From the Platitudinous to the Absurd

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Henry Aiken’s gush of impassioned rhetoric has carried him from a position that he himself suspects is “platitudinous” — the word is his — to one that will strike others as positively mischievous in its absurdity. How is this remarkable feat achieved? Very simply. First he disregards the specific historical context in which certain campus groups, both students and faculty, are explicitly calling for the politicalization of the university, demanding that the university as a corporate entity become an agency of political, even revolutionary, political change. He then proposes an arbitrary conception of the term “political” so broad that it has no intelligible opposite in human affairs, according to which “to be is to be political” — so that by definition, the university, the church, even the family and kindergarten are political institutions. Thereupon he gradually slides or slips into a more specific, conventional conception of political behavior that in effect would make the political functions and concerns of the university almost coextensive with that of a political party. There is a complete and irresponsible disregard of the overwhelmingly likely consequences of such a program, viz., opening the floodgates to a political reaction that would destroy existing academic freedoms and the relative autonomy of the university which have been so precariously won in the last sixty-odd years against earlier conceptions and practices of politicalization.

On top of all this, he scandalously misstates the position of those whom he is ostensibly criticizing, including President Abrams. He stuffs figures with straw, burns them with gusto and sheltered by the resulting thick smoke, charges that those who oppose politicalization of the university therefore are, or must be, opposed even to the study of politics by or in the university, and that they cannot consistently defend the principles of academic freedom when such defense has political implications. This semantic obscurantism makes it easier to blur the distinction between the study of politics and commitment to political action.

Let me illustrate Aiken’s method by a reference to some episodes of American higher education of whose history, to put it most charitably, he is egregiously innocent, for he seems to believe that there was what he calls a golden age of freedom in the American college. (I assure you that those he thinks he is criticizing believe no such thing.) There was a time when American colleges were completely denominational — so much so
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that no one who was critical of Christianity could teach in them. As Professor Gildersleeve once put it: “The teachers were either clergymen or men who, having failed to make good in foreign missions, were permitted to try their hands on the young barbarians at home.” In some colleges no one could teach unless he was a Baptist, and in others unless he subscribed to some specific dogmas and techniques of Baptism. When the proposal was made to de-religionize or secularize the colleges, everyone understood what this meant. It didn’t mean that religion wouldn’t be studied but only that the college as a corporate institution would take no religious position, that instruction would not be geared to any Christian dogma, that faculty and students would be free to believe or not to believe, and that if they were Baptists the college would not be concerned whether they chose to dip or sprinkle to achieve salvation.

What would we say to some spiritual forbear of Henry Aiken who objected to the proposal that colleges as institutions be neutral in religion, and addressed us in the following words: “It is absurd to demand that the colleges not take a religious position. For our real choice is between one religion and another. The very refusal to take a religious position is itself a religious position. Even those who urge the colleges to reorganize their curriculums to permit students to seek the truth or anything else – are they not making a religion of the truth?”

What, I ask, would we say to this kind of retort, that parallels Aiken’s view that the refusal of a university to take a political position is itself a brand of politics? I think we would say with Charles Peirce that there is such a thing as the ethics of words in given contexts, and that Aiken has manifestly violated it. We would say that he has missed the whole point of the controversy, which is whether it is appropriate for the college to make a specific religious or political commitment when its members differ widely in their religious and political views.

The illogic of the retort obfuscates political thinking, too. I believe, for example, that we should tolerate in the political marketplace the expression of any ideas. Consequently, I must also believe that we cannot suffer those who are actively intolerant of the expression of ideas, who prevent those of whom they disapprove from speaking by force. Along comes someone inspired by Henry Aiken’s logic who charges me with intolerance, too. “You, too, are intolerant,” he says, “just as much as the intolerant Nazi Storm Troopers and Red Guards who break up the classes of their professors. Everyone is intolerant – only about different things. In claiming to be tolerant you are guilty of bad faith! For if you were truly tolerant, you would tolerate intolerance. Since you are intolerant of intolerance – you are a hypocrite!”
What does it mean when we say that the university should be depoliticalized? Nothing so absurd as Aiken pretends to believe in most of his paper. There are perfectly clear contexts in which we understand and have used the expression without difficulty. I shall give two illustrations, one from this country and one from Germany.

