Book Reviews

The Ascendancy of the Professors

The Academic Revolution. CHRISTOPHER JENCKS and DAVID RIESMAN. Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y., 1968. xx + 580 pp., illus. $10.

Nothing so becomes Jencks and Riesman as their audacity. It requires more than ordinary scholarly hubris to lavish attention on virtually every item of the agenda that daily shatters the complacency of the faculty club. Intergenerational conflict; racial, religious, sexual, and geographic segregation; competing modes of administrative control; tensions between mass and class; diplomatic relations between school and society; inter- and intra-academic antagonisms; the imperial influence of the graduate school—these are the familiar patterns of structural, functional, and cultural diversity that are scrupulously arranged for our inspection. It is as if Malinowski had dared to submit his findings to the Trobriand Debating Society.

Indeed, although we are informed that the book "attempts a sociological and historical analysis of American higher education," the spirit of cultural anthropology hovers about the entire volume. The authors exhibit the civilized biases restrained by disciplined innocence, the faith in self and informants, and above all the sense of wonder and respect that characterize the very best studies of preliterate societies. It is because of this felicitous blend of intimacy and distance that so much of *The Academic Revolution* appears genuinely revealing and persuasive. Surely our impression that Jencks and Riesman have produced an authentic "classic" does not arise because of their fidelity to austere scholarship, let alone science.

The authors freely acknowledge that their intellectual style will offend methodological purists. They observe that the "genius and peril of academic research is that it unearths and weighs information in ways very different from those used by laymen. The academic profession places little weight on knowledge derived from individual subjective experience. It insists on knowledge that is objective in the sense that others can be told how it was acquired, can repeat the operation, and can be expected to arrive at the same result. This book is in this sense largely nonacademic, despite its statistical excursions and footnotes." The authors concede that they made only relatively brief visits to some 150 of America's colleges, that their sample is biased, that they have relied heavily on "secondary" sources, and that in the absence of "hard" data and a general theory of education they have been compelled to resort to much *ad hoc* speculation. They contend, nevertheless, that "choosing one's problems to fit the methods and data that happen to be most satisfactory, strikes us as an invitation to triviality and ultimately as an abdication of social and personal responsibility."

The Academic Revolution, then, is at once an encyclopedic inventory, a series of judicious commentaries, and a personal testament. Jencks and Riesman's perception of the American campus is influenced by a comprehensive theory of history which has been variously identified by sociologists as the shift from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, from community to society, from primary to secondary groups, and from ascribed to achieved status. These typologies refer to a transition from small, stable, agricultural societies dominated by parochial values and sexual, kinship, ethnic, religious, and geographic loyalties to large, complex, industrialized societies characterized by cosmopolitan norms and a universalistic ethic. This process has been accompanied by a corresponding transformation of established social institutions—economic, religious, educational—in the direction of more professionalization, specialization, and bureaucratization.

The main thesis of *The Academic Revolution* is that higher learning in America has in microcosm undergone a parallel development. Since the last quarter of the 19th century—especially after the establishment of graduate education at Johns Hopkins and Clark and the introduction of the elective system at Harvard—the local, special-interest college with its homogeneous student population, its domineering president and trustees, and its poorly trained faculty has declined in reputation and influence. It has been supplanted as the prototypical institution of higher learning by the contemporary university, whose prestigious graduate faculties and programs also serve as a model for undergraduate instruction as increasing numbers of students regard the baccalaureate as a certificate of eligibility for still more education.

The university, so conceived, acknowledges the equal claims of teaching and research, and the entire enterprise is under the *de facto* control of its faculties, who by virtue of custom, tenure, and expertise have achieved substantial emancipation from administrative whim and caprice. Moreover, since each university competes for competent faculty in a restricted marketplace and rewards scholars with established national reputations, professors are increasingly oriented to the broader academic community and less sensitive to purely local considerations. Thus armed with the threat of mobility, they are in a strategic position to define the conditions of their own employment and to influence general university policy. Since competent teachers prefer able students, they exert pressure for admissions procedures which emphasize merit rather than "artificial" criteria such as class, race, sex, or religion.

The academic profession, then, is increasingly autonomous and powerful, in some areas very nearly sovereign. "If this book has any single message," write Jencks and Riesman, "it is that the academic profession increasingly determines the character of undergraduate education in America. . . . It is true that the academicians' claims are still resisted with some success by young people who resent adults, by provincials who resent cosmopolitans, by the devout who resent heretics, by the upwardly mobile who resent the arrived, and by the wealthy who resent the application of meritocratic standards to their children. . . . But this resistance is for the most part poorly organized, poorly financed, and poorly thought out. . . ."

