

What Good is a Liberal Education?

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As my defense of liberal education today will be somewhat unusual, drawing as it does on the insights of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Herbert Marcuse, rather than on Cardinal Newman and John Dewey, it might be useful for me to begin by reminding you of some of the more familiar defenses of liberal education. After reviewing three rationales for undergraduate liberal education, I shall turn to what I consider the real justification for the study of our cultural and intellectual tradition.

The first of the three defenses I shall consider of liberal education is the oldest, and perhaps the most traditional: liberal education as the appropriate education for a gentleman. [Not, please note, for a gentlewoman - that consisted of skill with the needle, a bit of music, and the elements of oeconomics, which is to say the management of a household.] A study of the classics, it was thought, would give men of high estate the proper finish, or patina, that would allow them to move gracefully in polite circles. A command of Greek and Latin, like a well-turned leg and a well-filled codpiece, was an evidence of good blood lines. It was even suggested that a familiarity with ancient tongues and literatures might deepen a

young man's understanding of human affairs, although that was, to be sure, more of a tutor's hope than a realistic expectation.

The fundamental presupposition of this conception of liberal education is, of course, that the young gentlemen who are to receive it have inherited their position in society. As gentlemen, not forced to work for a living but supported by the inherited wealth of their extended families, they are free to treat education as an intrinsic rather than an instrumental good. This construal of the intellectual and aesthetic life has exercised a great appeal to many of those who make their lives, and their livings, as scholars, writers, and teachers. Somewhat less obviously, it underlies the familiar disdain exhibited by the liberal arts faculties of modern colleges and universities for the faculties and students of the vocationally oriented branches of higher education - medicine, law, architecture, business, nursing, engineering, hotel administration, and the rest.

The traditional defense of liberal education as the appropriate finishing for a gentleman has a curious American variant, traceable to the exigencies of frontier life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As one can see in such classics of frontier literature as Owen Wister's *THE VIRGINIAN*, it is the woman who is idealized as the bearer of culture, not the man. In the myths and popular fiction of our recent past, the mother teaches the young boy to read, nags and pleads until her husband brings an upright piano out to the homestead, drags the family to church

on Sunday, and maintains minimal standards of polite behavior - table manners, courtesy between the sexes - as a defense against the relentless encroachment of the wilderness. The spinster school teacher is, in this version of frontier life, the connecting link to a valuable cultural heritage, left back East, but still remembered.

The second justification for liberal education is a more recent entrant into the debates about educational philosophy. I have in mind the familiar claim that liberal education is the gateway to integration into American society and economy, the engine of upward mobility in a competitive capitalist marketplace, the stepstool that will enable the smart, the ambitious, the hard-working to begin the climb up the pyramid to its favored upper reaches.

This theme is repeated endlessly in our popular literature, and not without a certain measure of truth. Indeed, my own family history is a perfect exemplification of the story. My great-grandfather arrived at Ellis Island in 1880 as Abram Zarembovich. Forced to change his name to Wolff by an unsympathetic immigration official, he settled on the Lower East Side of New York and raised my grandfather, who without formal education beyond some secondary schooling became a leader of the Socialist Party. His son, my father, seized the chance for a free college education, and continued on to do graduate work in Biology, before beginning his career as a teacher. And here I stand, the fulfillment, odd as it may sound, of my family's aspirations - a college professor who actually writes books!

Not many men have the great good fortune to satisfy their parents' deepest hopes while doing something so unworldly as philosophy. It is, I suppose, the way some Catholic priests feel who come from Irish-American backgrounds, except that I don't have to give up sex.

All of this can be summed up, in the slang terms common to American corporate life, by saying that the role of liberal education is to draw a sharp, immediately discernible line between the suits and the shirts - between those employees of large companies who wear suits, are paid salaries by the month, never get their hands dirty, and sit in offices with their names on the doors [along with their professional counterparts, the doctors, lawyers, professors, architects, etc.], and the many more employees who wear shirt sleeves, or the female equivalent, are paid wages by the week, get dirty and sweaty, and work on factory lines, or in office secretarial pools, or in stockrooms, but not in offices with their names on the doors.

