

# BARBARIANS AT THE DOOR:

## A PSYCHOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL PROFILE OF TODAY'S COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

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# **BARBARIANS AT THE DOOR:**

## **A Psychological and Historical Profile of Today's College Students**

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*Modern psychology at its best has a questionable understanding of the soul. It has no place for the natural superiority of the philosophic life, and no understanding of education.*

—Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*

**D**uring turning points in history, colleges and universities act as microcosms in which we can sometimes see with particular clarity forces that are less perceptibly at work in the larger society. We face such a turning point today. The values that used to define higher education have been pushed aside to make room for others that emphasize vocational education and money-making. In the process, not only has the nature of higher education itself changed, but so has what we as a society value.

Educators generally see this as a shift away from a traditional conception of higher education in which the liberal arts were central, to a more contemporary approach that responds to the dominant role technology has come to occupy. Yet it is more than this; it is not an isolated phenomenon confined to education. The quiet revolution that has occurred in the education offered by our colleges and universities is a symptom of basic and far-reaching change not only in America but in other highly industrialized nations as well. The international emphasis on vocational education is a regressive change that marks, as we shall explore, the reestablishment of a primitive view of man and of a fundamentally barbaric attitude concerning the purposes of living. {19}

The progressive deterioration in American higher education, which has become particularly acute during in the past three decades, has been inevitable. It has come about as a result of commitments that took deep root in the fresh American soil of social and educational policy nearly two centuries ago. On the foundation of these commitments, American higher education has grown: At first its growth was stunted, then became warped, and now it has withered. The historical process we shall describe has been accompanied by a process of psychological deformity that has culminated

in an epidemic of narcissism and, its moral counterpart, barbarism.

As we review the history and underlying psychology, we'll find that its past has made the atrophy of American higher education unavoidable, while narcissism and barbarity have spread because they are *appropriate* responses to the psychological forces that animate that history.

## WHAT HIGHER EDUCATION MEANT

Higher education is essentially an ideal, an ideal associated with a group of values that for many centuries were thought both to make individual men and women better people, and to enrich humanity. Central among them were these two:

First, it was thought that some intellectual and artistic pursuits have an intrinsic importance to human life. They have no special utilitarian purpose, they do not satisfy particular social needs, they do not tend to bring financial affluence or material comfort, yet they are essential to a fully human life. They are of value in and of themselves, without connection to external gain or vocational advancement.

Secondly, it was accepted that there are comparatively few individuals who are well-suited to these pursuits. Only some possess the personal qualities of intelligence, discipline, dedication, and interest to cultivate them. It was, nonetheless, believed to be important to the well-being of a civilized society that some people devote their lives to intrinsic values of this kind. It was believed that among the students of higher education are some who are destined to become scholars, scientists, poets, artists, and religious leaders: men and women who can offer to others experiences of a distinctive kind that lead to a freer, higher, and richer level of consciousness. The world of pure theory, any genuinely aesthetic encounter, and prayer—these are experiences that can liberate a human being; they are the experiences that, it was believed, express human nobility and excellence. {20}

They lead to habits of mind and of practice that transcend the workaday world; their importance is wholly intrinsic, for they open doors to an altogether different quality of living. Their cultivation elevates man as a species, not only those who are members of its elite—provided that one sees humanity as a brotherhood in which those who devote their lives to higher values add to the measure of each. For this reason, when the ideal of higher education was current, even the common worker felt a sense of respect for the liberal arts, however far removed from them his own toil might be. His respect expressed a framework of understanding and of values in which his life could be situated and lived with dignity and meaning. He had a sense of place in his world, a world in which some learning was clearly “higher” and some “lower.”

Culture and leisure for the few: these are essentially the traditional values of higher education. It is a now rapidly disappearing vision, this cultivation of the liberating arts by a small minority who possess the required interests and skills, and leisure or freedom from everyday work. These are values not of our time, clearly out of place and out of pace with contemporary society.

Our response to an ideal—through allegiance that is given or that is withheld—is a psychological event. It is within this psychological, value-laden context that we should look for an understanding of what today's college students, as well as their faculty, care about, what they value, and what they don't. This psychological substructure is, as we will see, responsible for the decline of higher education, a subject that lately has been much discussed, but as yet not examined from a psychological perspective.

## THE DEGRADATION OF THE IDEAL OF HIGHER EDUCATION AS A RESULT OF DEMOCRATIC VALUES

*Materialism, among all nations, is a dangerous disease of the human mind, but it is more especially to be dreaded among a democratic people because it readily amalgamates with that vice which is most familiar to the heart under such circumstances. Democracy encourages a taste for physical gratification; this taste, if it becomes excessive, soon disposes men to believe that all is matter only; and materialism, in its turn, hurries them on with mad impatience to these same delights; such is the fatal circle within which democratic nations are driven round.*

—Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

Our society believes that there are three interlinked truths: (1) opportunity should be equal for all, (2) equal opportunity will yield equal results, and (3) equal {21} education for all equalizes opportunity and therefore brings about equal results.<sup>1</sup> This *myth of egalitarianism* has very little to do with democracy.

Dewey tried to place the myth in its proper place:

Belief in equality is an element of the democratic credo. It is *not*, however, belief in equality of natural endowments.... The very fact of physical and psychological inequality is all the more reason for establishment by law of equality of opportunity, since otherwise the former becomes a means of oppression of the less gifted.... [W]hat we call intelligence [is] distributed in unequal amounts.... The democratic faith in equality is the faith that each individual shall have the chance and opportunity to contribute whatever he is *capable* of contributing and that the value of his contribution be decided by its place and function in the organized total of similar contributions, not on the basis of prior status of any kind whatever.<sup>2</sup>

Individual variation is a condition of evolution; it is also the spice of life. Fortunately, we are not all the same. Our intellectual and practical skills as well as our interests and aptitudes differ. But misconceived democracy based on the myth of egalitarianism is precisely an attack on individuality. In our zeal for equality of opportunity, we have mistaken democracy for a commitment to conformity and uniformity, in the belief that only when men are homogenized is there real and assured equality: one man is then as good as any other as an interchangeable part in the social machine. At this point, democracy and communism embrace.

