Political Liberty for Academics

In "Academic freedom and political liberty" (17 Dec., p. 1559), Lepawsky raises a number of questions about the impact of political activity on university life. He concludes that academic freedom implies the right to free inquiry and public expression of dissent but precludes "the mounting and directing of political demonstrations, the managing and financing of political campaigns, and the organizing and conducting of political movements." In fact he describes academic freedom as a sort of contract between the university and society at large, which requires of academicians that they refrain from direct political activity, in return for the privilege of studying and debating controversial issues and of voicing unpopular opinions without hindrance. "The very purpose of . . . the university, is to permit members to enjoy particular advantages they could not enjoy as nonmembers, at the cost of certain privileges they can otherwise continue to exercise in their capacity as citizens."

I think Lepawsky is correct in saying that academic freedom does not extend to direct political activity, in the sense that membership in the university provides no special protection against the consequences of social action. However, I do not believe that academicians forfeit the right to involve themselves in political life, any more than employees of a business enterprise forfeit the right to participate in strikes.

At the root of the confusion lies Lepawsky's failure to draw a distinction between the academic community as one among many social groups which may choose to publicly support a social or political cause on the basis of informed opinion on the one hand, and the campus as the *locus* of political activity on the other hand.

The activities which Lepawsky holds to be inappropriate for members of the university all belong in the second category. Demonstrations, acts of civil disobedience, and the like are not academic functions. On the contrary, they tend to disrupt the primary business of teaching, learning, and research. In this context the university plays the same role as other social institutions; it becomes the arena of political conflict, as do streets, factories, and public accommodations. The strength of political minority groups is measured by their power to disrupt the orderly functioning of established institutions. Strikes and boycotts disrupt the economy, civil disobedience disrupts traffic, and similar action on campus disrupts academic work.

A member of the university who decides to become active politically—on or off campus—must make the same choices, and confronts the same hazards, as do citizens whose livelihood depends on other institutions. He gauges the importance of the issue, and the prospects of effecting political change, in relation to the consequences in terms of disruption, censure, and possible dismissal from the university (if the political action is illegal). This is a choice open to all citizens, and I fail to see why the option to participate in social conflict as a deliberate political act should be any less open to academic people.

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Too Many Surveys

Collecting data for the sake of collecting data is always a questionable enterprise. In the study of nature, it is true that description, counting, and measurement merely for the record have often proved valuable when practical or theoretical questions developed at some later time, but even in the natural sciences researchers normally take care to ascertain the possible usefulness of such information and to weigh the cost of collecting it against the possibility that the same amount of time and effort could be spent to better purpose in answering some clearly defined question.

In the social sciences, mere collections of descriptive data are much less likely to be accidentally useful in the long run, because the data themselves are typically transient. Transient data suitably collected can occasionally add to the effectiveness of practical decisions. Less frequently, they may also advance social theory. Social scientists successfully use survey techniques to test specific hypotheses about social phenomena. But we are being deluged with surveys that collect transient social data without specific purpose. Government agencies publish volumes of statistics that answer no practical or theoretical questions and are of doubtful historical significance. Businesses and educational institutions are flooded with requests to fill out forms, count noses, and estimate dollars in every division and subdivision of their operations. Similar requests are now coming in increasing numbers from nongovernmental organizations. A professional organization of cuff-link salesmen will ask fellow salesmen, customers, or potential customers to fill out voluminous questionnaires about the height, weight, income, age, sex, and hobbies of buyers and nonbuyers of cuff links. . . . Nobody stops to plan what will be done with the data afterward. Nobody asks: "How might our approach to selling cuff links be changed if we find that the average height of cuff-link wearers is different from that of nonwearers?"

Some of our most serious and most important professional associations have been guilty of this kind of effort. One asked college presidents and trustees to answer exhaustive questionnaires about the selection of college presidents. The outcome was a pamphlet proving only that educational executives, like other executives, are chosen on a highly personal and intuitive basis. Another group has carried out an exhaustive survey of rules, regulations, and attitudes on American campuses concerning the freedoms of students. No hypotheses and no alternate proposals for action depended on the findings. The published report makes no recommendations that could not have been made without the survey. . . . Another association has recently distributed a long questionnaire asking for tables of organization, titles, salaries, and descriptions of duties of many different functionaries within the university. The aim is to "get the facts" about public-relations and fund-raising problems and their solutions. Nothing indicates why the particular facts are needed—how, for example, the titles of officers in American colleges might affect recommendations about fund-raising.

Dozens of such examples could be chosen from the mail that crosses the desk of a college president or dean every week. I should like to propose some remedies:

1) Individuals and organizations with a genuine need for information on which to base decisions should clarify for themselves the nature of the decisions that must be made.

2) The decisions should be analyzed and classified so that possible courses of action can be explicitly stated.

3) The dependence of choices among these possibilities upon missing infor-