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# Education for Justice and the Common Good

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# EDUCATION FOR JUSTICE AND THE COMMON GOOD

*Most of us with any insight into what we are doing  
know that we are seldom neutral*

By Robert N. Bellah

**M**y title, “Education for Justice and the Common Good,” may seem like bringing coals to Newcastle, since Jesuit higher education has long been committed to education for justice, and a concern for the common good lies at the foundation of all Catholic social teaching. Still, I think it worthwhile taking up this subject once again, because education for justice and the common good is not something obvious in the context of American society or American higher education today. It is more intelligible in the context of Catholic higher education, with its obligation to understand and interpret a long tradition of Catholic social teaching than it might be in other kinds of colleges and universities. But Catholic higher education in general and even Jesuit colleges and universities are not immune to the surrounding culture, so that the first answer to the question what is education for might well not be justice and the common good.

I want to take as my theme a passage from Decree four of Jesuit General Congregation 32, the document that committed the Society of Jesus to the service of faith and the promotion of justice:

We should pursue and intensify the work of formation in every sphere of education... We must help prepare both young people and adults to live and labor for others and with others to build a more just world. Especially we should help form our Christian students in such a way that, animated by a mature faith and personally devoted to Jesus Christ, they can find Him in others and having recognized Him there, they will serve Him in their neighbor. In this way we shall contribute to the formation of those who by a kind of multiplier-effect will share in the process of educating the world itself. (paragraph 60/109)

That is the meaning of education that I will want to explicate. Let me call to your attention the verb “form” and the noun “formation” in that passage. I will return to the idea of formation in relation to issues of justice and the common good.

But first I want to consider three common answers to the question of what is education for today. I’m not saying that

these three answers are wrong and education as formation for justice and the common good is the right answer. Actually I believe all the answers are right, and if they are seen as rightly ordered, they are complementary and not contradictory. But I’m afraid at the moment these answers seem more like “rival versions” to take a phrase from a recent book by Alasdair MacIntyre, than they do like complementary parts of a whole.

The traditional answer to the question what is education for, and one very much alive and well in Jesuit higher education, is that it is for the cultivation of the liberal arts; its purpose is the formation of cultured, educated individuals with the wisdom and judgment necessary for them to provide leadership to the larger society. While the liberal arts curriculum includes the sciences, natural and social, its core is the literary, philosophical, and theological traditions that have for well over two thousand years allowed our ancestors to make sense of their world and to act responsibly in it.

Although the liberal arts understanding of higher education has not disappeared, it has been under overt or covert attack for over a century as the answer to the question what is education for, and the second and third answers have been offered as substitutes for it.

Since the rise of the research universities at the end of the nineteenth century, the purpose of higher education has been seen as the disciplined search for new knowledge, in a broad sense of the term, science, and not the transmission and interpretation of tradition central to classical liberal arts education. It is worth remembering that early modern natural science was pursued largely outside the universities, and that it was only late in the nineteenth century that science began to be central in higher education. But the idea of the disciplined pursuit of new knowledge spread from the

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natural sciences to the other disciplines, even the humanities, as the central concern of higher education. It is interesting how this idea has been transmitted to students. I recently heard a professor of religious studies say that when he asked a variety of college students what is higher education for he got a remarkably uniform answer: it is to learn critical thinking. It is the ideal of natural science, based on universal doubt and the criticism of all received opinions, that is being transmitted to students. The actual practice of “ordinary science,” as Thomas Kuhn taught us, is something rather different: filling in the gaps of received research traditions, something that goes on indefinitely until the next paradigm revolution occurs. But the idea of higher education as critical thinking or, simply, criticism, is widespread among students and faculty today.

**A** third answer to what is education for is rather simple and probably dominant today: the purpose of higher education is job preparation, or more specifically, preparation to get a good job. It is not surprising that this answer makes sense for college-age young people in a society where all institutions are oriented to the bottom line and they are encouraged to look out for themselves as their main task in life. So it is natural that they think a lot about the jobs they are preparing for, especially the kind of jobs that will produce the income to make possible a good style of life. If a smattering of liberal arts and some capacity for critical thinking can be picked up along the way, then that is all to the good, but those are frills if the main purpose is job preparation. My coauthor Ann Swidler in a recent paper suggests the educational cost that is often paid by too exclusive a concern for the utilitarian benefits of higher education. She describes it as disinvestment in anything that doesn't have fairly immediate payoff:

There is also disinvestment as parents decide that college-age children should work to pay most of their expenses. I regularly teach college students who work 20 or 30 hours a week. Some can't afford to be full-time students, but others work because neither they nor their families think of their education as an endowment worth enormous collective sacrifice. Students take pride in having supported themselves through college, without realizing that while their efforts speak well for their character, energy, and efficiency, they have foregone the enduring benefits of a rich, full education and the self-development it permits. Many come to think of their education in purely instrumental terms, just like their work lives—an accumulation of credits toward a degree that will help them in the labor market. The idea that the college years allow time for the development of deeper understanding of history, cultures, and societies outside one's own, a deepened appreciation of one's own

history and traditions, and reflection on the purpose and meaning of one's life in society—for appropriation of the enormous cultural endowment that is our birthright, won through generations of those who came before us—this conception of education is all but lost.

