

The Ideal of the University

Robert Paul Wolff

With a New Introduction by the Author



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The Ideal of the University

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Introduction to the Transaction Edition

We strive always to write philosophy *sub specie aeternitas*, under the aspect of eternity—seeking to articulate timeless truths extracted from the purely rational explication of self-evident premises. In retrospect, it always turns out that we were putting a philosophical gloss on immediate concerns growing out of the most personal experiences.

When I wrote *The Ideal of the University*, twenty-two years ago, I had just lived through the tumultuous events of the 1968 student uprising at Columbia University, where I was a senior member of the Philosophy Department. Seeking to give my responses a wider setting and significance, I ranged back over my experiences as student and as teacher, which by then covered almost twenty years. The result was the book to which these remarks are a new introduction.

At the time, I conceived myself to be speaking in quite general terms about higher education in general, but with the passage of time, I have come to recognize the constraints on my experience and vision that defined the problems and solutions of my text. The invitation to write a preface for this new edition of *Ideal* offers me the welcome opportunity to present a somewhat altered vision of higher education.

I say "altered" rather than "more accurate" because my present reflections are as embedded in their time, and in my experiences, as were those earlier ones. At most, what I have achieved over twenty years is a greater self-awareness of the significance of that embeddedness.

My world today is very different from what it was in 1969. From my undergraduate days at Harvard to my senior professorship at Columbia, the first half of my career was spent entirely within the privileged sanctuary of private, elite higher education—Harvard, Chicago, and then Columbia. Shortly after pub-

lishing *The Ideal of the University*, I left Columbia to accept a position in the philosophy department at the University of Massachusetts, a big public state university where I have taught ever since. To put it as simply as I can, I spent the first fifteen years of my teaching career setting polished diamonds in appropriately tasteful settings, and I have spent the last twenty years spotting diamonds in the rough. This period coincides, of course, with the nationwide transformation of higher education from primarily a private sector activity to overwhelmingly a public sector activity.

Not surprisingly, my subjective perceptions and judgments have changed to reflect my experiences. In 1969, I thought of Harvard, Chicago, Columbia, and their fellow elite institutions as the home of genuine liberal education (and also, I blush to observe, as peopled pretty much by men only). My genial, aristocratic contempt for Clark Kerr's celebration of the University of California was as much an expression of Ivy League snobbery as it was of radical social criticism. Today, as my university faces devastating budget cuts from a state government as bankrupt morally and intellectually as it is financially, I find that I consider the Harvards of this world as pampered irrelevances.

A second difference in my world is, of course, the soul-numbing political shift in the United States from promisingly left-of-center to troglodytically reactionary. My two sons have grown to manhood without being able to remember anything but right-wing Republican administrations. I live now in a world in which the likes of Pat Buchanan, John Silber, William Bennett, and Orrin Hatch are allowed to appear on network television as though they were reasonable human beings! And all this without the consolations of religion.

In 1969, one could, with becoming modesty, ruminate on just precisely which path to the promised land seemed shortest and least studded with pitfalls. Today, one longs hopelessly for the resurrection of some few of those programs of the Great Society that at the time we scorned as typical band-aids.

During the same two-decade period, I have moved considerably farther to the left than I was in 1969. With an exquisite historical sensibility, I have become a serious student of the economic theories of Karl Marx just in time to witness the official

worldwide declaration that Marxism is dead. Nevertheless, my understanding of higher education is more deeply informed by my understanding of class conflict and the reproduction of economic inequality than it was twenty years ago.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly for the themes of this book, we have recently witnessed an assault on the life of the mind, cunningly and disingenuously presented as a defense of the great intellectual and educational traditions of Western Civilization. Two decades ago, when I wrote this book, the liberating potential of the liberal arts was universally recognized and acknowledged. Today, a perverse distortion of the liberal arts is deployed as a set of iron constraints within which to imprison the minds of the young. It makes me weep to see Plato, Aquinas, Montaigne, Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant, Mill, Shakespeare, Dante, and Dostoyevsky trotted out and forced to serve as transparent rationalizations for the mean-spirited animadversions of an Allan Bloom or a William Bennett.