We understand these distinctions intuitively and recognize them immediately, even in a university, where local customs dictate a style of dress that might fool outsiders - but never insiders - about class position. After all, when was the last time you mistook a janitor, a groundskeeper, or a secretary for a professor?

There is, finally, the justification for liberal education which I have always associated most immediately with the University of Chicago under the guidance of

Robert Maynard Hutchins, but which has been given expression, in one form or another, in Harvard's General Education and Core Curriculum programs, in Columbia's Contemporary Civilization course, in the Great Books curriculum of St. John's College, and in countless other curricula and institutions besides: the conception of liberal education as an initiation into the two millennia long Great Conversation.

When I was a boy, I found in my parents' attic, buried under a mound of ancient science textbooks, a slender volume entitled "Heavenly Discourses," by Charles Erskine Scott Wood. This consisted, as the title perhaps suggests, of a series of imaginary conversations in heaven among famous men and women of the western cultural tradition who could not, under normal historical circumstances, have encountered one another here on earth.

The book made an enormous impression on me - so much so that my very first college paper, written in the Fall of 1950, was an imaginary heavenly discourse, featuring John Stuart Mill, T. S. Eliot, Zarathustra, and Carl Sandburg, on the issues posed by Ortega y Gasset's REVOLT OF THE MASSES. [As you might perhaps guess, Sandburg won.]

The ideal of the Great Conversation is merely an elaborate formalization of Wood's charming conceit. Western Civilization is conceived as a perpetual debate about a number of timeless questions, conducted by the great minds of the Judeo-

Christian, Graeco-Roman tradition, with its medieval Arabic variants, through the medium of a small, but continuously growing, library of great works of philosophy, tragedy, poetry, fiction, history, political theory - and, more recently, sociology, anthropology, economics, and anthropology. Homer and the nameless authors of the Old Testament, Sophocles and Euripides, Plato and Aristotle, Herodotus, Thucydides, Cicero, Caesar, Paul and the Evangelists, Ovid, Sappho, Philo, Tertullian, Aquinas, Maimonides, Averroes, Avicenna, Erasmus, Luther, Chaucer, Calvin, John of Salisbury, Jean Bodin, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Bacon, Montaigne, Descartes, Spinoza, Shakespeare, Donne, Herbert, Locke, Galileo, Newton, Berkeley, Hume, Leibniz, Kant, Rousseau, Hegel, Fichte, Schelling, Herder, Marx, Smith, Bentham, Mill - on and on they come, quibbling, quarreling, drawing distinctions, splitting hairs, proving the existence of God, refuting the proofs for the existence of God, reading one another, referring to one another - a grand faculty seminar, captured for all time in no more than several hundred immortal books.

A liberal education - so this story has it - is a ticket of admission to the Conversation. Most of us are mere auditors, much as I was when, as a boy of ten, I sat on the steps of the staircase leading from my parents' living room and listened to my parents, my uncles and aunts, and the neighbors debating politics, literature, and the bureaucratic insanities of the New York City School System in which they

worked. An inspired few actually enter the Conversation, and make to it contributions that will be taken up into the immortal lists of Great Books. But for the rest of us, it is enough that we have been initiated into its rituals and shibboleths. Throughout our lives, that eternal debate will be the intellectual accompaniment of our quotidien lives.

What can we say of these three defenses of liberal education: as the stigmata of the upper classes, as the royal road to upward mobility, and as the entree into the Great Conversation? For the defense of liberal education as the distinguishing mark of aristocracy, I have nothing but contempt. If all this to-ing and fro-ing, all these reading assignments, term essays, multiple-choice examinations, and curriculum revisions have no further point than to put the latest polish on those born to, or headed for, the upper reaches of society, then I for one shall turn my attention to more honest labor, like the cleaning out of sewers. As for the second rationale for liberal education, as an instrument of upward mobility, I have no objection to ambition, and given the American pyramid of wealth and income, whose shape, incidentally, has remained essentially unchanged in at least eighty years, save to become even steeper, it is perfectly sensible for those lower down to attempt to climb to a more comfortable and secure position. But unfortunately for those of us whose task it is to administer the requisite doses of liberal education, there is an entirely accidental relationship between the content of that education

and its function as a leg up for shirts who would be suits. Entry to the privileged positions in society could as easily be determined by one's ability to write a poem or practice calligraphy, as in Mandarin China.