Here Ann is clearly lamenting the loss of the liberal arts understanding of higher education and its replacement by a utilitarian understanding, or, to take a broader view, a practical understanding of higher education.

Now where do justice and the common good as an answer to the question what is educa-

*Higher Education teaches critical thinking*

tion for fit in to this threefold set of answers? I think we would have to say that they don't really fit easily into any one of the three, but have implications for all of them. Certainly justice and the common good belong in the third category, properly understood, that is, they are eminently part of practical life, though not in the narrow sense of utilitarian job preparation. Justice and the common good are part of our practical participation in the world as citizens, but also very much in the occupational and professional fields as well. As I said at the beginning, I am not arguing that any of these three answers is wrong except when it becomes exclusive or severely downplays the other two. Much as I decry the invasion of the money world into higher education, I know that preparation for participation in the world of work has always been and still is a legitimate concern for higher education, especially when it grows organically out of liberal arts education and the capacity for critical thinking.

To help us understand why justice and the common good are central in a broad understanding of education as job preparation, let me give you, borrowing from my colleague, William Sullivan, whose work I will be drawing from throughout this talk, a couple of conspicuous examples of engaged professionalism. Take the case of a giant pharmaceutical company whose profits derive in large part from the efficient production and sales of large quantities of a widely prescribed antibiotic drug. Because of the magnitude of the consequences, including not only deaths but lots of bad publicity and large legal costs, potentially defective or contaminated production of its drugs is not something the company can take lightly.

A few years ago, the engineers responsible for the drug's production reported to their superiors that there was a small, but statistically real possibility that some part of a major run of the drug might

be contaminated. The company quickly convened a high-level meeting of managers, including the head of engineering for the drug, as well as the physician who served as medical director, and the firm's chief legal counsel. As the facts became clear, the marketing and finance managers began to argue that so

### *The case of the contaminated drug*

a 12 million dollar production run. The engineers, for their part, pointed out that absolutely pure production was, after all, a statistical definition. The chief legal counsel fended off the issue by declaring it "medicine's call."

The attention, and the pressure, then focused on the medical director. Almost as instinct, he reported, he decided that he had to invoke the classic medical norm: Do no harm. Taking a deep breath, the physician went on record as vetoing release of this batch of the drug, costing the company 12 million dollars. Subsequently, contamination was discovered in some of the batch of the drug, so that the company's higher management later upheld the doctor's judgment. In order to understand the doctor's decision, and why it was, as he said, "almost as instinct," we have to assume that it did not come simply from his having taken a course in medical ethics in medical school, or that he consulted a handbook of decision making prepared by a philosophical ethicist. Rather it was his character, formed in family, church and college, as well as in medical school, that he was drawing on, a character that had internalized the virtues, and, in particular, the virtue of justice and a concern for the common good.

A second example: In the aftermath of the World Trade Center disaster of September 11, 2001, perhaps no one experienced the tragedy more intimately than one of the building's designers, the structural engineer Leslie E. Robertson. A former principal in the engineering firm that had partnered with the architects of the Twin Towers in the 1960s, Robertson described his situation this way: "The World Trade Center was a team effort, but the collapse of the World Trade Center is my responsibility, and that's the way I feel about it." Structural engineers work with architects to enable complex buildings to stand and function. They also work with both architects and firefighters to define and implement standards for public safety in buildings. In the case of the World Trade Center, the design had represented a relatively untested novelty in the 1960s. The buildings consisted of an outer steel tube linked

to an inner core that carried the building's functional infrastructure by lightweight floor trusses. The novelty of no interior bearing walls was made possible by the progress in materials engineering that followed World War Two. Inside, the WTC towers contained vast, completely open office spaces on every floor. In the attacks, it was just those open floors, and the use of lightweight fire-retardant covering on the trusses instead of heavier concrete, that permitted the rapid spread of the fire. (Famously, Robertson had taken into account a Boeing 707's probable impact on the structure. But, of course, the huge heat of the fire produced by the explosion of a much bigger plane was beyond those calculations.) "Remember," Robertson pointed out, "this wasn't a corporate headquarters—a monument building. It was a profit-making proposition."

The predicament for structural engineers such as Robertson is that in planning and design, as well as in the setting of minimal safety standards, the participants all work within "an economy of wealth, image, and fame" that strains against the engineer's commitment to safe structures. In fact, though, "A lot of things worked well—people got out," continued Robertson. "I guess I'm proud of that." At the same time, the dimensions of the tragedy have continued to haunt him. "It's a tremendous responsibility, being an engineer. It's not so beautiful as science. I have a lot of tough nights... I go to sleep for a little bit, but I wake up thinking—I have so many thoughts." What bothers this engineer, in spite of the fact that the buildings stood long enough for the great majority of the occupants to escape, are the questions, did I act rightly, did I act justly, was I thinking enough about everyone who would inhabit these buildings, when I was designing the building?