As everyone knows or should know, American higher education has never been free from political controls of the most blatant kind. When I began my academic career, no one who was known as a Socialist and, in many places even as a progressive, could be hired. I could cite instances galore of a political, religious, racial and social bias that violated the principles of academic freedom. As Council Members of the AAUP during the thirties, fighting to establish recognition of these principles, we meant by 'depoliticalization of the university' that the university was not to penalize faculty members or students for exercising their rights as citizens, that the universities were not to make allegiances to capitalism or to any other social or political ideology a condition for membership in the academic community. These principles of academic freedom — reversing the whole course of educational history — gradually began to win acceptance. For example in 1935, together with A.J. Muste and some left-wing labor leaders I organized the American Workers Party with a militant socialist political program. Whereupon the Hearst Press launched a national campaign demanding my dismissal. To everyone's surprise, New York University refused to yield. That was a great step towards the depoliticalization of the university in America — Roger Baldwin thought it was a turning point! — for other institutions rapidly moved in the same direction. There are, of course, still abuses. But how far acceptance of academic freedom has gone is evident in the failure to unseat Professor Eugene Genovese, a public supporter of the Viet Cong, despite a gubernatorial campaign in which his right to teach was the chief issue. Aiken claims that if the American university were depoliticalized, Marcuse couldn't teach, Chomsky couldn't teach, nor could I. On the contrary: the fact that all of us, and even individuals far more extreme politically, teach is evidence of the degree to which depoliticalization has gone.

The American university is far less politicalized today than at any time in the past.

Here is the second illustration. In the late years of the Weimar Republic, the Nazis attacked the professional integrity of the German universities because of their failure as corporate bodies to condemn the Versailles Dictat — the peace treaty which unfairly asserted that Germany was solely responsible for the First World War. This was denounced as a betrayal of das deutsche Volk. It was charged, with a logic and language much like Aiken's, that the refusal to take a political...
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position, to become politically involved, was itself a political act hos­
tile to the German community, German education, and to German youth
who were branded as the offspring of war criminals in the eyes of the
world. And when Hitler came to power, his minions purged those who had
urged the German universities to remain politically neutral. That action
was properly called "politicalizing" the university.

Those of us who oppose politicalization contend that teachers should
be free to make whatever political choices or commitments they please
as citizens, but that the university as a corporate body should not make
partisan political commitments. What Aiken contends is that it is partisan
to be non-partisan. (The same silly logic would prove that there are only
nouns in the English language because when I say that "And" is a con-
junction", "From" is a preposition," etc. they are really nouns because
they are subjects of the sentence.)

In short, the "depoliticalization" of the university means the growth,
defense, and vitality of academic freedom. The "politicalization" of the
university means threats to and erosion of the principles of academic
freedom. By academic freedom is meant the freedom of professionally
qualified persons to inquire into, to discover, to publish, and to teach
the "truth" as they see it — or reach "conclusions" in fields where the
term 'truth' may be inapplicable, as in the fine or practical arts — without
interference from ecclesiastical, political or administrative authorities.
The only permissible limits on the academic freedom of any teacher
would flow from evidence established by qualified bodies of his peers or
profession that he was clearly incompetent or had violated the standards
of professional ethics. These are the current rules of the AAUP, which
now are almost universally accepted.

Today it is a fact ignored by Professor Aiken that these principles
of academic freedom are being threatened more by extremist students
than by fundamentalist bishops, economic royalist tycoons, and political
demagogues. For these students presume to determine who should speak
on campus and who shouldn't, break up meetings of those with whom they
disagree, disrupt the classrooms of teachers of whom they disapprove,
demand the cessation of research they regard as not in the public inter-
est, and clamor for the dismissal of teachers whose views they denounce
as racist, reactionary or imperialist. On campus after campus, as the
New York Times editorially declared when Dr. Hayakawa's meetings were
shamelessly disrupted, these students acted just like the Nazi Stom Troopers whose hob-nailed boots and clubs broke up the classes of the
Socialist and Jewish professors.