The main psychological force that leads to this veneration of equality by advocates of democracy is their manifest fear of superiority, fear of the discriminatory entitlements that it is natural to bestow upon men and women who, in different respects, are our superiors.

In America, the only evidences of superiority that we will comfortably tolerate are in sports, in the accumulation of monetary wealth, in military prowess and rank, and in show business. Heroes

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<sup>1</sup> Ernest van den Haag, "Gresham's Law in Education," in Sidney Hook, Paul Kurtz, and Miro Todorovich, *The Idea of a Modern University* (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books 1974), pp. 45-49.

<sup>2</sup> John Dewey, "Democracy and Education," *Problems of Men* (New York: Philosophical Library 1946), p. 60, emphasis mine.

in these areas do not threaten egalitarianism because the common man is able to persuade himself that he, too, could accomplish such things, if circumstances were right—that is, if the proper opportunities {22} were assured him, and possibly if he possessed the requisite physical capacity. Natural *physical* superiority can be forgiven in a democracy, perhaps because it has close and familiar ties with physical labor.

But, if we advance a step further, we tread on thin ice: The performances of outstanding fine artists, and here I am referring to virtuoso performances of classical music and ballet, though they are physical in nature, reveal a superiority of accomplishment that is too distant from what the majority can aspire to. They are intimidating for this reason and, as we will see, for another as well, because of the disquieting addition of the ingredient, “culture.”

The step from athletic prowess to intellectual superiority puts us in a markedly different universe of uneasy values. To be tolerable in our egalitarian democracy, intellectual superiority must be excused, disguised, and brought down to a commonplace level. The only intellectuals who are really acceptable in America are those with dirt under their fingernails, who speak like any Joe, who possess no unusual qualities of personal distinction, who would, in short, make good drinking buddies. A recent article about Bill Bennett, Secretary of Education for the Reagan administration, is typical:

He holds a B.A. and Ph.D. in philosophy and a J.D. in law, plays a deadly serious game of touch football and is a former rock-band guitarist who is at home with Plato, Shakespeare and Thomas Aquinas. The cozy world of academia never blunted his street smarts; the privileges of his education did not make him an elitist. ...[H]e not only read classics in Latin, but played on the school's winning football team.<sup>3</sup>

Bennett's higher degrees can be once forgiven because he played football, and twice because he played *on a winning team*. In short, Bill is an all-American guy even if he does have a few degrees.

Similarly, Nobel Laureate Robert Feynman was democratically acceptable because he could play a mean rhythm on the bongos, could handle himself in a fist fight in the men's room of a bar, made quips that entertained the press, and joined a Stockholm students' ceremony for Nobel Prize winners by making frog noises and jumping backward.<sup>4</sup>

The confused equation of democratic equality of opportunity with egalitarianism {23} particularly during the past thirty years has led, as we shall see, to a society that prefers the blindness of indiscriminate to risky sins of discrimination, to a society that favors laxity in its educational expectations and that unquestioningly repudiates values not closely linked with financial aggrandizement.

The history of higher education and the history of culture and civilization to which it is linked are made up of two kinds of change: we can discern some patterns that, for a time, endure, while the many quickly pass. One of the most fascinating challenges for the social psychologist and historian is to understand the reasons for this difference between the momentary and the comparatively enduring, between the ripples of fads and significant turns in the river.

As we examine the internal dynamic of higher education, we will see that its history has made two interrelated consequences inevitable: the deterioration of the schooling that American higher education can offer, and the spread in our society of pathological narcissism, and of its result,

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<sup>3</sup> Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, “Bill Bennett: Secretary *for* Education,” *Reader's Digest*, March, 1988, p. 106.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Grobel, “The Remarkable Dr. Feynman,” *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, April 20, 1986, pp. 15-38.

barbarism. This dynamic is strong and self-reinforcing. So much so, that there are convincing reasons to believe that the social and psychological phenomenon of barbarism is here to stay, perhaps for a long time.

## THE SELF-UNDERMINING HISTORY OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN AMERICA

*In a single year, America spends more upon higher education than all the people of the world, throughout history, had spent upon the higher learning down to the time of the Second World War. What generosity, how indiscriminate, how ineffectual!*

—Russell Kirk, *Decadence and Renewal in the Higher Learning*

From the perspective of the 1830s, the young American republic was enlightened and intelligent compared with Europe. So it seemed to French social critic Michael Chevalier, in his study of American society, *Society, Manners, and Politics in the United States*. Speaking of the France of his time, Chevalier says

Examine the population of our rural districts, sound the brains of our peasants, and you will find that the spring of all their actions is a confused medley of biblical parables with the legends of gross superstition. Try the same operation on an American farmer and you will find that the great scriptural traditions are harmoniously combined in his mind with the principles of moral and religious independence proclaimed by Luther, and with the still more recent notions of political freedom.<sup>5</sup>

{24} In retrospect, the schooling then offered by American higher education supports Chevalier's judgment. Consider the work still required of freshmen at Oberlin in 1877: The first term, they studied Livy, Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, Greek prose composition, and algebra. The second term, Horace, Lusias, Greek prose composition, and solid and spherical geometry. The third term, Cicero's *De Senectute*, Herodotus, German, and more geometry.