Sullivan argues that the kind of engagement shown by these two professionals exhibit what can be called "civic professionalism." This is the practice of a profession in which technical expertise and judgment are deployed not only resourcefully but for public-regarding ends and in a public-regarding way. Thus beyond expertise, and certainly beyond the question of profit, the professional must ask, Is this right? Is this just? What are the public implications of what I am doing? Unfortunately, too often professionals don't ask those questions—one thinks of those responsible for the design of the Ford Pinto, or recently, the executives at Enron or Arthur Anderson. But it is the responsibility of higher education, as it prepares people to enter the occupational world, to try to make sure that they always do ask those questions, that they never let the bottom

## Why did the World Trade Center Fall?

line determine all the decisions. Our common life, our common safety, depends on that kind of job preparation, which is indeed academic, but about which we can never say it is "just academic."

As I have already implied, I don't want to use these examples as an argument for adding ethics courses in professional education or even in undergraduate education, as though ethics is some kind of technical fix that we can just add on to the existing "education industry." A deep concern for justice and the common good as part of one's character is not an add-on that can be attained from a one-shot course in ethics. Rather it is a matter of what has traditionally been called formation. In the Catholic tradition formation has been used particularly for the process of entering the religious life, becoming a priest or a nun, but it really applies more generally to all of us as we learn what it is to become a responsible adult.

**W**illiam Sullivan, in his work as director of the professional education project of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, has discovered that in theological education the question of "formation" has become increasingly salient. The need for such a term arose from changing demographics among aspirants to the ministry, priesthood, and rabbinate. Traditionally, candidates for the clergy came from families with long experience in the religious tradition for which the candidate was being trained. Such candidates possessed what is sometimes termed "tacit knowledge" or experiential knowledge of the particular religious tradition. In recent decades, however, increasing numbers of men and women are coming to seminaries with much less informal exposure to traditional religious practice. They lack long familiarity with the mores and sensibility of the community that they are being prepared to lead. Or, to put it differently, they have not been "formed" by life experience so that they can feel the community's tradition as "second nature." To address this perceived lack of intuitive engagement, some denominations have developed, as part of professional preparation, self-conscious pedagogies of immersion in the community's ethos and ways. The aim of such efforts is to shape or



form, consciously, a deep engagement with the central practices and meanings thought to be necessary for anyone aspiring to religious leadership in that community. Without such deep, intuitive understanding, it is thought, clergy are not able to function effectively.

I want to argue that if this is a problem for theological education, it is also a problem for college education. We can no longer, if we ever could, assume very much about the formation our students have received before they come to us. Neither the family nor primary and secondary education seems to be doing a very good job these days in this regard. I remember some years ago a sociologist at the College of Notre Dame on the peninsula consulted me about a study she was doing of family traditions of Catholic spirituality. In her interviews with practicing Catholics in good standing in their parishes she asked about their family traditions and was told almost uniformly, "We don't have any traditions, sister, but we'd love it if you'd teach us some."

*Some have given up teaching substance and teach only method*

Bill Sullivan, who taught for some years at LaSalle University in Philadelphia before going to the Carnegie Foundation, told me how frustrating it was in teaching courses on Augustine and Thomas to find that his students, most of whom had had parochial school education and had gone to mass most of their lives, knew virtually nothing about the

Christian tradition, not even the Bible, that they had presumably heard read every week of their lives. Just in one ear and out the other, or perhaps television

had usurped the space where religious formation might have occurred.

But I'm afraid these specifically Catholic examples are only the tip of the iceberg. Those of us who have taught at a secular institution such as the University of California at Berkeley have found a remarkable lack of what social scientists call "cultural capital" in the students coming to us from secondary school. And it's not only in class that we find formation lacking. The ballooning of student services budgets in recent years is due to the fact that students bring behavior difficulties with them to college that have not been resolved in their earlier years.

What I am suggesting is that whether we like it or not, or even whether we understand it or not, formation is more than ever a central aspect of college education today. And if we consider where formation might occur, while for Catholic students in a Catholic college a program in Catholic Studies might make sense, more generally it must be through the liberal arts curriculum that formation takes place.

Indeed at the core of liberal education, as Sullivan has pointed out, is what the classical Greeks called *paideia*, the same word they used for what we call "culture." When Cicero translated that term into Latin, he coined the word *humanitas*. The Latin word conveys something of the existential flavor of the Greek original. This kind of education is above all a kind of shaping of the person. Knowledge is a result of "reason," understood as insight into the structure of reality, and the cosmos is understood as a meaningful order of value. Thus, education is a kind of reflexive training of insight, allowing the student to gradually grasp—and imitate—the order of the whole. Historically, this was the animating ideal of education and knowledge embedded in the Classical heritage. Appropriated, with modifications, by historic Christianity, it

received its American institutional form in the liberal arts curriculum taught in the liberal arts college.

I think one of the great advantages that Jesuit institutions have is that this understanding of liberal arts education still makes (some kind of?) sense to you. In secular and particularly in public universities this whole idea has come under increasing attack. First of all there is the attack on the very idea of a canon, without which liberal arts education makes no sense at all, but the questions, whose canon? who decides the canon? why isn't the canon more inclusive? etc., are serious questions and must be answered. Canons have always changed and obviously must continue to do so, but throwing out the idea of a canon altogether is simply a total abdication of responsibility; it would be the end of liberal arts education.