As for the third defense of liberal education as admission to the Great Conversation, you will no doubt have discerned that I am more than half in love with it. If all the injustices of this world had been rectified, if all the suffering had been alleviated, if, in the words of Isaiah, every valley had been exalted, every mountain and hill made low, if the crooked had been made straight, and the rough places plain, then perhaps I could justify to myself and to others a life spent initiating young men and women into the Great Conversation, for there is no denying that it is wonderful talk.

But is there no deeper, more compelling justification for liberal education that can reassure and strengthen those of us who have devoted our lives to it? And so, I arrive at last at the real substance of my remarks. The true rationale for liberal education, in my considered and passionate judgment, is our society's desperate need for a reservoir of negative thought -and for some protected place in which young men and women can explore what my sons, some years ago, would have called the dark side of the force. In what remains of this discourse, as in much that I have done, I draw for insight and inspiration on the work of my old friend and co-author, Herbert Marcuse.

I take as my texts two of Marcuse's most profound and provocative phrases: "surplus repression," which makes its appearance in his early work, *EROS AND CIVILIZATION*, and "repressive desublimation," from his best known book, *ONE-DIMENSIONAL MAN*. By an explication of the notion of surplus repression, and a close reading of a single paragraph from the chapter on repressive desublimation, I can, I think, lay before you a deeper justification of liberal education that will explain both how it plays a central role in the critique and reformation of society, and why it is so appropriately undertaken at that moment in late adolescence and early adulthood which we in the United States identify as the undergraduate years.

Marcuse, who as a member of the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research, participated in the great early twentieth century attempt to fuse the central insights of Marx and Freud, begins *EROS AND CIVILIZATION* by accepting the pessimistic thesis of Freud's *CIVILIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS*, that some measure of psychic repression is the necessary precondition for the organized social existence of humanity.

The new-born infant does not possess a coherent rational self or ego with which to negotiate its relationship to the external world. Indeed, it does not yet so much as possess a conception of itself in contradistinction to its surroundings. What we think of as the ordinary thought-processes of reality orientation - the

distinction of self and other, the recognition of relations of space, time, and causality, the distinction between desire and satisfaction, wish and actuality - are in fact secondary accomplishments, painfully acquired in the wake of initial and continuing frustrations. Each of the stages of what we consider normal childhood development has a profoundly ambivalent significance for the child, at one and the same time a source of power, satisfaction, and self-esteem, and a suffering of frustration, pain, and rage.

One example can perhaps stand for the entire years-long process. Little babies are at first unable to express their desires, of course, save by the inefficient method of crying. Still, a fortunate baby will succeed in getting its parent's attention by crying, and the parent will become hyper-sensitively attuned to those slight variations in the cry which indicate whether it is hunger, fatigue, colic, or teething that is the cause. Eventually, the baby learns to sit up in a high chair and eat with its hands or a spoon, and [we may suppose] it learns as well that when it waves its hands and makes a demanding noise, it gets a cookie. The baby, note, will be deeply ambivalent about this learned behavior, for what the baby wants [or so Freud persuasively tells us] is to have its hunger, or its desire for a cookie, instantaneously gratified, without even the temporary frustration of waiting until the parent decodes the cry and responds. But though this state of affairs has come about at the cost of frustration and pain, it is also a source of power and

gratification. By learning how to command its parent's response, the baby can get the cookie. What is more, the parent is likely to respond with manifest pleasure to the baby's ability to sit up and communicate its wants.