In reflecting on all these changes, as I prepared to write this new preface, it occurred to me that nowhere in *Ideal* had I spelled out in substantive detail the reasons for my belief in the liberatory power of the liberal arts. Though there was a great deal about how (and whether) a university ought to be governed, on student power, faculty power, administrative pretensions to authority, and such like topics, there was precious little in the way of a coherent and reasoned defense of the life of the mind that I conceived myself to be defending. In 1969, that did not strike me as necessary. Today, it is clearly indispensable.

In what remains of these prefatory remarks, therefore, I should like to explain just what I understand as the authentic justification for a liberal education.

True and False Justifications for Liberal Education

As my defense of liberal education will be somewhat unusual, not to say offensive, at least to those who are accustomed to identifying what is good with what is positive, and what is bad with what is negative, it might be useful for me to begin by reviewing some of the more familiar defenses of liberal education.

The first of the three defenses I shall consider 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 economics, 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 cod-piece, was 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.

This rationale for liberal education has an unexpectedly long history. We find it first articulated, I think, in Plato's great dialogue, the *Gorgias*. Callicles ridicules Socrates' decision to devote his entire life to the discussion of philosophical issues, in a passage whose satirical bite reveals Plato's own ambivalence about his decision to retreat from Athenian public affairs into the seclusion of his Academy. Here is the central portion of the passage. For reasons that will become apparent immediately, I am, as professor of philosophy, especially fond of this passage. Callicles is speaking:

Philosophy is no doubt a delightful thing, Socrates, as long as one is exposed to it in moderation at the appropriate time of life. But if one spends more time with it than he should, it's the undoing of mankind. . . . To partake of as much philosophy as your education requires is an admirable thing, and it's not shameful to practice philosophy while you're a boy, but when you still do it after you've grown older and become a man, the thing gets to be ridiculous. Socrates! . . . When I see philosophy in a young boy, I approve of it; I think it's appropriate, and consider such a person a liberal

one, whereas I consider one who doesn't engage in philosophy illiberal, one who'll never count himself deserving of any admirable or noble thing. But when I see an older man still engaging in philosophy and not giving it up, I think such a man by this time needs a flogging. For . . . it's typical that such a man, even when he's naturally very well favored, becomes unmanly and avoids the centers of his city and the marketplaces—in which, according to the poet [Homer], men gain "preeminence"—and, instead, lives the rest of his life in hiding, whispering in a corner with three or four boys, never uttering anything liberal, important, or apt." [Trans. by Donald J. Zeyl]

This conception of liberal education rests on the presupposition 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. Most recently, and notoriously, it can be discerned in Allan Bloom's manifest contempt for everything vulgar, banal, material, lower class. 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 Zaramovich. 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. Letters written by my mother and father in their teens, when they were courting, reveal that my father would attend the philosophy lectures at City College by the great Morris Raphael Cohen with his friends and classmates Ernest Nagel and Sidney Hook, and then would repeat them as well as he could from his notes for his comrades in the Young People's Socialist League who were too poor even to attend a free college. 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.

One curious variant of the notion of liberal-education-as-instrument-of-upward-mobility, to be found principally in the elite private sector of higher education, can be traced to a feature of American corporate life that does not have exact parallels elsewhere in the modern capitalist world. Among the top ranks of American corporate executives, one finds an unusually high proportion—more than two-thirds—with *nontechnical* backgrounds. In contrast, for example, with Japanese firms, top American auto executives do not have any particular technical understanding of how cars are made, nor do many top oil executives understand much in a technical way about the refining processes that turn crude into product. Rather, what these men exhibit—and they are, of course, almost without exception men—is a modern bourgeois version of those aristocratic graces that older forms of liberal education were supposed to confer upon the previous era's occupants of the top levels of the income and wealth pyramid. Liberal education, for them, provides the identifying stigmata by which they are recognized as executive material, and by which they can recognize their fellows among the successful, the winners, of American society.

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. Put somewhat differently, the latent function of liberal education in America today is to determine whether you will take orders or give them; whether you will be required to ask permission during work hours before going to the bathroom; whether you will end up somewhere in the top fourth

of the income pyramid, where real income and living conditions have been improving, or in the bottom three-fourths, where you will, on average, be less well off than your parents.