**T**he second attack on the liberal arts idea overlaps with the first, though its roots are deeper than political correctness. This is the objection that we now know so much that we could never teach it all, so we shouldn't even try to teach substance, but only methods. While it is true enough that we now have the canons of all the great traditions available to us and the problem of selection is prodigious, I believe that the real basis for this argument comes from the second understanding of higher education that I discussed at the beginning of this talk, that is, that the basis of higher education is not in the liberal arts but in science, and the emphasis above all is on "critical thinking." I might take as an example my alma mater, Harvard College. As an undergraduate I had the benefit of the general education program that was put in effect in the immediate years after World War II, an effort to include liberal arts education in a great research university. But thirty years later the general education curriculum no longer made sense to the Harvard faculty and was replaced by what was called the core curriculum (like the general education curriculum, widely imitated elsewhere). What the core curriculum did was to substitute method for substance. Thus when Martha Nussbaum, then teaching at Harvard, wanted to offer a course on the ethics of Plato and Aristotle in the humanities part of the core curriculum, the course was rejected. Martha was told that they didn't want a course on Plato and Aristotle but a course on "moral reasoning," so she resubmitted her course under the title "The Moral Reasoning of Plato and Aristotle" and it was accepted. I gather that now,

*Higher education will  
get me a job*

under President Summers, the wheel is turning once again as he argues for a return of “substance” to the undergraduate curriculum, though I’m not at all sure what kind of substance he has in mind.

Nonetheless, this second model for higher education, which the Harvard core curriculum was taking as normative, derives from the Enlightenment’s notion that genuine knowledge is *Wissenschaft* or “science,” and I’m afraid that the substance Summers has in mind is just more science. In this view reason no longer means insight into a value-laden structure of nature. Instead, reason is identified with procedures for the testing—and correcting—of claims to truth. Hence, rational education is not about shaping the self in relation to the world, not about such things as justice and the common good. Rather, it consists in learning to test and criticize beliefs with the object of building up a body of well-established “facts” and principles or laws of how things work. In this view through the use of appropriate methods we accumulate valuable information. Such a scientific education shapes a detached, critical mind, not an engaged one. The scholar, in so far as he or she is a scholar, should be, to use Max Weber’s term, value neutral. If this kind of education does not grow organically out of a notion of liberal arts as formation, it also does not eventuate in ethical practice. About what is called “policy,” science must remain agnostic. It supplies only information to those with the responsibility to “apply” it.

However inadequate I think this second model of higher education as science is, I don’t in the least want to deny its achievements, or its educational value. Indeed freeing science from the embrace of metaphysics and theology was a necessary precondition for its healthy development. Approaching nature with objectivity and distance has proved enormously fruitful in the production of accurate information. It has also provided new powers to control and transform the natural processes understood in this way, as the achievements of modern technology powerfully demonstrate. The neat, bounded quality of the observer’s stance is one of the charms of scientific theory. The pursuit of science provides a sense of security, so welcome compared to the uncertainty and anxiety of decision that pervades the realm of practice. To a greater or lesser degree the disciplined knowing that is characteristic of science dominates the disciplines that make up the university curriculum, and it is part of our responsibility as scholars to communicate that to our students.

But in the broader perspective of liberal arts education, it is important to remember that science can produce information but not meaning. What characterizes the humanities, however, in at least partial contrast to the natural and social sciences, is the centrality of issues of meaning. In the humanities too, we need “knowledge about” but that is always secondary to “the meaning of.” In his famous essay “Science as a Vocation” Max Weber wrote, “Who—aside from certain big children who are indeed found in the natural sciences—still believes that the findings of astronomy, biology, physics, or chemistry could teach us anything about the *meaning* of the world?” He goes on to quote Tolstoy approvingly when the latter said “Science is meaningless because it gives no answer to our question, the only question important for us: ‘What shall we do and how shall we live?’” But these are just the questions that higher education as liberal arts must face. If, in our desire to avoid indoctrination, we deprive our students of the knowledge of how the great traditions have answered these questions we are surely short-changing them. We are giving them no help with the questions that precede and follow scientific inquiry. We are avoiding the question of why should I study this in the first place, why should I study this instead of that? We are avoiding the question of what to do with scientific knowledge once it is attained. And above all we are giving them no help in trying to make sense of their lives.

