



A PHILOSOPHER LOOKS AT CALTECH

ABRAHAM KAPLAN, professor of philosophy at the University of Michigan, visited Caltech this spring as a YMCA-sponsored Leader of America. During his four-day stay he met and talked with Caltech students (above) 14 hours a day. Before leaving campus he was interviewed by John Weir, associate professor of psychology at the Institute, regarding the impressions he gained here. This article contains excerpts of his comments.

John Weir: How would you characterize the general nature of the student body at Caltech?

Abraham Kaplan: They're the most intellectually mature undergraduates I've ever known. They are also by and large the brightest that I've known anywhere; but that's a different factor. What I mean by intellectually mature is: whereas I'm usually able to identify a student's class and even his semester fairly well, here I've constantly been off by several years and always with a systematic error in the same direction. Whenever I think someone is a senior, he's a freshman, and when I think he's a member of the faculty, he may be just a junior.

They are most decidedly not "hardnosed," if by that is meant what I call "scientistic"—wanting to count, weigh, and measure. In fact, my impression has been rather the contrary. I have a vision of an intense need for development of their human side. What is the opposite of hardnosed? William James speaks of hardheadedness and tenderheartedness. It is their tenderheartedness—a great desire to feed their appetites for human warmth, aspiration for literary and dramatic sensitivity, and that whole spectrum of interest. For instance, whenever our discussions have gone in the direction of the nature of science, there has not been a particular response. But the minute I bring in God, or morals, or art or beauty, there are 20 people who want to say something all at once.

Weir: You referred to this earlier as a hunger?

Kaplan: Yes, and I want to speak to that as one of the respects in which this campus is barren. I've been very struck by it in contrast to many other

colleges that are not just inferior to Caltech but are so by several orders of magnitude. I have been on many such campuses and been aware that there is a showing of Laurence Olivier's "Hamlet"; that the local theater group is putting on a play of Ionesco's; there's a string quartet playing that evening; there's a retrospective show of the paintings of Lionel Feininger. Here I have not been aware, in a massive fashion, of the visual arts, of sculpture, of music, of theater, or poetry, or, for that matter, of even dance and beer parties. So it has been a sense of austerity.

There was also a hunger of another kind which is not especially characteristic of Caltech, but it surprised me because you have less reason for it than any other place—namely for a direct encounter with faculty. I have been told—and even those who didn't tell me conveyed it quite accurately—that they have never had a chance in all their time at Caltech to sit down side by side with a member of the faculty and just chat about something without a formal course context between them. This is almost universal in American higher education, but in a school as small as Caltech and with your enviable faculty-student ratio, it ought to provide for many such occasions.

Weir: But it is often said here that all the students have to do is to knock on any professor's door and he's quite willing—even eager—to see them.

Kaplan: But the fact is that they don't. As an educator I cannot rest content with saying, "Okay, now it's up to you. All you have to do is knock on the door." The fact is that if they don't knock on the door I want to find out why, and I want to maybe remove the door so that they don't have to knock.

Weir: Would you mention a few things that could be done to improve the situation?

Kaplan: I would want to organize an important part of the educational process to have its locus in

the houses. The houses are now apparently a place where students eat and sleep and where they have their own lives, but not where they have a part of university life. I would like to see each member of the faculty take it for granted that he's going to spend six to eight hours a week in a house some way or other. And that he is going to be doing it not as something extracurricular and incidental but in very nearly the same spirit as in the classroom or in an office consultation—that is, continuing the process of intellectual growth and education.

I would also see that graduate students and undergraduates are thoroughly mixed in their housing. Students can learn at least as much, perhaps more, from one another as from faculty.

Weir: Do you think that our admissions or selection procedures could be improved?

Kaplan: Not for *you* they couldn't. You have so many students that are so fine, I don't think you can improve on what you have. But maybe it would serve the national interest better if you didn't have so many and let a few of the other places have a few. It would do *them* some good.

I find wholly admirable in every way that your students represent such a rich diversity of national and social background. I cannot overstate how significant a contribution that seems to me to be making to our life as a nation, as a society. The number of foreign students you have, the number of Americans of oriental descent, the Negroes, the number of Jewish students, the number of students that apparently come from lower economic strata—all of this creates an atmosphere in which certain basic values that are appropriate to a university are tacitly being reinforced every hour of the day. What is being said is that the one value that is being shared by everyone here is a dedication to the life of the mind, to the adventure of ideas, and that all these differentiations, which, alas, are so important elsewhere, have no place at Caltech.

Weir: What about our educational facilities?

Kaplan: I've had a little sense that books as a specific educational adjunct played rather less of a role here than they would even at quite inferior universities. But I hesitated to draw any conclusions, even if it is a fact, simply because the sciences play such a role here, and a laboratory is understandably more important than a library. Nevertheless, I would have thought that there would be two or three bookstores at which used books would be bought and sold. It isn't that I have any fault to find with your bookstore, which is as extensive as it should be, but I'm surprised that there isn't a great deal more. Around many universities there is to be found a little avant-garde bookshop where

there are books that have nothing to do with classes—the kind of place where coffee is served, and once a week there's a poetry reading with guitar playing. Now it's easy for us to smile condescendingly, but I think they make an enormously important contribution. I'd also like to import a little bit of Berkeley or a little bit of Antioch College, or Reed.

Weir: A little offbeat?

Kaplan: Yes. College is the age for intellectual exploration and experimentation. That's what off-beat means. It's entirely right and proper for a kid to see what he would look like if he wore a beard or a mustache. It doesn't mean that this is what he is going to do the rest of his life. But now is the time for him to try it on, to try on various ideas and tastes in the arts and the like—at any rate, to be made aware of these larger horizons. There's a kind of a grimness here at Caltech. I would like to see more of joy, especially because these kids are so wonderful and capable of the joy of intellectual life. I feel as though I've come upon people who love to eat but who have never tried French cooking or Armenian cooking or Japanese cooking—only that wonderful rare roast beef.

Weir: Do you have any comments about the absence of girls on campus?

Kaplan: I think if girls were admitted at the undergraduate level in considerable numbers it would make an enormous difference to the quality of the place. I'm not just talking about heeding emotions. I'm also talking about a contribution to intellectual creativity, to excitement with ideas. It is not a recommendation where I say, "Why don't we have some good-looking girls around?" But I certainly think that it makes a considerable difference in the unfolding of the whole person and in making use of all the resources of the personality in an integrated fashion.

Weir: We are about to enter a period of expansion in the humanities and the social sciences. Could you suggest some direction we might take?

Kaplan: There are in the social sciences and the humanities two directions that can be distinguished, although the line between them is blurred. Let's call them hard and soft. In the hard social sciences there is much application of high-powered mathematical methods—decision theory, linear programming, game theory and the like. The idea that I would like to put forward is that that is decidedly *not* a direction to go. What I would like to see done at Caltech is to have the social sciences and humanities of the soft variety. I think it will contribute much more; it will be very much more of a ferment. If you do the other, then all you are doing is keeping everything here the same.