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 are, of course, important differences between the latent functions of private and public universities. Roughly speaking, elite private schools are designed to shoehorn their students into the top five percent of the income pyramid, entry to which is secured by a salary of about \$86,000 or more. The big state universities, like my home institution, the University of Massachusetts, have it as their function to give their students a shot at the top twenty percent of the income pyramid, which is to say, a household income of \$53,000. (These figures are taken from *The Statistical Abstract of The United States* for 1990, and the figures themselves are for 1987, but not much has changed since then, save a slight adjustment for inflation, and a continuing widening of the gap between rich and poor.) That goal is attainable for most Americans only insofar as they become part of a household in which both adults work full time. (Two high school teachers, or a supermarket manager married to a computer programmer, say.)

There is, finally, the justification for liberal education that I have always associated most immediately with the University of Chicago under the guidance of Robert Maynard Hutchings, 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 (speaking anachronistically, of course, since the idea antedates his book). 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, 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. At first, one is a mere auditor, 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, longing for the day when I too would be permitted to enter the discussion and make my voice be heard with the others. Later, after one has read some of the books and deciphered their arguments, one offers one's first, hesitant, no doubt badly phrased opinions— "Mightn't it be that we can read Plato's Myth of the Metals ironically, as the pessimism of an idealist who knows too well that the Republic can never be instantiated?"

Eventually, an inspired few will 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 quotidian lives. In the evening, after dinner, we can sit quietly before the fire and turn once again the pages of *The Republic*, *The City of God*, *Macbeth*, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (well, perhaps not *The Critique of Pure Reason*), *Northanger Abbey*, *The Red and the Black*, or *Jane Eyre*.

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 entrée 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. (A propos, I might note that immediately after being awarded the Ph.D. in Philosophy by Harvard University in June of 1957, I entered the United States Army as a private to do six months of active duty along with a company of other National Guardsmen. Confronted by an entire platoon of college graduates, my basic training Sergeant, Master Sergeant McVicker, following strict academic protocol, chose me to head up the la-

trine cleaning squad in consequence of my holding a doctorate. It was, I think, the most sincere token of respect my Harvard doctorate has ever received. I was, in effect, head man of the platoon.)

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, 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.

To see that this is so, we need merely perform the following thought experiment. Consider the current institutional condition of the so-called fine arts in this country—the relatively small numbers of young men and women who train formally to be painters, sculptors, poets, or composers, the relatively small number of museums, ballet companies, orchestras, and opera companies supported by a wealthy elite and concentrated in the larger population centers. Now imagine that somehow, unaccountably, more or less as in classical China, knowledge of, and training in, and even public performance of the arts were to become universally required as a precondition for admission to the ranks of corporate executives. Imagine, if you can, that it came to be as much of a boost into the upper middle class to have published a poem or written a sonata as it is now to have carried the ball for a touchdown in the Harvard-Yale game. What would happen?

Well—more and more people would apply for admission to existing art schools. Parents would search out signs of artistic talent in their children; elementary and secondary schools would be pressured to cut back on math and strengthen their art programs; new art schools would be founded, with corporate and government support; jobs would open up for art teachers. As the competitive pressures mounted, machine-graded multiple-choice Artistic Aptitude Tests, or AAT's, would be introduced to make

admissions procedures fairer. Publishing houses would bring out new lines of art books; and a one-person show at a recognized gallery would become the precondition for selection to the most prestigious corporate slots.

None of this would have any more to do with the successful performance of executive functions than a liberal education has now. Its sole rationale would be as an arbitrary device for sorting too many young people into too few privileged jobs. If liberal education is indeed to be nothing more than a status filter for the upwardly mobile, then we would do better to disassemble it than to seek to provide it with a rationale.

As for the third defense of liberal education as admission to the Great Conversation, I freely acknowledge that I am more than half in love with it. I have an immediate, sensuous attachment to certain of the books that have sat on my study shelves for almost half a century—to the stubby, thick volume containing David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*, to the wonderfully musty pages of the many-volumed Oxford translation of the works of Aristotle, to my dog-eared copy of Kant's first *Critique*, a graduation gift from two college friends, its margins now a palimpsest of puzzled comments.

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 always I return to the terrible question first posed by Callicles to Socrates more than two thousand years ago: Is this any way for a grown-up man or woman to spend an entire life? 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, at last, I arrive at the real substance of these remarks. The true rationale for liberal education, in my considered and passionate judgment, is our society's desperate need for a reservoir of *negative thinking*, 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 one-time 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 out 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 newborn infant does not possess a coherent rational self or ego with which to negotiate its relationships 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, saved 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 hypersensitively attuned to those slight variations in the cry that 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 a 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. Indeed, in many of us, the eventual emergence of genital sexual feelings get so thoroughly intertwined with those negative, bad, offensive, secretly attractive, repressed but not forgotten wishes and memories that we can only find sexual satisfaction in practices that we think of as low, dirty, bad, shameful—and therefore exciting.