In the face of this situation, Sullivan suggests an understanding of a modern version of higher education as involving a three-fold circuit. The starting point is the formation that begins in childhood and secondary education but continues more critically and reflexively in the humanities and humanistic social science curriculum. Here formation means the understanding of self and world, of the meaning and value of society and nature, and of the kind of person who is courageous, moderate, just, wise and responsible, in a word, virtuous. The second movement of higher education is disciplinary and is concerned with methods, analysis, and criticism. The relation between the first and second movements should ideally be dialectical: formation does not, I hope, mean the creation of fundamentalists who know all the answers, but of persons with a sense of the meaning and value of life who are also open to criticism, even of their most basic beliefs, where new facts seem to demand it. Nor should we be produc-

*How is character formed?*

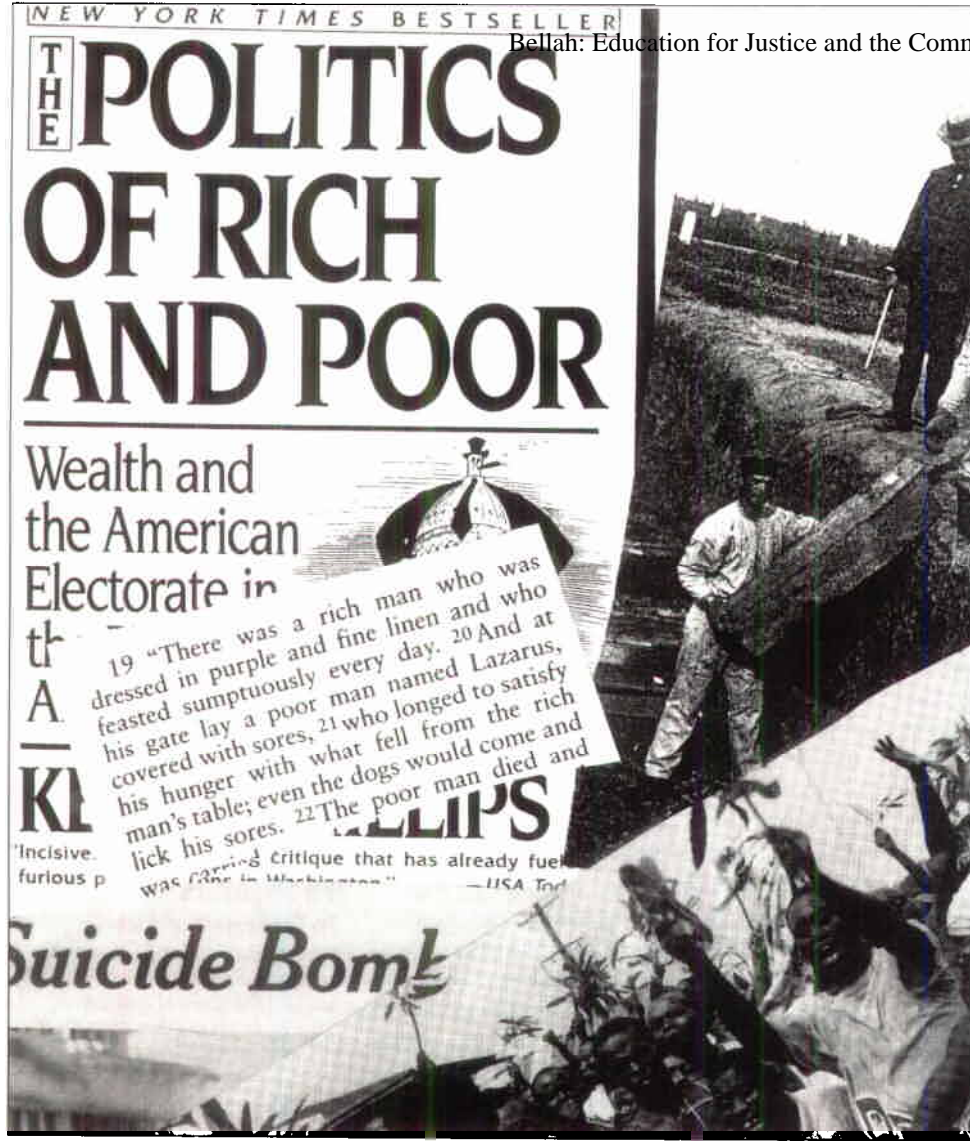
# THE POLITICS OF RICH AND POOR

Wealth and the American Electorate in

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19 "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20 And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 21 who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. 22 The poor man died and

PHILLIPS  
"Incisive, furious p  
was carried to Washington"  
—USA Today

Suicide Bom



ing scientists who are so wedded to positivistic methods that they can never ask the questions of the value relevance of their research.

The third movement in this three-fold circuit is, as I suggested at the beginning, practice, not in the utilitarian sense, but in the Aristotelian sense of practical reason, which involves ethics as much as expertise. In one sense practice is more the focus of professional education than of college education, but the third movement can't wait until professional school; it already begins in college. Service learning is one obvious example. Studies have shown that when service learning is done in a purely individual basis, an accumulation of volunteer hours to put on one's resume, it has little educational effect. But where service learning is integrated into actual course work, where it is done together with others, and, above all, where it takes place in a context of on-going reflection about the meaning and value of the work, it can have life-changing consequences. In terms of my argument, service learning as part of the three-fold circuit of modern liberal arts education

can be a powerful kind of teaching and a powerful expression of education for justice, but without that context it amounts to little.

