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Kenneth Woodward

Eric Gelman

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The Humanities Crisis

For most of Western history the study of the humanities needed no defense. To know the best of what had been thought and written, to be able to think critically, to be morally discerning and esthetically discriminating were the marks of an educated person and leader of the *civitas*. Today, however, American universities teach whatever students want to learn and confer degrees in almost any "discipline." In 1978, for example, less than 20 per cent of all undergraduate degrees were awarded in the humanities—literature, language, philosophy and other liberal studies. Education, in short, is a buyer's market, and what most students want is not a philosophy of life but a salable skill.

Against this background, the Rockefeller Foundation has funded a survey by 32 scholars, professionals and businessmen that explores the sorry state of "The Humanities in American Life."^{*} Their report, which has already fired controversy in academia and government, finds a crisis in the humanities at all levels of America's educational enterprise. The most pressing need, they argue, is "dramatic improvement" in primary and secondary schools. College undergraduates desperately need a coherent philosophy of education, they warn, but on the other hand, "Graduate programs in the humanities that cannot offer students reasonable prospects of employment, whether academic or nonacademic, should be abolished."

A Back Seat: The report is more sanguine about the vitality of the humanities in public life, noting that historical societies and extension courses are thriving. But in an inflationary era, financial support for humanistic research and institutions, such as libraries and museums, takes a back seat to science and technology. The most disturbing implication of the report is that exacting ethical discourse is no longer demanded even of the better educated. Too many of today's doctors, lawyers and business executives are called upon to make critical choices without the moral discipline imparted by the humanistic tradition.

The greatest challenge facing humanists, the commission insists, is not to find more money or students but to demonstrate the importance of the humanities to education and to society. Unlike vocational training, humanistic studies are ends in themselves; they focus on man's creations, discerning in concepts, texts and images what man is and ought to be. "Unfortunately," observes University of Texas historian Gaines Post Jr., who wrote the Rockefeller report, "not many academic humanists are looking for ways to inject the humanities into the bloodstream of American education."

^{*}192 pages. University of California Press. \$12.50.

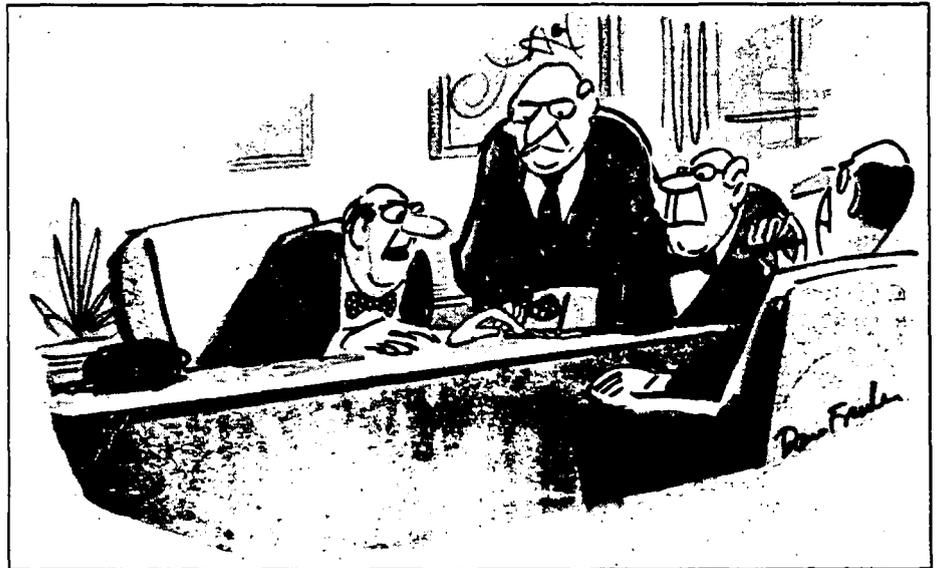
Mired in their own specialties, many humanists in the academy are unwilling or unable to help bridge the gap between humanistic and scientific learning. And too few focus their disciplined attention on such problems as the ethical implications of biomedical and other technological advances. "Humanists have lost their franchise," declares philosopher Bernard Murchland of Ohio Wesleyan University. "Humanity goes on without the humanists."