A depoliticalized university is one in which all sorts of political
positions may be studied, defended, and criticized, so long as the ethics
of inquiry are not violated. It is one in which the university as a corporate body may take a stand on public political issues that threaten the existence and operation of the principles of academic freedom. It is or should be jealous of its relative educational autonomy of the state even when it receives the support of the state. But this does not make it a political institution any more than a church which protests a measure that would restrict its freedom of religious worship therewith becomes a political institution. As an institution, the function of the university is not to exercise political power but to clarify and test ideas.

This conception of the university, as I shall try to make plain, differs from Aiken's not only in degree but in kind. But before developing these differences I want to say something about his descriptions of American higher education, past and present. He tells us he is no formalist. I don't know what he exactly means by this, but if all he means is that he is indifferent to formal logic, it is apparent enough. I am not a formalist either, but I believe that a little respect for formal logic would not be amiss. It would enable him to distinguish more clearly between a contradictory and contrary, which he obviously confuses.

If Aiken is not a formalist, is he an empiricist taking his point of departure from concrete historical fact? Unfortunately not, because on critical matters he makes up his facts as he goes along. Here are three major examples.

1. He states that the programs of General Education introduced at Columbia and Harvard were "quite simply to awaken the minds of students to the transcendental virtues of our American system and the wickedness of all systems that oppose it." This is sheer invention. I know something about the Columbia system and the men who devised and taught it. Almost to a man they were critics of contemporary society. The program grew out of John Erskine's "great books" course in the humanities and was broadened to include social studies which were actually basic critiques of the students' assumptions about American society. For the first time in the history of American education, Marx and Engels' Communist Manifesto was required reading. Many of the teachers and students in that program became the architects of the New Deal. For many years it was a genuine liberating educational experience. It received the approval of John Dewey. The major criticisms of it were not that it was political but that it wasn't specialized enough, and this criticism came from the scientists because of the great difficulties encountered in developing General Education courses in science.

2. Or take Aiken's charge that government and foundation grants have "political strings attached" to them. Just a few years ago, when Aiken was still at Harvard, a Report of a Special Faculty Committee...
appointed to supervise the operation of grants, declared that no political
strings were attached to any grant, that no government or foundation
financing had subverted research. It is interesting that some research
grants to Chomsky and other ardent critics of American foreign policy
have come from the Navy and other government institutions with abso­
lutely no political strings attached.

The subject is very complex but three things are clear. No one com­
pels a university or a faculty member to undertake any research of which
it or he disapproves. The faculty as an educational body has the right to
lay down guidelines governing the use of its facilities, the time of its
members, the limits of secrecy, et cetera. No accredited university I
know of accepts grants to prove a point of view in advance, or to incul­
cate opinions or conclusions specified by the donor. Subject to these
conditions it is perfectly permissible for a person passionately concerned
for the education of free men in a free society to accept research bearing
on the defense of the free society, without which academic freedom and
the free university cannot survive. To leave the free society defenseless
and vulnerable to totalitarian aggression is to imperil the survival of the
free university, too. Defense-related research initiated by Einstein in
this country and other scientists in England enabled the Western world
to turn back the threat of Hitler, whose victory would have meant the end
of all basic freedoms — in the academy and out. Neither Aiken nor I would
be talking here tonight if universities had been forbidden to engage in
any research “designed to enhance the (democratic) state’s military
power” during the years when totalitarianism threatened to engulf the
Western world.

3. Finally, take Aiken’s charge that faculties have no real aca­
demic authority over curriculum or conditions of tenure, that overnight
“the formal powers can always be reconverted by university presidents
and governing boards into actual power.” This is wrong about things that
matter most. Aiken is simply ignorant that in most legal jurisdictions in
the United States today, the tenure rules adopted by the AAUP and the
AAU have the force of law. President Abrams holds his post at the will
of his Board but happily for us Professor Aiken cannot be deprived of
his tenure either by the will of the President or the Board of Brandeis.
And if he doesn’t believe that this represents real progress and power for
the faculty, I recommend that he read Hofstadter and Metger’s The History
of Academic Freedom in American Higher Education or Upton Sinclair’s
Brass Check.