There is a danger of thinking of the practical moment too narrowly in terms of something like service learning. That would approximate just the dichotomy between theory and application that I believe needs to be avoided. In humanities classes we are always confronting students with implications for their own lives. When I used to teach the sociology of religion, I used a comparative and historical framework in which I tried to explain the various traditions, as their adherents understood them, before analyzing them sociologically. One day after a class when I had tried to set forth the Confucian understanding of the world, with some passion, I admit, because I find it attractive, a student dropped a note on my desk as he was leaving class. When I opened and read it, it said, "Scratch one Presbyterian, add one Confucian." I wasn't trying to convert anyone. I was just doing what a teacher of Plato or Shakespeare would do—try to get the student to understand the material. How can we criticize what we don't understand? But I was not sorry that this student "got it" that Confucianism is a serious existential position well worth considering in the frame-

work of one's own life.

In the social sciences, however much we claim value neutrality, most of us with any insight into what we are doing, know that we are seldom neutral. When we teach about poverty, or gender, or race do we not usually imply that the facts we have uncovered suggest all is not well, that things could be better than they are? And in the natural sciences I think things are not so different. One of our most influential living biologists, E. O. Wilson, has argued fervently for biodiversity and the ecological cause. It is hard for those who study gorillas or chimpanzees in the wild not to become active in the effort to preserve them. Atomic scientists have been famously concerned about the danger of atomic weapons, and so on down the line. In short, in every field in the college curriculum we would really have to work hard to avoid communicating to students that there are practical implications of what we are teaching, that questions of justice and the common good are intrinsic to our subject matter. Of course we must



## The greatest challenge facing American education is.

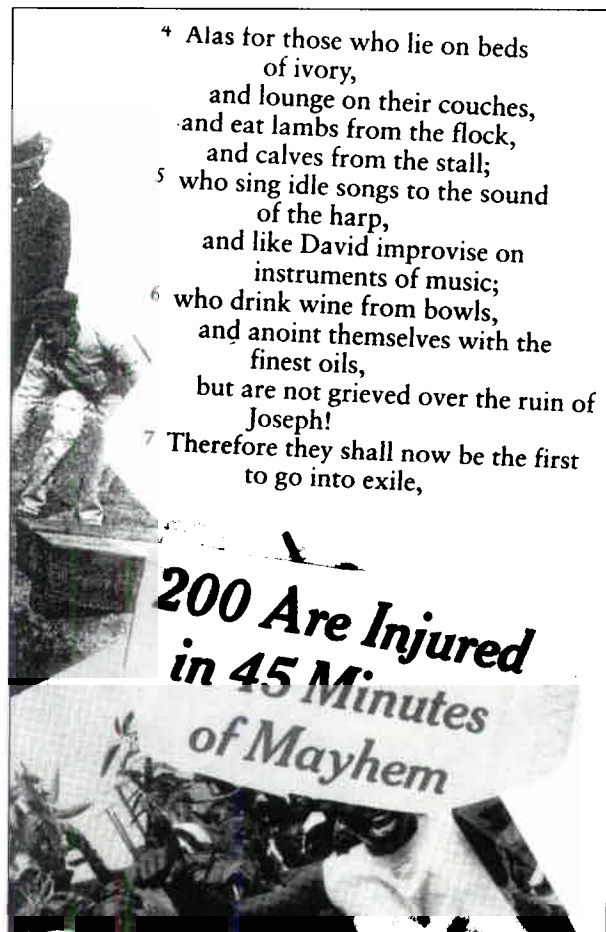
avoid indoctrination, but raising questions that all of us as citizens must try to answer is part of our job.

To sum up the three-fold circuit that could characterize a modern liberal arts education we can think of it as characterized by three phases: the formative, the critical or scientific, and the performative. These are not just three “rival versions,” or three kinds of enterprise going on side by side, though often they are viewed that way. It is the essence of thinking of higher education as practical reason in the Aristotelian sense that we see these as three mutually engaged phases. If, on the other hand, we remain fixated on one of the phases, various kinds of pathology ensue. If we think our obligation is exclusively to tradition, we lose the sense of a living tradition responding to the world and become traditionalists, devoted more to the defense of embalmed texts than to their possible current application. Or if we are devoted to the critical or scientific phase alone, we run the risk of cynicism on the one hand, or positivism on the other, as though “the facts” ever speak for themselves. To be fixated on the performative phase is to imagine that the moral issues are clear and our only obligation is to act, a position one might call romantic activism, one all too attractive, I’m afraid, to students in time of stress.

In remembering that the three phases should always go together, I think your Catholic tradition provides you with something that is largely lacking in the secular education dominated by positivism: namely, the practical syllogism. If the major premise is that human rights are to be respected and the minor premise is that in some situation human rights are being violated, then the logical conclusion is not just about knowledge but about action. What is the just thing to do about it? The practical syllogism doesn’t tell us what to do about the situation. For that we need all the wisdom and all the knowledge and all the judgment we can bring to bear on it. But the practical syllogism tells us we can’t just stand idly by. Often the reality is, we can’t do much; but the obligation to do what we can remains. It is here that we must bring our commitment to justice and the common good to bear.