Academicians exercise rather more limited jurisdiction outside the university. Although higher education furnishes the skilled manpower that

maintains the dynamism of an industrial society and helps determine who shall occupy elite positions and second-level leadership in government, corporations, and community, it is of course responsive to a whole array of complex social forces. Similarly, universities typically disseminate "liberal" values but their graduates are subjected to countervailing ideological messages. Indeed, Jencks and Riesman contend in a brilliant chapter that one of the best-advertised social functions of higher education, its alleged capacity to promote social mobility, has been much exaggerated. Room at the top is not unlimited, and the initial comparative advantage of upper- and middle-class children in motivation, income, parental models, and school-rewarded skills tends to persist as they proceed through the educational hierarchy. These characteristics of the "actual" as distinguished from the "ideal" opportunity structure become even more significant in view of the recent contractions in the differential birth rate. Proportionately more advantaged children are now available to inherit desirable occupations and comparatively fewer will be recruited from less-favored populations.

For these and other reasons Jencks and Riesman conclude that further efforts "to induce mobility may be not only fruitless but undesirable." They propose, instead, that reformist energies should be directed to the achievement of greater equality in American society. If prevailing disparities in possessions, power, and prestige were sharply reduced, students would be liberated from aspiring to highly rewarded social positions and could attend college for sacred, rather than profane, reasons. The authors are not much persuaded that the university itself can be very instrumental in contributing to egalitarian goals. They are led to the cautious judgment that "universal higher education will diminish the economic or social differences among classes a little but not much." This finding is wholly consistent with the accumulating body of research which indicates that, in comparison to formal schooling, "input" variables in the form of personal characteristics and environmental circumstances account for an appreciably larger proportion of the variance in all manner of educational and social outcomes.

On the whole, Jencks and Riesman approve, or are at least reconciled to, the impact of the academic revolution on the campus and the wider society. They are, however, manifestly pleased that the revolution is not yet complete. Much of their volume is devoted to a spirited defense of anachronisms. Thus the authors seem dubious that it is possible to specify a distinctive role for Catholic colleges but they express the hope that religious institutions may succeed in fusing academic professionalism and concern for questions of ultimate moral and social importance; they prefer national universities but they are attracted to the concept of a localism that implies "communal solidarity and commitment to other people simply because they are there"; they are, all things considered, opposed to sexual segregation but they "would hate to see women's colleges entirely eliminated just because they do not seem to suit the majority"; they deplore the low academic standards of many Negro colleges but they hold that at least some could experiment fruitfully with providing community services, early admissions programs, and a "black curriculum." The principle that unites all of these judgments is that those who have been unable to join or have chosen to resist the academic revolution serve best when they develop distinctive alternatives to the dominant model. Jencks and Riesman are quite content to have a hundred flowers bloom.

The authors' ambivalence is most apparent in their approach to the graduate school, the archtypical symbol of the academic revolution. They are troubled by its departmental rigidities, by its failure to train students in the art of teaching, by its imperialistic control of undergraduate education. They align themselves with those critics who find graduate education insufficiently "personal," "creative," and "relevant." Yet their specific proposals for reform reveal that they do not really desire any very radical change. They properly reject the research-versus-teaching problem as a pseudo-dilemma, they fear that transferring power from departments to undivided faculty could result in arbitrary abuses, and they do not call for the abolition of uniform requirements. They are finally reduced to suggesting that prospective Ph.D.'s in literature might try their hand at writing a sonnet, that interdisciplinary programs should be given degree-granting powers, that some students might benefit from a post-college sabbatical year before continuing their studies, and that teacher internship programs should be established under the supervision of competent faculty.

Jencks and Riesman recognize that even if these modest recommendations were to prevail they would hardly jolt the academic imperium. They conclude, however, on what may be a prophetic note. Writing during the interregnum between Berkeley and Columbia the authors observe that "aside from nuclear war or a wave of national repression brought on by racial conflict or the defeat of imperial ambitions, generational conflict seems to be the major threat to the stability and growth of the American system."

Presidents Eliot and McCosh of Harvard and Princeton once engaged in a celebrated debate on the proposition "In a university the student must choose his studies and govern himself." An appreciable sector of the student body is now replying in the affirmative. Their motives vary. The most militant young radicals and some black students regard university reform as a trivial issue except insofar as the campus is a staging area for total transformation of the society. But even moderate students now speak of "student power." For their part even the most hawkish members of the faculty appear willing to "consult" students, while the doves seem prepared to countenance genuine student "participation." We may be witnessing an abortive episode, a bitter conflict for control of the campus, or perchance even sensible efforts to achieve mutual accommodation. It remains to be seen in what ways and to what extent faculties will protect the gains of the academic revolution. It will require the most anguished self-revelation and exquisite intellectual delicacy to distinguish an authentic concern for the welfare of the university from naked motives of self-interest.

The student movement will doubtless stimulate new social histories, and perhaps Jencks and Riesman can be persuaded to continue their chronicle. Nearly a half-century ago G. Stanley Hall observed that "true history in the field of higher education was perhaps never so hard to write as in this country." Since no brief review of *The Academic Revolution* can do justice to its subtlety, complexity, and cultivated irony, every academician would do well to discover for himself how admirably Jencks and Riesman have surmounted many of the principal difficulties.

MARVIN BRESSLER
Department of Sociology, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey