of-kin. Yet Coon also says with great conviction that the university had maintained its center: "at its core there is a heart and a soul too often forgotten or overlooked. That is Columbia College . . ." Contrast Coon with Kunen's comment on the same question today:

You might say that Dean Deane is not exactly in the mainstream of Columbia life. But then no one is. There is no mainstream of Columbia life. Columbia is a lot of meandering streams up which the students struggle, vainly attempting to spawn. (p. 110)

Jacques Barzun (mentioned prominently by Coon in 1947 as an heir to the mantle) was not able to stem the tide of fragmentation. And Charles Frankel, for all his charm and good sense, can't do it either. Now, could Kunen and his ilk do better? The prospect is not only frightening, it's practically unintelligible.

But it's the only prospect which is not *certain* to be a catastrophe.