There are many things wrong with American colleges and universities
and you will find my criticisms detailed in my book Education for Modern
Man and Academic Freedom and Academic Anarchy. But Aiken’s picture
or map of academic reality is way off base. He himself says it is over­
drawn by an "inch". But on some maps drawn to scale an inch represents a hundred miles or more. Actually his is the wrong map of the wrong country. It tells us more about him than about the university. It proves that he is not a formalist, not a sober empiricist but — what shall we say? — a fantasist! And although he confesses — in an attempt to disarm criticism — that he may be "a bit disingenuous" he is obviously no judge of size or distance.

Basically, the great and unbridgeable difference between Aiken's position and the view he misrepresents is that whereas the latter recognizes the right and sometimes the obligation of the university as an unpolitical corporate body to take a stand on issues that threaten the integrity of academic freedom, Aiken would convert the university into a political action organization taking corporate decisions on anything which affects "the condition of liberal learning" or "the wide and deep aims of higher education." This takes in the whole range of politics from the income tax, housing programs, interstate commerce, to defense, foreign policy, and disarmament measures.

Listen to this: "The great and ineluctable fact is that no institution, given its ends, is more profoundly involved in problems of politics and government than the university (note: not even our Courts, Congress and Legislatures! S.H.) . . . Ours has become for better or worse a kind of Platonic republic whose crucial institution is the academy."

This gives the whole case away: We are not a Platonic republic but a democratic republic whose crucial institutions in political matters is not the academy but a Congress and Executive responsible to the electorate. This is the worst form of elitism, and smacks of Marcuse, not of James or Dewey. The university is founded by the democratic community not to engage in politics or influence legislation but to provide opportunities for the free exploration and critical study of all ideas, political and non-political, in the faith that this quest will lead to clearer ideas, more reliable knowledge, and indirectly to more enlightened policy. The university should be the locus of competent and disinterested investigation of human problems, a source and resource for the entire community, dedicated not only to the teaching and testing of known truths and accepted values but to winning new truths, broaching fresh perspectives and values on the open frontiers of human experience. The community does not look to the university as a political action group or political corporate body engaged in a struggle for political power by influencing legislation or laying down Platonic mandates for the masses of ignorant citizens. It looks to it, to be sure, to study political ideas, among others. But to study political ideas does not make the university a political institution, to study religious ideas does not make it a religious institution, any more than to study crime makes it a criminal institution.
To politicalize the university in the manner Aiken suggests is to invite educational disaster. First of all, it would lead to the loss of its tax exemption. Legal actions even now are pending against some universities which officially endorsed the Vietnam Mobilization Day by dismissing classes! Secondly, it would turn faculties into warring political factions, each of which would seek allies not only among students but among outside political groups – at the cost of genuine educational activity. Intellectual controversy, of course, is to be welcomed in the universities. But the kind of political controversies generated by concern with all the political issues that are construed by some faculty members as having a bearing on “the wide and deep aims of higher education” is sure to plunge institutions into educational chaos. The results of such politicalization are evident in some South American and Asian universities, and manifest also on some embattled campuses in this country.

Finally – and this is the greatest danger of all – the attempt to politicalize the university along Aiken’s lines is sure to inspire a reaction from the larger political community resentful of the political intrusion of a publicly subsidized educational institution. Political majorities, local, state, and national, will themselves move to politicalize the universities to prevent educational resources and opinions from being mobilized against them. There are some evidences of this at hand already. Colleges and universities will be politicalized with a vengeance. The first casualties of this vengeance will be the principles of academic freedom and tenure themselves, won after such bitter battles, and among the victims will be not only the Aikens – who know not what they do when they needlessly rouse by their provocations the sleeping furies of American vigilantism – but those of us who wish to preserve the autonomy of the educational process at its highest levels.

Aiken is blind or reckless about the educational direction of his policy of politicalization. What he proposes is to set back the clock to the days when the cultural Babbits and the economic Bourbons declared that scholarship and teaching must be kept in leading strings to good citizenship – except that his conception of good citizenship differs from theirs.

The view I oppose to his is that the university does not have to choose between one conception of good citizenship or another, that what makes a man a good citizen is no more the affair of the university than what makes him a good husband, that its primary concern is whether he is a good teacher and scholar. Just as I have no right when I take a political stand as a citizen to commit the university, so the university as a corporate body of which I am a member, except on matters of academic freedom, has no right to take a political stand that in the eyes of the public commits me.