One day, something inexplicable, terrible, frustrating, painful happens. The baby makes its demanding noise, with the cookie in full view just outside its reach, and the parent, instead of immediately handing it over, as has happened every day for as long as the baby can remember, now picks up the cookie, holds it tantalizingly before the baby, and says in what can only be construed as a deliberately sadistic voice, "Can you say 'cookie'?" Well, all of us know the rest of this story, for all of us have lived through it. The acquisition of language, the mastery of one's bowels, the control of one's temper - all of the stages in development that make one an adult human being who is recognizably a member of a society - all have a negative side, a side associated with shame, rage, pain, frustration, resentment, a backside, as we learn to think of it, as well as a positive side associated with praise, self-esteem, public reward, power, satisfaction - a front, which, as our language very nicely suggests, is both an officially good side and also a pretense, a fake.

By and large, we do not forget the frustration, the pain, the rage. We repress it, drive it out of consciousness, deny it, put it behind us, as we like to say. But,

like our own backsides, and the feces which issue from them, they remain, and exercise a secret, shameful attraction for us.

This brief reminder of our common heritage makes it clear that the repression of "unacceptable" wishes - as Freud so quaintly and aptly labeled them in his earlier writings - is an essential precondition for our development of the ability to interact effectively with the world, and with one another. Mastery of our own bodies, mastery of language, the psychic ability, and willingness, to defer gratification long enough to perform necessary work, the ability to control destructive, and self-destructive, rages or desires - civilization, society, culture, survival depend upon them. But necessary though they are, they are painful; throughout our lives, we carry, repressed, the delicious, illicit fantasies of total, immediate, uncompromised gratification, of instantaneous, magical fulfillment, of the permission to indulge the desires that have been stigmatized as negative.

With great flair, Marcuse combines Freud's thesis, of the necessity of some repression for the existence of human civilization, with the central concept of Marx's political economy - surplus value. According to Marx, it is the labor required for the production of commodities that regulates their exchange in a capitalist market. Inasmuch as workers sell their own capacity for labor in the market like a commodity, through the wage bargain, competition eventually sets its price - the wage - at a level equal to the amount of labor required to produce that

capacity, which is to say the amount of labor required to produce the workers' food, clothing, and shelter. This labor, Marx says, can be called "necessary labor," for in any economic system whatever, it must be performed if the workers are to be able to remain alive and continue their labors. But, Marx argues, the workers are forced, by the conditions of the labor market, to work more hours than is embodied in their consumption goods, and the extra labor time, through the processes of market exchange, is transmuted into surplus exchange value. That surplus value, Marx demonstrates, is the source of the profits, interest, and rents that the propertied classes appropriate. In sum, Marx asserts, capitalism rests upon the capitalist appropriation of surplus value, or, more succinctly, upon exploitation.

Marcuse transfers these concepts of necessary and surplus labor to the sphere of the psyche, and rechristens them "necessary and surplus repression." Just as there is a certain quantum of necessary labor that must be performed in any society, so there is a certain amount of necessary repression, as we have seen, that is the precondition of human existence as such. But in some societies, just as workers are forced to perform more than merely necessary labor, its fruits being appropriated by a ruling class, so in those same societies, and most particularly in capitalist society, workers, and indeed others as well, have inflicted upon them extra, or surplus, repression, whose function is not to make human society in

general possible, but rather to serve and support the particular exploitative, unjust, repressive economic and political institutions and policies of the ruling classes.

Over and above the deferral of gratification demanded by the exigencies of nature and human intercourse, the capitalist workplace demands an additional level of work discipline, of self-denial, of obedience, of surplus repression. Marcuse notes, by way of rough proof, the extraordinary fact that despite the doubling, trebling, quadrupling of worker productivity achieved by technological advance, the average work week has shortened only slightly, if at all, in the past three-quarters of a century.