This solid, no-nonsense curriculum that trained both mind and moral sensibilities was quickly to give way before pressures that would mock Chevalier's observations. Some of these pressures greeted the Oberlin freshmen virtually upon their graduation: The forces of change were already at work in the 1840s, as increasing numbers of Irish peasants and workers came to this country. The influx of the many thousands kindled the fear in America that unless determined steps in educating the immigrants were taken, the settlers would bring with them the seeds of European class-conflict and despotic government. As a result of the perceived or imagined threat to the tender new American democracy, reformers like Henry Barbard and Horace Mann argued on behalf of national compulsory education, schooling for everyone.

This was to be the first nail to be driven into the cross in the making for "higher" education. From this time on, education in America, including the so-called higher education offered by its colleges and universities, would succumb to a succession of policies that in time would corrupt academia from within.

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Chevalier, *Society, Manners, and Politics in the United States: Letters on North America* (New York: Doubleday 1961; first published 1838), Chapter 34.

Consider. The task of educating the incoming tide of immigrants was above all intended to initiate the settlers into American ways, and so the emphasis of education quickly became non-academic. By the turn of the century, the schools stressed manual training and vocational education. Their aim was to produce *useful* Americans: efficient workers and politically enlightened citizens. Education in America henceforth would serve the interests of social management.

By 1908, the National Education Association was urged (by a group of businessmen) to include industrial and commercial subjects in elementary schools. Since seventy percent of elementary school students never went on to high school, the best schooling for them ought to be, the NEA pronounced, “utilitarian first, and cultural afterward.”<sup>6</sup>

By 1910, protests became more widespread that education should not emphasize {25} academic subjects, the ingredients of “a gentleman’s education.” Manual and industrial training were the needs of the day. Why the protest? Because the American public was incensed at the high rate of failure of its children in schools that still provided academically-oriented programs of study. The democratically-minded public discerned that higher education must be disassociated from “culture.”

A second nail was hammered into place. Education would march to the drum of “manpower training.” The interests of American industry would increasingly subvert the academic values of higher education. The college curriculum devoted to mathematics, the classics, languages, grammar, history, and rhetoric was transmuted into the baser metals of vocational education, citizenship, health science, homemaking, commercial English, secretarial skills, accounting—all valued because of their practical utility. “Culture” was to become more and more of an afterthought until it occupied no place in the minds of American educators.

It is important to observe that not only did the *content* of education change at this time, but, at least of equal and perhaps of greater importance, so did its *tenor*. Rapidly disappearing was the sense of *reverence* that characterized the teaching, and the learning, of the older curriculum. This reverence was not transferred to commercial subjects; instead, it evaporated. The shift away from a higher learning devoted to culture was in fact, looking back, a shift away from contact with values capable of eliciting reverence. The values of careerism and acquisition of money took their place, but reverence was a thing past. We will return to this subject later on.

In keeping with America’s democratically-inspired hostility toward social classes, American educators were mulish in their commitment to the integral high school: they rejected the European model that routed some students to the universities and others to vocational and technical schools. Democratic equality, the educators felt, was opposed to any form of schooling that discriminated between students who were “college material” and those who were best served through job training. The enthusiastic populace, in their celebration of equality, had discovered anti-elitism, and this mind-set drove a third nail in place.

The period from 1910 until the second world war was one of consolidation. College and university policy makers became more heavily entrenched in dissociating higher education from culture, and in enforcing a democratic, anti-elitist integration of manual laborers, tradesmen, professionals, and intellectuals in the schools. Belief in the value of universal compulsory education soon spilled {26} over into the belief that everyone should go to college, and, most importantly, that college should be *useful*.

Professor George Boas at Johns Hopkins was a glaring example. During the second world war, he argued:

If training men in trigonometry and physics and chemistry, to the detriment of the

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<sup>6</sup> Raymond E. Callahan, *Education and the Cult of Efficiency* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1962), p. 10.

humanities, will win the war, then for God's sake and our own, let us forget our Greek, our Latin, our art, our literature, our history, and get to business learning trigonometry and physics and chemistry.<sup>7</sup>

During the same period, demoniacal Harry Hopkins was especially eager to enlist higher education:

Every college and university should be turned into an Army and Navy training center. The women, too, should remain in college only while they are being trained for their part in the war effort.

High school hours should be shortened so students will have more time to work, especially on farms.... I can see no reason for wasting time on what today are non-essentials such as Chaucer and Latin. A diploma can only be framed and hung on the wall. A shell that a boy or girl helps to make can kill a lot of Japs.<sup>8</sup>

Once the war had been won, thanks to these and other more final sacrifices of youth, others had to be made.

Colleges across the country were flooded with war veterans who, regardless of their academic abilities, were encouraged to enroll under the G.I. Bill. Enrollments blossomed. New buildings were thrown up.

Unfortunately, in a few years, once the G.I.s were graduated, the schools were left holding expanded facilities and over-stocked faculties, which had to be filled and supported, respectively. The emphasis of higher education therefore turned to "recruiting" replacements for the departing soldiers. To justify their recently expanded "physical plant," and to maintain their now longer payrolls, the schools were forced, or they felt that they were, once again to put academic standards aside, and to engage in *attracting* students.

{27} In 1957, the Soviet Union put its first manned satellite into orbit. The Eisenhower administration was alarmed. In 1958, the National Defense Education Act accordingly was passed. {28} Funds were appropriated and distributed to colleges and universities across the country. Teacher-training and foreign language programs were given special attention, because the government associated them with national defense.