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, albeit with certain complications due to variations from industry to industry in the degree of what we nowadays call capital intensity. 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 condi-

tions 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. 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 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 that lurk within us all. Workers' liberation, Black liberation, Women's liberation, Gay liberation—all appeal, necessarily, meretriciously, *and yet truthfully and 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 continually 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 quote 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 that refuse and refute the established order. [*One-Dimensional Man*, 61-62]

Consider the first sentence of this passage. It is clear enough what Marcuse means by the tension between the actual and the possible—between what is, and what we can imagine might be. We can even understand, somewhat, the sense in which this tension is transfigured, in a work of art, in "an insoluble conflict." The tension between the demands of social obligation and the urgings of desire is transformed into the apparently ungetoverable obstacles separating the highborn lover and his [or her] peasant beloved. The tension between the natural rhythms of unalienated labor and the forced lockstep of the assembly line is transformed into the apparently unresolvable dissonance between the melodic line and the orchestral accompaniment of a concerto. And so forth. But what can Marcuse have meant by the extraordinary phrase "in which reconciliation is by grace of the oeuvre as *form*?" Why by grace of the oeuvre as form? And why "by grace of," a phrase whose religious implications would have been immediately present to Marcuse? It is in the explication of this phrase that the entire theory unfolds before us.

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. I have deliberately chosen the most nonrepresentational of the arts, and the most nonrepresentational example from that art form, in order to make the point, because, as we shall see, the processes to which Marcuse is pointing operate at so primitive a level that they antedate, or underlie, or even, we might say, transcend, verbal meaning. What I say here about a fugue will apply as well to a sonnet, a portrait, a statue, or indeed a Platonic dialogue.

The rules governing the composition of a fugue are extremely strict. A composer who undertakes to write a fugue has—or so it seems—very little leeway, very little room for play or variation, as any beginning composition student will attest. These rules force the composer into narrow, predetermined pathways of compositional behavior. They constitute, psychologically speaking, a repression of the composer's instinctual, creative energies. In the hands of a novice, the fugue-form is a straitjacket, 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.

This last claim is, of course, the key to the entire analysis. Even to those accustomed to speak easily of "Freudian wishes" and unconscious desires, of displacements, projections, introjections, and cathexes, it may seem like a reach to claim that conforming oneself to the rules of fugal composition is emotionally akin to regulating one's anal sphincter. This is not the place to argue in a general way the appropriateness of such conjunctures, but I can at least reassure the reader that I do not mean them reductively or dismissively. Quite to the contrary. As will become clear immediately, I am following Marcuse in suggesting that what is aesthetically and intellectually most valuable in human experience—great art—is great precisely because it mobilizes primitive libidinal energies in formally precise ways.

At all events, back to the fugue. In the hands of Bach, the frustration of fugal composition is transformed. Bach's fugues are effortless. They magically transcend the constraints of the form, all the while rigidly conforming to them. In his hands, rules that are a painful constraint to the novice pose no problem

whatsoever. With seeming omnipotence, Bach plays with the rules, coquettes with them (to appropriate Marx's lovely description of his play with Hegel's categories), makes of them endless sources of spontaneous beauty. He writes double fugues, crab fugues, fugues in which the second line is the first line inverted. Thus, we may imagine, God played as he invented the world. The result is sheer, sensuous beauty that is, at one and the same time, liberated from the constraints of form and completely consonant with those constraints. Religiously speaking, this is what Jesus promises when he announces that he has come not to supersede the Law, but to fulfill it, in such a way that we too may perfectly fulfill it merely by loving and believing in Him.

The Bach fugue thus transcends the tension between the actual (the real-world social constraints imposed by culture, by civilization, by the demands of the ego) and the possible (the fantasy of instantaneous total gratification carried in the unconscious from the earliest days of childhood.) It holds out, magically, the promise of perfect satisfaction, the "promesse de bonheur." In this way, it keeps alive and available the libidinal energies whose mobilization is required for any large-scale assault on the *surplus* repression inflicted by the demands of political repression and economic exploitation.