Nonetheless, the commission insists that the humanities are integral to education at all levels. The report finds elementary and secondary schools riddled with illiteracy, "grade inflation" and an "overemphasis on testing that keeps children from

port courageously defends the concept of a common Western culture and argues that the classics of that culture should be given privileged status in school curricula.

The panel also bewails the failure to foster ethical inquiry. In its stead, many schools substitute exercises in "values education" based on shallow sensitivity sessions and role playing. "For learning about values," the panelists write, "... few strategies can rival the time-honored practice of identifying with characters in literature and history who, caught in ethical dilemmas, have had to make a choice."

Basic Skill: What can be done to improve the American schools? First, says the Rockefeller board, educators must recognize the humanities as "part of a basic education, linking literacy to cognitive, esthetic and critical skills." It urges the Department of Education to define critical thinking as a basic skill along with reading and writing. The panel also urges the National Endow-



Drawing by Dana Fradon. © 1975 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

'Miss Dugan, will you send someone in here who can distinguish right from wrong?'

learning how to think." The panel is surprisingly critical of the "back-to-basics" movement insofar as it reduces reading and writing to utilitarian "language skills" and chides those who supplant the study of history with catchall courses in "social science." They warn that when minimum standards of competence are imposed, especially on "disadvantaged" students, the three R's tend to be taught as if they were only instruments for survival, not skills for pleasure and learning. "It is fundamentally wrong," the report declares, "to act as if access to the humanities were beyond the capabilities of such students."

Elitist: Throughout the system the commission sees students caught between a maze of mandated trivia and a smorgasbord of electives. In too many classrooms, skills and methods are divorced from knowledge of content and cultural context. Dismissing populist charges that the humanities are inherently elitist and ethnocentric, the re-

ment for the Humanities (NEH) to channel more of its money and power toward upgrading humanistic education at the pre-college level, and it recommends that the requirements for certification of teachers—"typically among the least academically proficient undergraduates"—be based on "a solid liberal education."

The commission's survey of the humanities in higher education is grim indeed. Declining enrollments, decreasing funds and low morale plague academic humanists. Many religious and other private colleges, traditional homes of liberal education, have either closed or turned vocational. Where the humanities survive, the report observes, the curriculum has frequently become "so overspecialized that it merely prepares for graduate study in the humanities rather than contributes to a liberal education." Team-taught courses in the humanities too often turn out to be interdisciplinary hash. Too few professors assign essays and too

many accept poorly written work. As a result, most graduates are innocent of humanistic disciplines, and many are only semilliterate specialists.

The panelists recognize that a return to the humanities as the core of higher education is unlikely. Even so, they urge those who affect undergraduate education—from administrators to the government and prospective employers—to support humanistic programs. Biologist Lewis Thomas, one of the panelists, chastises medical schools for forcing pre-professional students to narrow their college subjects. In their quest for expertise, the report notes, pre-professional students are robbed of intellectual breadth and the professions are deprived of well-rounded practitioners.

Analysis: In its overview of the humanities' role in public life, the commission applauds the dissemination of humanistic programs through museums, libraries and other institutions. And, as expected, it calls for greater financial support, especially from corporations. But the panelists fail to distinguish adequately between entertainment, such as traveling exhibits, and the analysis of social and ethical issues. "Urban intellectual culture is on the wane," says author Richard Sennett. "We need to have places where serious thinkers and writers can gather and argue."