Here, then, the fourth and last nail was driven into higher education's cross. It was to be a nail of an entirely different sort. It was what general systems theorists call "recursive," since it comprised a self-perpetuating, or self-reinforcing, element in the "system" of higher education. — On the one hand, the departing GIs left universities with a need for students; on the other, the government decided to fund the expansion of higher education, compounding the need for new students. A self-cycling snowball-effect was set into motion, one that evades efforts to control it, and one that develops a mind, or more accurately, a mindlessness, of its own. As we shall see, this recursive phenomenon was to recur in different forms in the more recent history of higher education in this country. In conjunction with the other three nails that have crucified higher education—the convictions that higher education should be universal, that the education offered should be useful and not "genteel culture," and that higher education be opposed to intellectual elitism—a system with an extremely stable internal dynamic resulted. It is self-perpetuating, and it is

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<sup>7</sup> Russell Kirk, *Decadence and Renewal in the Higher Learning: An Episodic History of American University and College Since 1953* (S. Bend, Indiana: Gateway Editions 1978), p. xix.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xix-xx.

highly resistant to efforts to change it.

Caught with a host of student vacancies to fill, colleges and universities in the early 1960s found the public outcry that everyone has a right to be in college very agreeable. The challenge posed by the student recruitment problem was met by making higher education easier and more entertaining to students. The gates to academe swung so widely open on their hinges that the catchy and candid phrase “open admissions” was added to the advertising vocabulary.

Other events reinforced this trend. There was the civil rights movement of the 60s, followed by black power. They heightened our democratic sensitivity to minorities and the handicapped. Social consciousness was expanded and equal opportunity education resulted. Colleges and universities embraced a family of non-intellectual functions, ministering to the diminished self-esteem of the poor, the disadvantaged, the handicapped, and the downtrodden minorities. Higher education responded to its new calling by becoming social counseling and therapy for its students.

In 1965, Congress granted 848 million dollars to subsidize higher education. Funds were suddenly available for further physical expansion, for the training of more teachers, and for substantial student financial aid in the form of scholarships and loans. The upshot was that virtually anyone could attend college, without regard to aptitude, preparation, or dedication.

In 1969, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching asked the Nixon administration for greatly increased funding. Four billion dollars were appropriated in 1970. By 1976, funding would run in excess of 13 billion dollars.

The Vietnam war added another log to the self-fueling blaze. Legions of students enrolled to avoid the draft. In response, faculty whose social consciences were disturbed by the war eased their academic demands on students who, if they received the lower grades they merited, would become cannon fodder. At the same time, the clamoring students insisted that higher education respond to their personal demands for relevance and subjective gratification. The “new courses” that resulted, designed to pacify, lowered standards still more.

The offerings of “higher education” now included such tantalizing gems as Electronic Existentialism (the “philosophy” of rock groups) and Philosophy of Physical Education, embedded in the pabulum afforded by bachelor’s and graduate programs in Food Distribution, Packaging, Agricultural Journalism, Black History, Women’s Studies, and, of course, courses in the burgeoning new field, “Communications.” From LaMaze Methods for La Leche Mothers to Death and Dying and Hostel Management, it offered a womb-to-tomb varied diet, not intellectually nutritious.

During the decade of the 80s, leniency and anti-intellectualism have spread more quietly. Declining numbers of students have pushed standards lower still, as colleges and universities have scrambled to attract even less qualified students to fill their classrooms and wallets. Programs in classics, foreign languages, and even theoretical science have dried up and disappeared. As a mass, students and the vast majority of their teachers have turned from the more serious and demanding academy, its image lingering faintly in the haze, to the radiant, freshly polished idol, financial aggrandizement.

Attending college is now no more, no less than the most direct road to material gratification. Mass education is America’s springboard to economic development. The university has relinquished its control to the marketplace. Higher education knows that it now pays only lip-service to culture: its real purpose is to cater to students who want, more than anything else, to make money.

It has been a necessary result of our history. From the time of the migration to {29} America more than a century and a half ago, education in America, as we have seen, has been forced to respond to public demands that it be useful and responsive to the real world of practical and ultimately financial affairs. Its foundation was universal, leveling, compulsory education. Next came the dissociation of higher education from culture, from the essentially contemplative nature of the traditional higher learning that inspired a feeling of reverence. Elitism, most especially cultural

elitism, which would select university students on the basis of their intellectual and creative abilities, was then declared the enemy of the equality-sensitive republic. History has trapped education in a system of self-reinforcing feedback that has turned colleges and universities across America into cafeterias for careerism.

This is the heritage of American higher education. We turn now to look at its underlying psychology.

## THE PATHOLOGY OF NARCISSISM

*No patient I have ever encountered is free of narcissistic problems. At least a third of our patients have this as the leading psychopathology, the central one, the nuclear one around which the tide has to be turned. People argue with me and say it must be two-thirds. Has this always been so, or is this something recent? Is it only that our attention has been sharpened so that we diagnose it more, or is it indeed increasing? I do not know the answer to that but I believe that it may be on the increase, and the question is, "Why?"*

—Heinz Kohut, *The Kohut Seminars on Self Psychology and Psychotherapy*

In this century, there have been three main psychological consequences of the history we have traced, each contributing to bring about the next.

After two world wars against totalitarianism, Americans have been conditioned to feel a reflex-arc-enmity toward authority. Complete authority embodied in the state is totalitarianism, but authority also extends to the discipline we require of our children and fellow adults, as it does to the values to which we adhere and to the standards of conduct and competence that we respect.

In their rejection of authority, Americans over-generalized, and rejected all: values, standards, and discipline.

When the experience of children, or of adults, is freed from the regulating effects of authority, life takes on a quality of arbitrariness. We come to think of laws and standards as mere conventions; our outlook becomes relativistic, provisional, tentative, and ever subject to doubt, reappraisal, and re-legislation.

At the same time that American society, and most of the free world, acquired this antipathy toward authority born of a fully justified fear of its political consequences, the traditional sources of normative balance began to find themselves in trouble: religion, the classical heritage, and philosophy lost their capacity to elicit reverence. Respect for higher education and for its professors, the transmitters of this cultural tradition, began to deteriorate.

Rejection of authority and loss of respect for the standards affirmed by tradition led to a second psychological consequence: a spreading attitude of leniency that was camouflaged as tolerance: leniency in the home, in the courts, in corporate and governmental affairs, and, of course, in the schools, which concern us here.

At the height of the 60s, a pamphlet published by Stanford's first-year students, called *Freshmen Voices: Student Manners and Morals*, gave eloquent testimony:

Our morals, or lack of morals, show our increasing conviction that there is nothing absolute or dependable in this world, that nothing is real and no purpose is valid

unless we make it so and believe in it. There is no God, or if there is, the code that people attribute to him is only an invention of man. There is no country in itself worthy of patriotism, unless its ideals coincide with what we personally feel is just. And since Nuremberg, we even feel that a person must decide whether the laws are good and should be followed, or bypassed because they contradict what he believes are right.

The period of the 60s is of special interest to social psychologists because it shows us how children who have been brought up in an atmosphere of indulgence and leniency will turn in anger on their society to express their pent up resentment that the guideposts for meaningful living had been stripped away. The children of the 60s were looking for the authority that had been withheld from them, if only authority to challenge:

No one ever firmly said “No!” As tiny children are said to court punishment, that they may learn definitely what is permitted and what is not, so the college generation of these years probed again and gain for solidity, but encountered only flabbiness. Without vice there is no virtue; without folly there is no wisdom. The rising generation could not discover virtue or vice, wisdom or folly: only the phrase of empty consolation: “Do your own thing.” Without authority, the world was meaningless.<sup>9</sup>

{31} The loss of established sources of human values together with the epidemic of leniency led to a third psychological consequence. Clinical narcissism, the disorder of the self that psychotherapists and social workers increasingly encounter among their clients, goes considerably beyond self-absorption. It is, as we shall see, an *appropriate* response to certain of the conditions that have come to make our society what it is.

Freud mentioned narcissism only in passing, and in a sympathetic context:

[A] person who is tormented by organic pain and discomfort gives up his interest in the things of the external world, in so far as they do not concern his own suffering. Closer observation teaches us that he also withdraws *libidinal* interest from his love-objects: so long as he suffers, he ceases to love.<sup>10</sup>

Narcissism in Freud’s sense is induced not only by physical pain, but by chronic illness and disability, and by the loneliness and incapacitation of old age. Natural narcissism of this kind is tunnel-vision brought on by suffering from which there is no escape.

Clinical psychology’s description of narcissism has broadened from this early basis, in an effort to understand a specific variety of pathology of personality called “narcissistic personality disorder.” The main contributors to its study have been Heinz Kohut and Otto Kernberg.<sup>11</sup> The

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71

<sup>10</sup> Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” trans. by James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIV (1914-1916) (London: The Hogarth Press 1957), pp. 73-102.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Heinz Kohut’s *The Analysis of the Self: A Systematic Approach to the Psychoanalytic Treatment of Narcissistic Personality Disorders* (New York: International Universities Press 1971); *The Restoration of the Self* (Madison, Conn.: International Universities Press 1977); and *The Kohut Seminars on Self Psychology and Psychotherapy with Adolescents and Young Adults*, ed. Miriam Elson (New York: W.W. Norton 1987); Otto Kernberg’s *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism* (New York: Jason Aronson 1975); *Internal World and External Reality* (New York: Jason Aronson 1980); and *Severe Personality Disorders* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press 1984).

pathology of narcissism is most effectively understood if we appreciate both how a person develops the condition, and why it is considered to be a disorder or illness.

Clinical narcissism, which I will refer to simply as ‘narcissism’ from here on, is {32} thought to arise as a result of a childhood trauma that drives the child to build rigid fortifications to protect against further pain. In time, these defenses wall the person off from others.

Alternatively, it has been suggested that narcissism comes about in reaction, or as a result of subjugation, to the twisted unreality of a “schizophrenogenic parent.” The child attempts to insulate himself from the parents’, most often the mother’s, confused and conflicting demands, expectations, and distorted style of communication, and isolates himself in a world of his own.

A third hypothesis has gained wide acceptance. It claims that narcissism develops when a child is raised without “confirming” or “mirroring” experience. Again, it is usually the mother who plays the dominant family role: When she is herself self-absorbed, she sees her child as an extension of herself, and so does not really respond to the child at all, but only to her own projected needs. Typically, the child experiences an alternately suffocating and cold/indifferent mother. The father often is absent, physically or emotionally; he either is just not there, but, e.g., always is at work, or else he distances himself from the family, and remains emotionally uninvolved. The result is a child whose early needs for acceptance and affirmation as a separate and unique person fail to be satisfied. He then develops a set of symptoms associated with his deficient self of self.

Writing in the 60s, before the diagnostic vocabulary of narcissism had been honed, psychologist Salvador Maddi observed:

All you need to develop a premorbid identity is to grow up around people in significant relationship to you who value only some aspects of you, who believe in social roles and biological needs as the only defining pressures of life, and who are either afraid of active symbolization, imagination, and judgment, or see no particular relevance of these processes to living. Have these significant people act on their views in interactions with the child, and he will develop a premorbid identity.<sup>12</sup>

Before we look at the symptoms that characterize narcissism, it is worth noticing that the three explanations of the condition agree on one thing: that the early experience of the child leads him to erect barriers to further pain. This self-isolation is at the heart of the disorder.

