

MULTIVERSITY: EFFICIENT,BUT THE EDUCATION IS LOUSY.

by Dennis Lee.

A new book by Nicholas von Hoffman, THE MULTIVERSITY, is subtitled "a personal report on what happens to today's students at American universities." What happens to them? These are some of the comments he records:

"The university - like the high school - rewards only those students who conform to its rules. Disillusionment comes quickly." (an administrator).

"The thing that bothers me is that it's so much like a machine, not only the university but the students too" (a student).

"The idea is to pass, not learn" (another student).

"Catherine's observation was one I hear often from the brightest liberal arts students; they had come seeking a beginning to learning, and had found themselves in a sort of continuation of high school" (von Hoffman's comment).

"Students who want an education can go to Harvard. It's cheaper in the long run" (a professor).

"It's the current fad among student writers to picture the university as an impersonal, soulless giant, but I wouldn't take it too seriously. Undergraduates have always been this way" (president of the university).

These are among the more unsettling remarks in a generally unsettling book. THE MULTIVERSITY began life as a long piece in the Chicago Daily News; von Hoffman spent several weeks on the University of Illi-

nois campus, and then set down a kind of collage of interviews, incidents, debates, and anecdotes. The result is humanistic journalism at its best.

Von Hoffman suggests that Illinois is typical of a new kind of university - the multiversity - which has come to set the pace in higher education in the past decade. Except for a few multiversity presidents, there is almost no one with a good word to say for the quality of undergraduate education in such institutions; other reactions vary from the impatient to the paranoid.

And as multiversities are emerging rapidly in Canada too - the University of Toronto is one - everyone from students to taxpayers has reason to be concerned. The significance of von Hoffman's book is clearer in the context of this trend.

FERMENT

Everybody knows that a ferment of some kind is underway at the universities, and that it is connected with the boom in student enrolment and the jack-rabbitting cost of providing facilities. This is the so-called crisis in the higher education.

But in point of fact there is not one crisis but two. The second involves the quality of university education. To anyone concerned with the education of people, there is a grisly possibility emerging from the current whirlwind of activity: The system we've institutionalized gives everyone an equal chance for a mediocre education, but pins back the ears of almost everything that good universities have traditionally encouraged.

BITTER

At Illinois, as elsewhere, many students and younger staff members make a bitter claim: University education is now a travesty. And since they're often among the brightest minds in the university, their reaction needs to be pondered.

Such critics usually have the multiversity in mind. There are dozens of departments, institutes, professional faculties; research projects and vocational institutions within its jurisdiction; these may range from a centuries-old faculty of arts to a new punch-card instruction course or a school for detectives.

Instead of working from a single coherent educational philosophy, the multiversity becomes a loose framework within which a wide variety of educational philosophies and methods can function, often at cross-purposes. To hold together such a grotesque collection of semi-compatible enterprises a strong administration comes into being, inevitably gaining more and more say in the practical workings of the place.

The multiversity gets most of its money from governments, and hence is constantly being encouraged to accommodate its programs to the priorities of state and society. And within the academic program, a teacher's priorities often place research, committee work and graduate instruction ahead of work with undergraduates. Graduate students, who increase out of all previous proportion in the multiversity, take on more and more of the undergraduate instruction.

SENSATION

As the multiversity developed only since World War II there has been little understanding, until recently, of the drastic transformation which was taking place.

Then in 1963 Clark Kerr delivered a now famous series of lectures at Harvard. They were published as THE USES OF THE UNIVERSITY (available in a paper edition from Harper Torchbooks).

The book created a sensation. It set out a coherent philosophy and description of the multiversity - partly sketched above - and suggested that no other alternative is viable today.

BASIC

No one can be literate about the contemporary university without reading this little book; it's the basic work on the subject, and will undoubtedly become a classic. Kerr's fine blend of candor, urbanity and cynicism reads with the same troubling fascination as Machiavelli's. The realpolitik of contemporary education is exhilarating or appalling, depending on your point of view; but in Kerr's book it is never dull.

THE USES OF THE UNIVERSITY is indispensable, but it has one great weakness: it sloughs off criticism of the multiversity with a few short, elegantly phrased reservations. A reader would never guess the passion and despair of the multiversity's critics. They agree that the multiversity is marvellously efficient as a generator of economic expansion; and as a post-secondary school receptacle; and as a tool of national defence, government research and the corporate empires. But it gives a lousy education.

On this subject, von Hoffman's THE MULTIVERSITY is the best corrective i've seen to Kerr's book. Because it conveys the texture of university experience with a great sense of immediacy, it brings to life the ineluctable lousiness of undergraduate education in a multiversity. It does so by presenting the abrasive welter of student and faculty reactions without translating them into comfortably abstract generalizations.

HYPOCRISY

The picture that emerges, as the earlier quotations suggest, is pretty depressing. A university largely dedicated to assembly-line methods in educating its students, and to paternalism and hypocrisy in regulating their private lives. Senior university officials who often haven't an inkling of what makes up student experience. And students who are mesmerized by the working assumptions of the system; who are locked inside the

climbed stances of blind conformity or blind rebellion; and who grouse all day about exams or fool, but go on accepting the notion of education as a spectator sport.

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