In *ONE-DIMENSIONAL MAN*, in what has always seemed to me one of the truly inspired texts of twentieth century social theory, Marcuse deploys this insight to explain the structure and conditions of social protest, and the subjective psychological sources of the energy that fuels social change. The argument goes like this: The energy on which we draw for work, for art, and for politics, as well as for sex, is the fund of originally undifferentiated libidinal energy with which we are born, and which we attach to various objects through the psychic processes of sublimation, displacement, and cathexis. The gratifications we obtain are, as Freud poignantly shows us, always somewhat diminished, compromised, shadowed by the unavoidable adjustments to reality. The pleasures of useful, fruitful, unalienated labor, the satisfactions of artistic creation, even the sensuous delights

of sexual intercourse, necessarily fall short of what is longed for in our repressed fantasies. To give a single, elementary example: all of us who write books of philosophy will acknowledge, I imagine, that in our most secret dreams, we lust after a review that begins something like this: "Not since Plato wrote THE REPUBLIC has a work of such power and brilliance burst upon the scene" - after which, we become instantaneously rich, young, thin, and flooded with absolutely risk-free offers of polymorphic sexual satisfaction. What actually happens, if we are fortunate, is that we are moderately favorably reviewed, by someone with his or her own fantasies of instant gratification, and have the genuine, but subdued pleasure, in years to come, of stumbling on references to our production, or of encounters with a praising reader.

Now, Marcuse suggests, there is real surplus psychic repression inflicted on all of us in our society, most particularly on those at the bottom of the economic pyramid, and the established, institutionalized structures of political and economic repression being what they are, it takes an enormous, painful, dangerous mobilization of psychic energy to fight those structures and reduce the quantum of surplus repression. But since the dangers of revolt and resistance are so great, and most especially because the repression has been internalized in each of us in the form of an unnecessarily punitive set of self-inflicted restraints, a reasoned, measured, realistic call for incremental improvements is unlikely to elicit the burst

of revolutionary energy needed for any change at all. "Workers of the world, unite! You have a modest reduction in surplus repression to win!" is not a slogan calculated to bring suffering men and women into the streets.

What in fact happens, Marcuse suggests, is that revolutionary change is energized by the utopian, siren call of liberation, which, whatever the language in which it is couched, is experienced subjectively as a promise of the gratification of those infantile fantasies of instantaneous, magical, total gratification which lurk within us all. Workers' liberation, Black liberation, Women's liberation, Gay liberation - all appeal, necessarily, meretriciously, and yet productively, to these universal repressed fantasies. Only the tapping of such powerful wellsprings of psychic energy can move us to the heroic feats required for even modest reductions in surplus repression.

The upshot of every revolution is therefore disappointment, for no matter how successful the revolution, it cannot, in the nature of things, liberate us from necessary repression. After the victory celebrations, we must still go to work, use the toilet, submit ourselves to some code or other of dress, of speech, of sexual conduct. Despite the inevitable and repeated disappointments, we must keep alive the fantasies, and attach them to our political aspirations, for they are the essential motor of real world social, economic, and political progress.

In this project, the great works of art, literature, philosophy and music of our cultural tradition play an essential, and rather surprising, role. Regardless of their manifest content and apparent purpose, these works, which we customarily consider the appropriate content of a liberal education, play a continuingly subversive role. They keep alive, in powerful and covert ways, the fantasies of gratification, the promise of happiness, the anger at necessary repression, on which radical political action feeds.

To explain somewhat how even the most seemingly abstract works of art perform this function, let me read to you a single paragraph from Marcuse's discussion, and then explicate it by reference to a Bach fugue. Here is the passage:

The tension between the actual and the possible is transfigured into an insoluble conflict, in which reconciliation is by grace of the oeuvre as form: beauty as the "promesse de bonheur." In the form of the oeuvre, the actual circumstances are placed in another dimension where the given reality shows itself as that which it is. Thus it tells the truth about itself; its language ceases to be that of deception, ignorance, and submission. Fiction calls the facts by their name and their reign collapses; fiction subverts everyday experience and shows it to be mutilated and false. But art has this magic power only as the power of negation. It can speak its own language only as long as the images are alive which refuse and refute the established order. [ONE-DIMENSIONAL MAN, pp. 61-62]

Consider a Bach fugue, which can stand, in our analysis, for any work of art or literature that submits itself, as all true art must, to some canon of formal constraint. We could as well consider a sonnet, a portrait, a statue, or indeed a Platonic dialogue. The rules governing the composition of a fugue are extremely strict. They constitute, psychologically speaking, a repression of the composer's

instinctual, creative energies. In the hands of a novice, the fugue-form is a strait-jacket, painfully forcing one to adjust one's musical line in unnatural ways. It is, speaking at the very deepest psychological level, the equivalent of being required to use the toilet, or to say "cookie" before being fed. But in the hands of Bach, all is transformed. Bach's fugues seem effortless. They magically transcend the constraints of the form, all the while rigidly conforming to them.

