

[1982?]

Several years ago at The Wilson Center in Washington, a great Polish sociologist and educator, Jan Szczepanski, shocked an academic audience with the suggestion that universities as we have known them during the last century would probably cease to exist by the end of this century. Most learning, he suggested, would be directly attached to, and conducted by, productive enterprises in both East and West. The only universities that would survive would be those that preserved the special memory and heritage of the particular cultures in which they were imbedded.

It is instructive that Szczepanski, who is in every sense of the word a modern and methodical social scientist, should call for greater attention to unique and special heritages, which are the special preserves for humanistic investigation. The humanists' world of value, judgment, and belief has always interested the best social scientists from de Toqueville to today. For there is a natural reinforcing dialectic between the hypothetical formulation of general laws and the concrete study of particular examples. Natural science itself recognizes the unique, the messy, the eternally variable quality of the materials used in each experiment; and, when that material is people, the particular features of each human configuration acquire an importance in their own right. In the study of human society, the object is also the subject; the things that count usually cannot be counted; and the forces that drive us together or apart always appear in unrepeatable configurations. Thus, the serious study of human society cannot exist apart from constant recourse to unique examples and special circumstances.

Unfortunately, the development of a massive, university-based study of the outside world since World War II took place to a disproportionate degree under the aegis of the behavioral social sciences. Abstract theories of development and modernization, psychology and sociobiology, tended to get

moral right suggested by Sakharov; about the deeper theological dimensions of ecological and environmental questions suggested by Solzhenitsyn; or about global pluralism that goes beyond brotherhood banquets to blood ritual suggested by Paradjanov's Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors and Flower of the Pomegranate.

A nation that produces three such heroes in an age supposedly without heroes may well produce in the next generation something undreamt of by the present aging leadership which has forced Solzhenitsyn abroad, and confined the other two to virtual house arrest in the provinces.

We do not have to drop our guard to raise our sights. An honest attempt to understand the other in its uniqueness can open up our ears to signals that many Russians might want to send but that few Americans are yet trained to hear. Even if it were true that the historic spiritual culture of Russia has been effectively killed and replaced by an imperial military one, we would still enoble ourselves in approaching it as Dostoyevsky bade Ivan Karamazov go to a West that he felt had perished spiritually in his own time.

I know that I am only going to a graveyard, but to a most precious graveyard . . . precious are the dead that lie buried there, every stone over them speaks of such burning life that once was there, of such passionate faith in their learning, that I know I shall fall on the ground and shall kiss those stones and weep over them.

At the end, I return to the beginning and to Szczepanski's somber warning that the future of the university itself is threatened unless it can come to be the bearer of memory and the custodian of shared values of the broader society.

I have not meant to prescribe some adolescent immersion in foreign art and religion but rather a mature balance between two equally demanding and mutually enriching forms of study--the search both for the simplification of general laws and for the complexity of specific human examples.

I would argue further and finally that we will not understand the values and beliefs of others unless our own study is rooted in universities that are willing to study more confidently and thoroughly our own values and beliefs than we do today in America. For the study of another civilization can only be securely rooted in institutions that are not afraid to foster deeper study of their own. A minimal core curriculum with a set of core readings on western civilization is in my view a necessary reinforcement, if not a prerequisite, for the mature study of the civilizations of the eastern or southern hemispheres.

Perhaps the greatest vision of humanistic culture in our own Judeo-Christian heritage comes with the alta fantasia, the "high fantasy" of the 33rd canto in Dante's Paradiso, which was both a beatific and a geometric vision. The ultimate task of the university in our tradition is still to find some unity within our diversity: to bring one out of many, e pluribus unum, and to recognize that the left and right halves of the brain are united in one fragile human mind just as the hemispheres are united in one planet.