{33} If one were to make a composite portrait of the narcissistic personality from the work of its main contributors, it would look like this:

We are first struck by his or her intense preoccupation with the self. Behind this surface aspect of self-absorption, his feelings are blunted; his perception of the world is flat and monotonous. He is driven to seek stimulation, “to make life feel real,” and so tends to wear masks, to lie, to deny, to blame, and wish for power and infallibility. Megawatt rock music fills his need for a bombardment of noise that can drown out or mask the dullness he feels, what Russell Kirk has called “the tyranny of the auditory nerves.”

[T]he scholar’s lamp...glows uncertainly in the blast of cacophony.... Within nearly all

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For a more general description of clinical narcissism, see V. Siomopoulos, “Narcissistic Personality Disorders: Clinical Features,” *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, Vol. XLII, No. 2, April, 1988, pp. 240-253; Steven J. Bartlett, “Narcissism and Philosophy,” *Methodology and Science*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 1986, pp. 18-26, and M. Scott Peck’s *The People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1983).

<sup>12</sup> Salvador R. Maddi, “The Existential Neurosis,” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, vol. 72, no. 4, 1967, pp. 311-325.

the dormitories and fraternities of the typical American campus, cacophony triumphs insanely.<sup>13</sup>

The narcissist tries, in short, to compensate through excited hypervitality and self-stimulation for a feeling of inner depression, apathy, and deadness.

Because of a feeling of purposelessness, he seeks comfort in conformity. His “chameleon personality” yearns to be “just like others”; only then does he feel affirmed, stable, real.

He is attracted to the famous. He seems to gain a strengthened sense of self and personal value through the admiration he directs toward celebrities whom he sees as extensions of himself. Our society’s celebration of the celebrity originates here. But the mirage cannot be sustained: Celebrities “have more” than he does. Their lives are therefore fuller, more real. Like Envy in *Doctor Faustus*, he asks “Why shouldst thou sit, and I stand?” He yearns for the trappings of affluence, for affluence encourages the unexamined life. He is a yuppie at heart.

External demands are an unwelcome drain on his energy, and so he evades personal accountability and the judgment of others. As a student, and later on in life, he seeks the path of least resistance, and best the path that can pacify and entertain. He wants less work, but even more he wants to evade judgment of its quality.

His psychological world is painfully confined to immediate experience. He cannot appreciate what came before the self—that is, history—or what will come after him—the world he will leave to his descendents. For him, history and the future do not exist. He cannot reconcile the demands of the fleeting moment with {34} the sometimes vaguely imagined permanent things that require an attention and care that transcend his cramped world.

Enduring personal relationships—friendships, love affairs, and marriage—demand more than he can give. His sense of self never solidifies and integrates; the earth moves beneath his feet and he is constantly unsettled by the demands of new experience. More than anything else, he is driven by the desire to be accepted and admired by others. He therefore invests his emotional energy in external appearances, extensions of himself. He focuses on money and on career, the two yardsticks that our society esteems to measure personal worth. Career advancement and monetary success are expressly *public* ratifications of a person’s value. The narcissist hopes to find personal affirmation in the public spectacle of material success.

These, then, are some of the main characteristics of narcissism. They describe a condition that most psychologists today judge to be an illness, a disorder of the personality. Like a physical illness, narcissism is both incapacitating and contagious. It constricts a person’s world, undermines his personal relationships, and forces him into a partial and embittering existence that can never satisfy his hunger for individual acceptance and confirmation. The narcissism that affects America is a disability that constrains a person to perpetual dissimulation, to living a life pretending that a shallow existence of social mimicry and material acquisition is full. Like certain other emotional disorders, narcissism is contagious—that is to say, a narcissistic mother or father will tend to recreate in the upbringing of a child the very conditions that emotionally isolated the parent.

We have traced the outlines of nearly two centuries of the history of higher education in America, and we have sketched a portrait of clinical narcissism. The connections between the two are unmistakable: Our society’s history has favored egalitarian homogeneity. It has removed culture from public consciousness and appreciation in its single-minded devotion to utility. It has vigorously opposed cultural elitism, which is, after all, despite its unfortunate association with unnecessary

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<sup>13</sup> Russell Kirk, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

snobbery, a public expression of a scale of values with a clearly defined sense of “higher” and “lower.”

Not very long ago, Americans and Europeans, like any civilized people, realized that the spectrum from philosopher to menial laborer revealed something important about human life and about the values that make living worthwhile. The distance separating the contemplative from the manual life was conceived not in terms of a leveled range of job descriptions as it is now, but it expressed a {35} hierarchy in which reverence for certain values was natural and meaningful. Culture has ceased to be an *axis mundi*. We have yet to find another that gives men and women direction in living. In place of culture, we have placed career and money, and even here we are loath to recognize that some ways of amassing money are inherently more meaningful than others. And yet, “working as a brain surgeon is almost certainly more meaningful than working as a salesman of used cars.”<sup>14</sup>

When the sense of reverence and respect to which I refer is lost, higher education, on the one hand, is brought low; on the other, narcissism is made to spread. Higher education in which the meaning of ‘higher’ is drained of meaning reinforces on the social level the same phenomenon that American family life engenders on an individual level. Our sham education takes neglected children who know only leniency, and produces sham people—narcissistic, incomplete people who are handicapped for life by their schooling and by a society committed to mediocrity, to adulation of shallow celebrity success, and, above all, to money—none of which can satisfy the narcissist’s emptiness.

If we shift our perspective from psychology to human judgment, we realize that narcissism is ultimately barbarism.

