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# SWARTHMORE COLLEGE: IVORY TOWER IN A CLASS SOCIETY

BY Frank Ackerman '67

"Twenty years of schooling and they put you on the day shift"
Bob Dylan

Swarthmore College is entering a crisis. Ostensibly, the crisis is about Black admissions policies. But the roots of the problem go much deeper. The black students and their supporters are challenging the nature of the college as a training school for America's elites. If that challenge succeeds, as I hope it will, it will affect much more than the admissions office.

## EDUCATION FOR WHAT?

Like many students, I came to college thinking that "an education" was an abstract entity, unrelated to any specific job or position in society. I was a little shaken in this belief by the problems of the multiversity. Students there felt they were moving along the assembly line of an educational factory, being processed to fit into routine jobs in government or corporations. But even after seeing that large universities amount to sophisticated vocational training, even after remembering that many college students go to teachers' colleges, or technical schools, or other special job-training programs, it is hard to believe that Swarthmore, with its small classes, easily accessible faculty, and Friendly administration, represents anything other than a good place to get "an education".

Ultimately any education, even a Swarthmore education, will give you some skills, and not others. The choice of which skills you are given implies something about the role you are expected to play in society. Colleges like Swarthmore offer two versions of training for life in the upper crust. On the one hand, they offer a well-rounded liberal arts education, leaving the student able to carry on intelligent conversation about almost anything, but unable to relate to most of society. This is the perfect education for a nineteenth-century gentleman, a somewhat ardhaic preparation for membership in society's elites. On the other hand, they offer specialized knowledge of one academic field, teaching a good bit about the scholarly debates and theories of that field, and appallingly little about anything else. This is the perfect preparation for graduate school, which adds the final touches, and produces one of the specialists who are so necessary for modern education, business, and government. Neither alternative teaches you anything about creative art, social change, life with the masses, etc.

## A STRATIFIED SOCIETY

The facts are inescapable: we live in a society of glaring inequalities, of poverty amidst affluence, starvation surrounded by overeating,. The statistics, the muckraking, the studies are all available (see Kolko, Wealth and Power in America; Harrington, The Other America; and Domhoff, Who Rules America?). Unless you were born there, you will not make it into the closed circles at the very top, described by Domhoff. But Swarthmore has prepared you for membership in the level just below that, the elegant house in the suburbs, two cars, a respected position in your local community. On the other hand, Swarthmore does not prepare you to change things. Swarthmore students do not learn how to teach "problem children" in schools in poor neighborhoods (much less to dirty their hands building new schools); they do not, except accidentally, learn how to organize movements for change, or how to overcome prejudices about other classes and races.

We live in a hierchical society. In the army, in the factory, in the office, in the classroom, everyone follows orders. Your position will be fairly high up the ladder, where you give orders as well as taking them. If you are unlucky enough to be drafted, you can probably be a second lieutenant. With better luck, you can teach according to someone else's syllabus, do research on increasing someone else's profits, or advise someone important in government on how to carry out his programs. Your work will be complex and specialized, requiring considerable day-to-day latitude in the process; but the goals will still be some one else's. After you have developed some seniority, you may even be respected enough to suggest minor changes in the system. But within the major institutions of our society, you will never control the goals of your work. For this also, Swarthmore is an ideal training school.

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ACADEMIC OPPRESSION

At Swarthmore, as in the job that awaits you, you have a wide range of freedom in arranging the petty details of life. You can decide when to study and when to sleep, what to do first and what to put off. But you cannot escape a life in which you take orders, in which you accept and absorb the wisdom of the past. Someone else had decided what is important, and how much of it you need to know in order to get a degree and become a certified adult. For instance, it had been decided that European history, political science, and art history are suitable areas in which to offer many courses and permit student specialization, while Black studies, social change, and creative arts are tolerated in inferior status on the fringes of academia, certainly not suitable

subjects in which to major. Students are the proletarians of the world of pedantry, permitted only to choose a favorite corner of the library.