The result is sheer, sensuous beauty which is, at one and the same time, liberated from the constraints of form and completely consonant with those constraints. The fugue thus holds out, magically, the promise of total satisfaction, the "promesse de bonheur," that is to be found in the unconscious of each of us. In the same fashion, a Dickinson poem, a Rodin sculpture, a Platonic dialogue, a van Gogh still life reawaken in us the fantasy of perfect, effortless gratification. These works of art and literature remind us of the possibility that there is a life better than the network of compromises in which we are enmeshed, a second dimension to existence in which freedom replaces necessity, happiness replaces suffering.

The great works of humanistic writing, be they philosophy, history, theology, or criticism, accomplish the same end. The pure, rational arguments of Spinoza's ETHICS recall for us the image of a world in which reason is an instrument of liberation, not of domination. The sheer formal beauty of a mathematical proof, the effortless derivation of the most powerful conclusions

from apparently innocent premises, holds out to us the hope of instantaneous ecstasy.

In all seriousness, I suggest to you that this is the real justification for keeping alive the great tradition of liberal arts and letters in our colleges and universities. Not as a patina for modern aristocrats, not as an instrument of upward mobility, not even as an introduction to the Great Conversation, but as a way of putting young men and women in touch with their repressed fantasies of gratification, in such a fashion as to awaken in them the hope, the dream, the unquenchable thirst for liberation from which social progress must come.

By way of final illustration, I should like to close with a true story. More than forty years ago, I taught for a year as a visiting professor at Rutgers University, in New Jersey. One semester I was assigned an Introduction to Philosophy that met, thanks to the peculiar schedule pattern then in use at Rutgers, on Monday mornings at 8:00 a.m. and Thursday afternoons at 4:00 p.m. For the only time in my teaching career, I assigned a casebook - a collection of readings from the great philosophers - instead of a group of complete original works, and each Monday morning and Thursday afternoon, I soldiered away, "covering" the material, as we delicately put it in the trade.

Some time in the late Fall, I got to Hume, who was represented by a few well-chosen pages from Part iii of Book One of the TREATISE - which, as some

of you will know, is the locus for his famous sceptical critique of causal reasoning. I was dead bored with the material, with the course, and with myself by this time, and I can confidently assure you that I was not doing a superlative job of teaching. I had studied Hume first as a Freshman, then as a Sophomore, then while writing my doctoral dissertation, and innumerable times since. I was so thoroughly inoculated against the force of his arguments that I could scarcely recall a time when I had found them even mildly provocative.

One day, after class, a young man came up to talk to me, very agitated. He had been troubled by Hume's arguments he said - I found this rather astonishing, as you can imagine - and had gone to talk things over with his priest. The priest, whose seminary training had not prepared him for this sort of problem from his parishioners, referred him to the Office of Information of the Diocese. The young man called the Diocese, and was referred to a Monsignor, who, after listening to his concerns, said abruptly, "Well, some people think that. But we don't," and hung up the phone. What should he do?, the student wanted to know.

Let me tell you, I was humbled by the episode. Despite my best efforts to deaden the impact of the text, and the utterly unpromising conditions of an 8:00 a.m. introductory class, David Hume had reached his hand across two centuries, seized that young man by the scruff of the neck, and given him a shaking that bid

fair to liberate him from a lifetime of unthinking subservience to received authority.

That is what a liberal education can accomplish, at its best, and that is why, in every college and university, a protected sanctuary must be preserved for undergraduate liberal education.