In concluding let me suggest that there is a very big practical syllogism that faces all of us in American higher education: the syllogism of globalization, one that raises the problem of justice and the common good to the nth degree. We live in a world where globalization is going on relentlessly at

many levels and in many ways and we Americans are at the center of it. One way of thinking about our present situation, in which the United States is the cultural model, the economic dynamo, and the only military superpower, is that globalization is really a new kind of empire, foreshadowed only by the Rome of two millennia ago and Britain in the nineteenth century. Talk of empire became widespread in the months leading up to the invasion of Iraq. President Bush’s report entitled “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” issued in September of 2002, seemed to reinforce this idea when he declared that we would maintain military predominance everywhere in the world and would permit no nation to become militarily competitive with us. That assertion of absolute military dominance, combined with Bush’s stunning promise to “rid the world of evil,” did indeed seem to imply a kind of world empire unheard of before. The history of all previous empires unfolds in three stages: expansion, overextension, and collapse.



What usually takes decades or centuries to unfold seems to have overtaken our country in a matter of months. A year ago we were told that American military power was so great that we could intervene anywhere and fight several wars at once. The collapse of the Iraqi army following our "shock and awe" tactics seemed briefly to confirm that assertion.

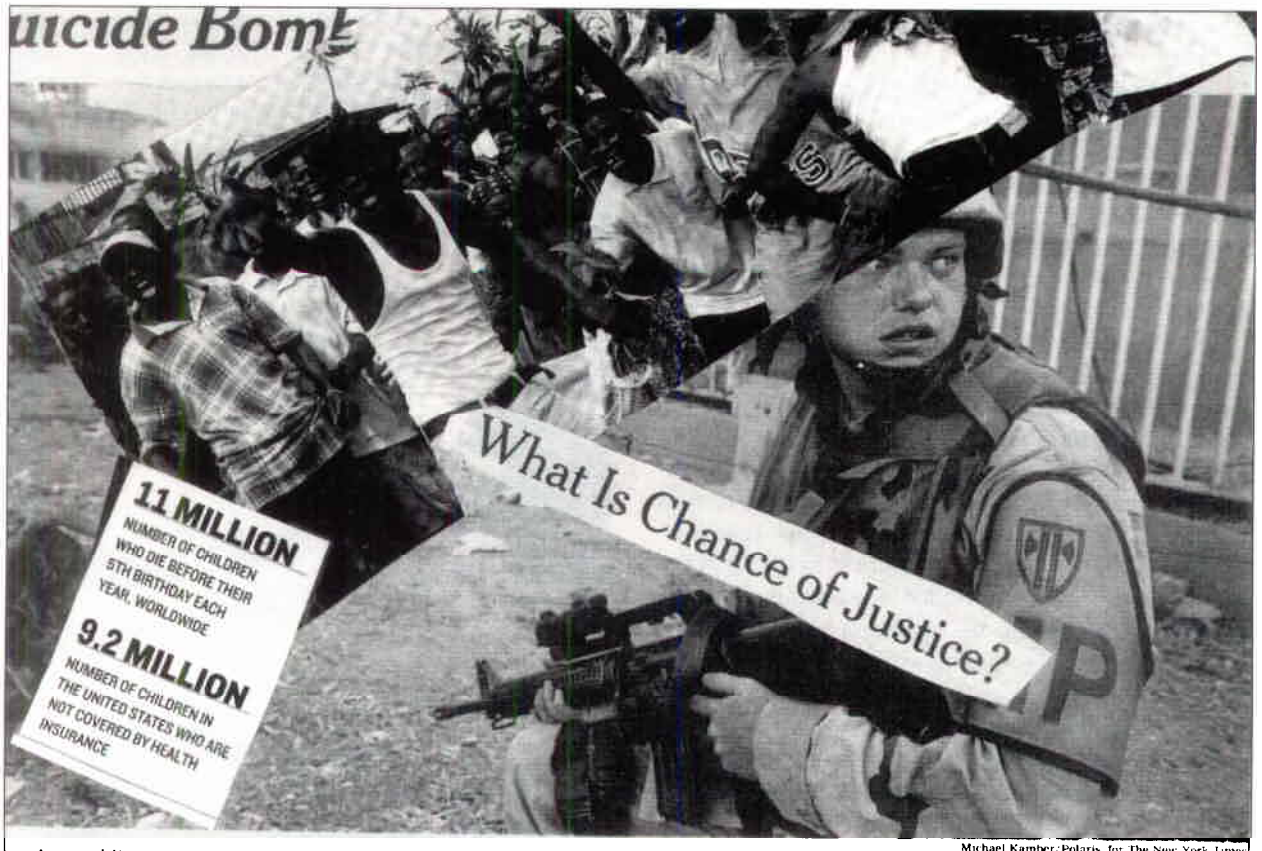
*Our foreign policy is that of the lone cowboy*

But though shock and awe destroyed the Iraqi army it did not destroy Iraqi resistance and now, several months later, we find ourselves seriously overextended and badly in need of help from others in the form of troops and money. It is too soon to speak of collapse, but arrogance has declined dramatically in tandem with growing world disapproval and falling poll numbers at home. The word empire doesn't trip from the tongue quite as easily as it did even a few months ago.