Like any social system, our system could not exist for long if its norms were always imposed by external authority. To assure stability, the norms must be internalized and reproduedd by each individual. Swarthmore students are subjected to a humanly impossible workload; no one does it all, and almost everyone feels guilty about not doing it all. When friendly, gentle professors ask you to do three times as much work as you can, when everyone around you talks constantly about how hard they are working, you feel that the failure is yours, not the system's. In Honors, the excessive workloads and the internalization of th e need to study reach a peak: you hear repeatedly that you are in an elite program, and get special attention, so you feel obligated to perform better than the average; on the other hand, many assignments are completely open-ended, and the day of judgment is as much as two years away, so you lose any sense of how much work is enough.

But, you say, the internalization is far from complete. True enough: you are still aware that an external authority is commanding you to do absurd amounts of work. But what do you do about it? Are you able to divide your week into a part that belongs to schoolwork and a part that does not, and then escape the feelings of guilt shen you are not working? Most likely not. More frequently, you have a very adolescent relationship with your schoolwork: when you are not working, you sneak away to the student center, complain to your friends about how much you have to do, how far behind you have fallen, how much you want to leave. And then, having sustained each other in guilt, you return to work. If a professor takes pity on you, and lightens his assignments, you spend more time on the other courses where the pressure is on. The professor soon learns the futility of marginal change, and returns to assignments as usual.

The school is not as bleak as that may sound. Swarthmore has many good features: it has a sense of community and a relaxed social life which are rare in the outside world, and a healthy tradition of political activity. But these do not exist because of the academic life; rather, they exist in spite of it, in the space and time left over. How fitting that in studying changes in the college, "student life" was one compartment, on a par with educational policy and with the library!

## THE COLLEGE IS A CORPORATION

Why does this oppression continue to exist? Why do students have so little choice of what and how much they will study? Simply because the people who control the college are content with things as they are. Swarthmore, like many colleges, is privately financed; and with finance goes control. A society which taxed the rich more heavily (see Kolko), a society which did not spend its taxes on war, might be able to provide public financing and democratic control of education. (This is not to be confused with the provincial oligarchic control which state legislatures (hardly a bastion of democracy) currently exercise over state universities.) But we do not live in such a society, and private funds are necessary. To get sufficient private funds, it is nedessary to have businessmen and bankers on the board of managers; it is necessary to have a president who can maintain the right kind of image for the school, and do a good job of fund-raising; it is necessary to maintain the facade of stringent social regulations, a gross infringement on student privacy. Most vital to the current crisis, the problems of private financing of education make it desirable to admit students who will become rich alumni, and to keep the number of scholarship(or high-risk or simply poor) students to a minimum. Since so many of the poor are black, limiting the number of poor students has racial implications; but the effects are no less cruel for Spanish-speaking groups, and for poor and working-class whites. There is much that can be done at present, much more than those in power will admit, but a completely satisfactory solution requires public financing and democratic control of all education.

COMMITTEE MEETINGS - THE OPIATE OF THE ELITES

There was a time when Quakerism, with its ideas of community and consensus, was a rebellious force in the Anglo-Saxon world. But times have changed. Quakers are now part of the established order, at least in the Philadelphia area, with a socio-economic status similar to that of Episcopalians. Today in Swarthmore, the consensus and the dialogue occur between the powerful and the powerless, and the outcome is never in doubt. Consensus between drastically unequal groups is an apology for the status quo, substituting unanimity and glacial drift for legitimate, open conflict and the possibility of rapid change. (See Cozer, Functions of Social Conflict, for a defense of open conflict.)

The consensus is evolved through committees. The mere functioning of the college requires an enormous number of committees. Many of these, like Student Council, waste their time making petty administrative decisions* are made by the administration, or better still, done by tradition. And, whenever a new problem rears its ugly head, new committees are formed to debate it ad nauseam. Selection of new committees can be extended into an elaborate ritual, requiring several months. Then, leaving time for several committee meetings, at the rate of one a

*-insert:while the significant decisions)

month, as well as vacations and exams, a whole school year has passed before anything could conceivably be done. The outcome of the committee meetings may well be a wishy-washy compromise between the administration and student members of the committee, in which case a new cycle of discussion will be necessary to force any further action. If a committee comes up with explosive recommendations, it is always possible to set up another committee to discuss implementation of the first committee's recommendations. The implementation committee can then recommend, after the unavoidable year's delay, nothing but gradual implementation of the least controversial parts of the first committee's recommendations. Observe the history of the CEP.