## BARBARITY AS A STATE OF MIND

*In the space of two or three generations, enormous stretches of the “Judaean-Christian tradition”... have passed into oblivion. The effective loss of cultural traditions on such a scale makes talk of a new Dark Ages far from frivolous.*

—Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*

To call a man a barbarian is to indict him for lack of civilization, for lack of cultivation, for lack of culture. Barbarity is more than the poverty of a loincloth—our clothes have evolved—it is a state of mind. The ancient Greeks and Romans used the term to deprecate men outside their civilization who lived in primitive conditions, but, in particular and more importantly, to name those with no sympathy for culture.

{36} Culture is linked to *cultus*, to a public sense of respect and devotion toward a source of value that lies beyond the satisfaction of immediate human wants and needs. Culture is free from practical considerations: To be cultivated is to possess a refinement that puts mundane reality in its place, in perspective. It is, in a sense, to have one’s head in the clouds while walking on the earth. It is an attitude: it does not derogate the importance of practical things—it is important to emphasize

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<sup>14</sup> Ayala Pines and Elliot Aronson, *Career Burnout: Causes and Cures* (New York: The Free Press 1988), p. 138. The authors argue that our society’s failure to admit such discriminations is at the basis of much career burnout.

this—but neither is it their servant.

Culture is man's link between a world of mortality, finitude, work and everyday care, and a world of freedom from these burdens. *Cultus* refers to man's capacity to step beyond the immediate and the mundane. Divine worship makes it possible for him to take this step, as do the liberating arts—philosophy, poetry, fine art, music, and pure theoretical research.

The man for whom this world of freedom from utility does not exist is trapped in barbarity. His shrunken sphere of concerns is limited to the satisfaction of his immediate biological needs and desires. The only growth of perspective that can be expected of him is that he may develop an anxiety concerning the future satisfaction of those same immediate needs and wants. The result—"the barbarian with a pension plan"—is no more of a contradiction in terms than is "squirrel that stores nuts." Neither the nuts nor the pension elevates.

Barbarity is an impoverishment of mind. It is an exclusive preoccupation with material gratification. It is a blindness to the feelings and autonomy of others. It is a lack of sensibility. And it is all that follows from these: savagery of manners and a desire for stimulation, the excitement of violence and of sex, and a sufficiently loud throb in music to permeate and exhilarate a dulled consciousness.

It isn't necessary for us to translate this meaning of barbarism to a higher level to see that today's college students, as a group, exhibit all of its defining characteristics. But then, outside of the ivy covered walls, so does most of the society at large.

## THE MEDIOCRE MAN, THE NEW BARBARIAN

Mediocrity is an intellectual impairment. The medieval Scholastics would have called it a state of impoverishment of the soul, an ignorant or willful confinement of vision that glorifies the trivial, the fatuous, the superficial.

Modern psychology does not yet include mediocrity among its clinical {37} categories,<sup>15</sup> yet there can be no doubt that it is a stultifying and infectious disorder that permanently disables. Mediocrity is a blindness not of the eyes, but of the mind, and in particular of that part of the mind in which our special cares and sympathies take up residence. Mediocrity is a disability of values.

The blindness of mediocrity is reflexive, that is to say, when men and women have this blindness, they cannot, for their very blindness, see that they are blind.<sup>16</sup> The world of their cares is hermetic, exclusionary of all that does not gratify consumption, provide an adrenaline fix, or act as a soporific. In short, for mediocre man, culture does not and cannot exist.

If we extend the diagnostic vocabulary of clinical practice to include mediocritized consciousness, today's disjointed pieces of the puzzle of higher education become easier to fit together. Assembled, they might look like this:

American education is controlled by an egalitarian distortion of democracy that flattens individual differences and glosses over distinctions. American family life is driven by the themes of money and career. They feed parental narcissism, which widens the emotional distance to children

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<sup>15</sup> The medieval moral theologians, however, *did* identify an impoverishment and illness of the soul, which they called *acedia*. The author has argued that the medieval conception of *acedia* tells us a good deal about the increasing incidence in our society of a certain type of work-engendered depression. See the author's "*Acedia: The Etiology of Work-Engendered Depression*," *New Ideas in Psychology*, (forthcoming).

<sup>16</sup> Newman's words for the self-inflicted blindness of religious dogma, referring to Catholics' views of education in England during the first half of the last century.

who are raised in an atmosphere of neglect and permissiveness. Family discipline and its social equivalent in the justice of the courts are fumbling affairs of leniency rationalized as tolerance. Caught in this web of laxity, indiscrimination, and materialism, the young, by the time they are ready to enter college, have established within themselves a mental fixity born of fear and disorientation that is strikingly narcissistic in its monadic self-encapsulation, in its fear and resentment of authority, and in its conformist rigidity and intellectual lassitude.

The result is the high tech barbarian: rude, without sympathy for culture, crude in his tastes, raucous in his behavior, enthralled by the loud pulse of his music, and devoted to the accumulation of megabucks and the amassment of the shining baubles of tawdry affluence.

When these tatters appear to us as Brooks Brothers suits of success that complement the musk-scented, year-long tan of the mediocre man, a new world beckons. It is a world in which the ideal of higher education can have no place.

{38} As with today's minorities, the handicapped, the disadvantaged, and the deficient, we are tempted to situate the barbarity of college students within a framework of egalitarian charity. We contentedly locate the failure of individual responsibility in these three areas: environment, heredity, and disease. The first serves to dilute individual incapacity and deficiency by spreading them thinly over a culpable environment: in this way, we environmentalize undesirable traits. The second, heredity, allows us to geneticize them when they will not abide reduction to environmental causality. The third, attacked by anti-medical psychiatrist Thomas Szasz, empowers us to label "a disease" what does not fit society's proprietary interests.