Needless to say, the work of art need not in any way, however indirectly, carry a revolutionary ideological message in order to serve this fundamentally revolutionary purpose. A Dickinson poem, a Rodin sculpture, a Platonic dialogue, a van Gogh still life—each is capable of reawakening 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.

This transfiguring effect is not limited to works of music; sculpture, poetry, or painting 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 that omnipotence that has been buried in the unconscious since infancy. (Lest the reader begin to doubt that fantasies of power lurk beneath the cerebral deductions of logic or mathematics, I would simply note the character of the metaphors with which their practitioners describe their activities—proofs, like punishments, are described as rigorous; conclusions are forced; a proof one has not oneself discovered is dismissed as trivial.)

Even great works of manifest and obvious protest, such as *Das Kapital*, enchant by the power of their images and the seeming inevitability of their reasoning as much as by their real-world critiques of the structures of actual domination and exploitation. To follow Marx as he extracts, from the very premises of classical political economy, the devastating conclusion that the seeming equality of exchange in the marketplace masks the exploitation of the workers in the factory, is to experience in the realm of the mind an *éclaircissement*, a promise of happiness, that keeps alive the hope of liberation.

In all seriousness, I am suggesting that in this promesse de bonheur is to be found the real justification for keeping alive the great tradition of liberal arts and letters in our colleges and universities. What we give to young men and women when we bring to them a liberal education is not a patina for modern aristocrats, not an instrument of upward mobility, not even an introduction to the Great Conversation, but a way of putting them 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.

Once we understand that this is the true purpose of liberal education, we immediately see why it seems so natural that the process should occur during the period of late adolescence and early adulthood. The increased sexual urgency of puberty, coupled with the immediate prospect of entry into the adult work world, with its necessary compromises, sacrifices, and lost dreams, creates exactly the condition in which the subliminal message of great art, literature, and philosophy can most effectively trigger a subjective response.

Those of us who teach introductory philosophy are always surprised, and somewhat puzzled, by the fact that extremely abstract theoretical questions—the existence of God, the nature of the self, the possibility of knowledge of the physical world—seize our students more powerfully than the supposedly more relevant issues of abortion, capital punishment, or social justice. These remarks may help to explain that puzzle.

By way of final illustration, I should like to close with a true story. More than twenty 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*—the locus of his famous skeptical critique of causal reasoning. I was dead bored with the material, with the course, and with myself by this time, and I can confidently assert 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 on the *Treatise* and the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and innumerable times since. I was so thoroughly inoculated against the force of Hume's 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 skeptical 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, even in the most affluent, research-oriented, vocationally flexible multiversity, a protected sanctuary must be preserved for undergraduate liberal education.

Robert Paul Wolff

Preface

This book is both the expression of a lifelong concern for the principles and purposes of higher education and a response to events at Columbia which, at this writing, are barely twelve months past. Reflections on the nature of teaching and learning have been a part of the philosophic enterprise at least since the time of Socrates, so it is entirely proper that philosophers today should resist the tendency of sociologists, psychologists, and professors of education to appropriate the subject for themselves.

My attitudes toward matters of educational philosophy and policy can be traced to three quite disparate sources. First in time and in importance was the impact on me of a number of great teachers with whom I studied as an undergraduate at Harvard. From Harry Austyn Wolfson, Willard Van Orman Quine, and Clarence Irving Lewis I learned what scholarship, clarity, precision, and philosophical commitment could be. In the years since, I have met and taught with men whose lives and work embody those same values—Barrington Moore, Jr., Hans Morgenthau, Herbert Marcuse, and many others. My admiration for these men in a sense sets limits to my speculation about educational reform, for no ideal of the university could possibly win my allegiance unless it made room for them to pursue their work with freedom and with honor.

A second influence, particularly on my thinking about institutional reform, has been the writings of Paul Goodman and a small number of other iconoclastic social critics of a similar style. From time to time a man comes along with the knack of seeing things in an entirely different way, as though he were able to get a look at them from a perspective denied the rest of us. Goodman seems to me to possess something of that capacity. I do not always agree with him about educational matters, but I always put down one of his books or essays with the dismaying feeling that until that moment I have not really understood the subject at all.

The third and most recent influence on the views in this book