Truly, the process is a marvel to behold. On contemplating it, one comes to understand the depth of Clair Wilcox's characterization of students as "transient parasites". The committee process operates so smoothly that, unless you watch carefully, you cannot tell when you have been refused or stalled. You will simply wake up one day, about to graduate, and realize that the changes you worked for never quite happened. Small wonder, then, that the black students refuse to serve on any more committees until their demands are met. If they can stick to this position, they will set an extremely important precedent for the future life of the college.

## UP AGAINST THE IVORY TOWER: THE NEEDED CHANGES

Beyond refusing to tolerate the committee system, and putting their academic work in some perspective, what should students do? I can only sketch the broad outlines; the detailed programs and tactics will be evolved by the actual participants.

The primary purpose of an educational institution should be to satisfy the needs of the people who study and work there. The interests of society at large must also be represented, to insure that everyone has equal access to educational resources; but most of the control of any education institution should rest with those who study and work there. Of course these ideals cannot be fully realized until the whole society is transformed, but considerable progress can be made. More important, the struggle to transform society is as much worth fighting here as anywhere.

What are the needs of students, faculty and workers at Swarthmore? First, all should be considered adults with complete control over their private lives, subject only to regulations protecting the privacy of others. The concept of social rules, of anyone acting in loco parentis for college-age students, is repulsive and indefensible.

Next, education should meet the needs of each person involved, as he defines them. Faculty and other more experienced persons can offer advice, but each person should be able to make the final decisions about what he studies. Grades should be abolished; if necessary, the whole institution could vote to award certificates to persons who have performed conscientious work at the college. But the person who wants to study creative arts, or experiment in the techniques of social change, or learn about ghetto life by talking to ghetto residents, should be no less legitimate at Swarthmore than the devotee of physics or ancient literature.

Broadening the definition of education is, ultimately, the best solution to the problem of admitting "high-risk" poor students. A student from a ghetto or poor rural high school could contribute at least as much to a program in black studies, social change, creative arts, etc., as any of the overprivileged students who are lower "risks". Conversely, as long as the current definitions of academic work are maintained, the "high-risk" students will remain at a drastic disadvantage compared to middle-class students.

There are two types of functions which the administration currently performs, the important and the trivial jobs. The important decisions, the hiring, admissions, expenditures, etc., should of course be made democratically by the whole institution, with some provision for protecting the interests of society as a whole. The trivial work, the clerical, secretarial, and other petty administrative work, should be handled in the same way as the manual work necessary to maintain the college. A democratic institution, committed to eliminating the class distinctions in society, should arrange to share this work equally, so that everyone who works can also learn, and everyone who studies or teaches also shares in the unpleasant work. It goes without saying that such democracy would require revolutionary changes in the concept of education at Swarthmore. What kind of educational or cultural activity would meet the needs of those who, until now, have only been allowed to work?

The changes described here are clearly utopian: they could not be established, or financed, in their entirety, until society is drastically changed. Such changes are still worth considering, if only to illuminate the problems of our society and the kinds of education and work it permits. The struggle to change Swarthmore is only part of the struggle to create a classless, democratic society which provides a decent education and job to everyone, and shares unpleasant work equally.

Nonetheless, this is not an excuse for inaction. Though the fight cannot be finished at Swarthmore, it certainly can be begun. More democratic admissions- poor whites, as well as blacks, should be admitted- are desirable, as well as higher wages and better working conditions for the workers. Lighter work loads and more freedom in the academic program are entirely possible. Will these changes make it harder, or more expensive, to run Swarthmore within the present society? Of course. The only sensible reply is that these are the beginning, not the end, of what we want to change.

What can you do? You can act around the problems you face. You can organize students, workers, faculty, around the problems of Swarthmore. You can organize broader communities around the problems we all face. I have no instant program to offer you, only the certainty that to change America we need a radical movement many, many times the size of what exists now: liberal administrators will not simply read your petitions and grant your demands. Think of yourself as representative of the millions of passive Americans. Does change seem impossible? It is only because the power structure has been too little shaken, because you have been silent too long. Do those on the left sound hostile and irrational? It is only because they despaired when they could not count on your support. Does a life of commitment to radicalism threaten your middle-class security, with no certain result in view? It is our only chance for fundamental social change.