But that America is not as omnipotent as its leaders only recently proclaimed does not mean that we are not still the greatest power in the world, economically and culturally as well as militarily. Americans, like the Romans and the British before us, cannot just think about problems within our own society. Since we dominate the world, not

absolutely but still enormously, we are responsible for the world we dominate. That, I think, is the greatest challenge for American education today.

American dominance is not new. We have been the strongest power in the world since World War II. But for most of that period we were challenged by another great superpower and another kind of social system: the Soviet Union and world Communism. A bipolar world has a particularly good fit with the American psyche. Moral splitting into good and evil is a general human temptation, but nowhere more than in the tradition of dissenting Protestantism that is so central to American culture. In the early days of the cold war Reinhold Niebuhr warned us of the temptation to see ourselves as the children of light and the other guys as the children of darkness. In those days we called ourselves and our friends "the free world," and the other side the "evil empire." It was a great simplification, especially since the definition of the free world depended more on who was anti-Communist than on whether their institutions were free or not. Nonetheless, there was a rough reality in that particular kind of splitting. A recent New Yorker cartoon showed a husband speaking to his wife saying, "Who would have ever thought the Cold War would be the good old days?"



The fall of the evil empire, however, did not bring sweetness and light; in many ways the world became more chaotic not less in the years since 1989. The fact that the door on which we had been leaning for 45 years finally and unexpectedly flew open led more to confusion than to a sense of triumph. The world was still a dangerous place, but how were we to understand it? Who are the bad guys now? Through most of the nineties we floundered about trying to find an answer. 9/11 changed all that. It was now clear who the bad guys are: they are the terrorists, and we, as usual are the good guys who will “win the war on terrorism.”

But who are the terrorists? Since many of them are Muslims, it is tempting to equate terrorism with Islam. Even though our government has gone out of its way to distinguish the “good” Muslims from the terrorists, many things we have done and said, including several times when our president used the unfortunate word “crusade,” have led many in the Muslim world to believe we really are at war with Islam. It doesn’t help at all that we have a very inadequate idea of what Islam is. In our eagerness not to appear anti-Muslim, we have tended to think that Muslims can be divided into religious zealots who are terrorists and the good Muslims who are just like us, just waiting for the opportunity to embrace capitalism and democracy, American style. But the truth is that Islam is a very large and diverse religion and most of its followers don’t fall on either side of our dichotomy. They aren’t terrorists, but they don’t want to become Americans either, nor are they happy to see a Christian nation occupying a central area of the Muslim world.

**M**any point is that the simple dichotomy of the free world versus communism, inadequate though it was, had a certain validity. Our present exercise in moral splitting, however, is wholly inadequate and is leading us into major mistakes and blunders. Our challenge as educators is how to help create a knowledgeable citizenry with a realistic understanding of the economic, political, and, above all, cultural complexity of the world in which we live. The future of the world is much more in the hands of the United States (and to some extent Europe and East Asia) than in the hands of al-Qaeda, or indeed the poorer nations of the earth. The kind of government we elect can lead the world into a new comity or blunder into one disaster after another. As we know, Americans tend to vote their pocketbook, and leave “foreign policy” as an afterthought. But we are now so much part of the world that there is little distinction between foreign and domestic poli-

cy. If we have to spend 87 billion dollars on Iraq now, and how much more in a few months, then our own economy is going to be severely affected. Our ignorance of the history, culture and religion of the Middle East is inexcusable, even in terms of our narrow self-interest. And how much do we know about Africa, or even East Asia for that matter? — places where serious challenges to us and to the world are already developing.

*How effective is service learning?*

**I**t’s not just cognitive knowledge that we need, though we are woefully short on that. It is also moral insight, and here too, Americans are sharply limited. Our central tradition makes us think of justice only in terms of individual rights and, outside the Catholic community, we have little understanding of the common good at all. Human rights as a set of norms are accepted all over the world, but in most of the world, and in Catholic social teachings, human rights include many social rights: the right to a decent standard of living, a good job, health care, etc. Only the United States has failed to ratify the United Nations protocol on social and economic rights, because our ontological individualism prevents us from even seeing them as fundamental rights. In our foreign policy we have of late acted like a lone cowboy, not building a general consensus, but declaring those who disagree with us to be “irrelevant.” It is already clear that the United States cannot run the world alone on the basis simply of our overwhelming military power. But how do we even think about justice and the common good in ways that will strengthen international institutions and really make the world a safer and happier place?

In short, how, in this deeply provincial nation, do we educate citizens responsible for the whole world? But if an effective liberal arts education cannot at least try to face the question of justice and the common good in a globalized world, what good will it be?

This paper draws heavily on the work of my colleague and former coauthor, William M. Sullivan, who is currently directing a study of professional education at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

I am indebted to Si Hendry, S.J., for the GC32 reference. This passage is beautifully explicated in “Commitment to Justice in Jesuit Higher Education,” a talk by Rev. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., Superior General of the Society of Jesus, delivered at Santa Clara University on October 6, 2000. It is further developed by several articles in the Spring 2001 issue of *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*, a copy of which was kindly sent to me by Joseph Palacios, S.J.