And so where once we had criminals, bad students, and censurable behavior, we now identify groups of the socially handicapped, culturally disadvantaged, and functionally impaired. We talk of "high risk students" when we mean those who will probably flunk out or drop out. Depending on the nature of the affliction, special therapists are needed to cope with the pertinent impairments and disorders.

No one is *unable* to do anything any more.

We live in an age that, in these sophisticated and camouflaged ways, denies the existence of individual responsibility. Like mediocrity itself, this denial and dishonesty are reflexive, for they perpetuate a cycle in which laxity is the rule and no one is responsible. This of course fuels the new barbarism.

## THE APPROACHING DARK AGES OF HIGH TECHNOLOGY AND THE DISAPPEARANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Mediocrity and the rejection of individual responsibility are vicious circles that theoretically can be cut, but it is too late for this. The only institutional solution that could stanch the tide is to place responsibility on college students and on their universities: that is, to brick up most of the breached doorway and to restrict passage to the comparatively few who are qualified and motivated, directing the rest to vocational schools. It would mean a reinstatement of curricular requirements and the de-trivialization of higher degrees.

Ironically, what is missing in our institutions of higher learning and in our homes reflects our opposition, born of a hyperexcited enthusiasm for social equality, to any semblance of elitism. What is missing, ultimately, is that particular species of elitism, of hierarchical valuation, that goes with a recognition of values whose origin is trans-personal. When right and wrong, better and worse, beautiful and {39} ugly are meaningful in their own right, when we realize that not all is attributable to the eye of the beholder, higher education can get on with its proper task of cultivating and

communicating culture, leaving the marketplace to take care of itself.

The elitism that we lack out of fear of social differentiation is identical to reverence for culture, reverence, that is, for certain values that give meaning to the phrase ‘higher learning’ by putting the world of daily cares in perspective. Without the vision of these higher and fragile things, meaningful living degenerates into crass and disoriented barbarism. When these higher values elicit our respect, a derivative respect is born automatically toward those who transmit culture to us. Then, and only then, can we *choose* the genuinely “higher” learning they represent.

This is elitism, in the original meaning of the Latin *eligere*, to choose. It is not antithetical to democracy, but it *is* incompatible with a society whose indiscrimination has set it adrift in a cultureless sea of narcissistic self-aggrandizement.

The myth of egalitarianism stands in the way of a reawakening of culture. Openness, homogeneity, and indiscrimination have impassioned our society; not only will we not question our commitments to devaluation, we possess the blindly willful pride of narcissists.

Quarry the granite rock with razors, or moor the vessel with a thread of silk;  
then you may hope with such keen and delicate instruments as human  
knowledge and human reason to contend with those giants, the passion and  
pride of man.<sup>17</sup>

And besides, it would be too expensive. Our universities, which have grown fat on open admissions, grade inflation,<sup>18</sup> and usurious mass-printed degrees, will resist any effort to restrict the hoards flowing through their doors.

The economic momentum is too great to countenance change away from “universal higher education,” the oxymoron that names the great travesty of academia. Individual responsibility exacts too many costs, and the material benefits are simply not there. To oppose mediocrity, one must fly in the face of misguided democracy’s fear of cultural discrimination. To resist the momentum is simply too much to ask.

The deck is stacked against the ideal of higher education. We have discarded the natural elitism of unequal ability. And we have discarded the non-utilitarian {40} values of the *artes liberales*; they have been squeezed out in our fervent embrace of money, utility, homogeneity.



Fads are momentary preoccupations; an age, however, endures for a long time. What is it that accounts for the difference between the transitoriness of a fad and the lingering character of an age?

What seems fundamentally to be responsible is the presence or absence of reflexivity, the recursive, self-maintaining character of a system that enables it to endure. Both a fad and an age have an internal dynamic. The dynamic of the one lacks equilibrium; it quickly burns out. The

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<sup>17</sup> John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (San Francisco: Rinehart Press 1960; based on lectures Newman delivered in 1852), p. 91.

<sup>18</sup> Post-publication note by the author: The dynamic that leads to greatly inflated grading that was anticipated in this paper has been borne out during the past 14 years since it was written. UCLA receives more freshman applications than any other university in the United States, some 50,744 applicants in November, 2006. The average GPA—note that this is the *average* GPA—of the incoming class for the current year, 2007, is now 4.30 (*UCLA Magazine*, October, 2007, p. 12), a veritable *reductio ad absurdum* of inflationary grading policies, still flourishing without check. The belief is now close to being universal, that so many children deserve such highly rated recognition for their alleged superior abilities. One should be reminded of the dictum, *credo, quia absurdum*—I believe because it is absurd.

dynamic of the other is self-reinforcing and so is self-perpetuating. A fad is transitory because the values and behaviors it excites do not feed back into and diffuse throughout those of an entire society. An age endures precisely because the opposite is true: A society's values and the activity of its members achieve a self-regulating homeostasis that fuels itself more or less efficiently. Lacking this, its reflexive inefficiency, like friction in a perpetual motion machine, ultimately brings it to a stop, and when that happens, a new age begins.

The barbarians at the doors of our colleges and universities are not an aberrant and passing phenomenon. They are the symptom, not the cause, of a self-reinforcing period of history in which mediocrity, indiscrimination, a mythology of egalitarianism, a denial of individual responsibility, a base focus upon money and upon work have combined. They have combined in a remarkably self-supporting, self-reinforcing way. The dynamic of this interplay of forces suggests the birth of an age, not a passing fad. Only other, stronger forces can perturb its equilibrium, as wars, plagues, and overpopulation do.

The barbarians at the door have now overrun the colleges and universities of America. The same is true in other industrialized countries. Higher education is history. The ideal remains, but the human response has died with only a murmur.