Initial reaction to the report suggests that it will generate considerable debate in Washington and on campus. Novelist William Gass, a panelist, thinks it is a radical document because "we call for a reformation of the educational system from the bottom up." However, Brown University religion professor Jacob Neusner, a member of the National Council on the Humanities, dismisses it as "a collection of banalities." Next month the report will be subjected to extensive public debate by NEH chairman Joseph Duffey and his staff. While generally approving of the report, Duffey complains that the panel was not critical enough of ivory-tower humanists who cannot communicate with the public.

A Job? Sennett agrees. The humanities are in trouble, he says, because "they have become too academic." Serious intellectuals, he argues, thrive better outside the strangulating effects of academic politics; he points to New York University's semiautonomous New York Institute for the Humanities, which Sennett founded with NEH and Exxon funds, as the ideal hassle-free preserve that nourishes professional humanists such as Susan Sontag and poet Joseph Brodsky. But if the ordinary student is to aspire once more to a humanistic education, a revolution is needed. In practical terms, that revolution depends largely upon the nation's corporate managers: unless they reward the well-turned graduate with a job, both society and its schools will greatly suffer. Unfortunately, that problem is mostly ignored in the Rockefeller report.

KENNETH L. WOODWARD with ERIC GELMAN
in New York and bureau reports

BOOKS



Jeff Lowenthal—Newsweek

Terkel interviewing Terry: Giving people a sense of control over their lives

The Great American Ear

In Chicago, city of Third World taxi drivers, Studs Terkel slides across the passenger's seat to peer at the card with the cabbie's name. This one is Adewale O. Ogunfemi. "Hey," Terkel says, "you're from Nigeria!" The driver shoots him a look of alarm. "How you know that?" "From Lagos, am I right?" He's right. "Let me guess," Terkel says. "You're a student." Right again. "Circle campus at the university." By now the cabbie is having trouble keeping his eyes on the road. Here he is in the land of the CIA, but who is this rumpled man with the remarkable nose? "You're taking business administration, right?" "Man," the cabbie says, "how come you know so much about me?"

How come, indeed. Knowing who people are is Studs Terkel's profession. Talking to cabbies is simply reflex action. For 25 years he has conducted a daily, hour-long talk program on Chicago's classical-music station, WFMT. Choosing his subjects to suit only himself, Terkel may devote his hour to reading a story by Chekhov or Grace Paley, to playing old recordings of union songs, or to interviews with people who interest him: Dizzy Gillespie, members of the Fine Arts Quartet, the author of a biography of Walter Lippmann. Unlike most interviewers on radio and television, Terkel is heavily informed about his subject. He has not only read an author's book, he has taken massive, elaborately cross-referenced notes that enable him to move a discussion hurriedly along. "Either I have standards or I don't," he says. "It's the carpenter bringing his tool chest. I'm the

carpenter. I can't say I forgot my saw."

These interviews with our society's articulate achievers prompted a publisher, André Schiffrin of Pantheon, to suggest to Terkel something radically different: a self-portrait of Chicago composed from interviews with common people, "the man of inchoate thought" as Terkel later put it. Terkel took his tape recorder out into the city to talk with teen-agers and congeniarans, cops and convicts, landlords and housewives, Fascists and social workers, bums and aristocrats. The result, "Vision Street: America," was perhaps the first book to rely entirely upon oral history and remains a classic of contemporary journalism. Chicago, in Terkel's hands, became a metaphor for urban Americans everywhere in the mid-1960s, a matrix of universal fears and hopes. Other books followed, each developing from themes touched upon in its predecessor. In "Hard Times" Terkel recorded the memories of those who had survived the Depression. In "Working" he revealed in eloquent detail the physical and spiritual oppression of everyday labor.

Because it is not confined to a single city, or time, or particular part of the human condition, Terkel's new book, *American Dreams: Lost and Found* (470 pages, Pantheon, \$14.95), is his most diverse. Curiously, because we live in straitened, even painful times, it is also his most optimistic. The cast of characters is by now familiar (indeed, some are returning from appearances in earlier books): Indians, immigrants and a folk singer; politicians, union organ-