

**IDEAS**

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."

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 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 set 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 report 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-

---

"Miss Dugan, will you send someone in here who can distinguish right from wrong?"
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 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 distinctive 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 Schifrin 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 into the city to talk with teen-agers and octogenarians, 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 the themes touched upon in its predecessor. In "Bird 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 organiz...