

THE HARVARD REFORM AND THE CULTURAL SELF-ASSERTION OF THE U.S.

Rüdiger AHRENS

Würzburg, Alemania

I. The Point of Departure

The report on *The Great Core Curriculum Debate* was published in 1979. It is subtitled «Education as a Mirror of Culture.»¹ This formulation suggests not only that Harvard, but that the entire educational system of the United States is of tremendous importance as a mirror of America's understanding of its own culture and can be assessed as the expression of national identity as well. In his history of American undergraduate studies since the founding of Harvard College, Frederick Rudolph writes that «curriculum has been an arena in which the dimensions of American culture have been measured», that «curricular history is American history and therefore carries the burden of revealing the central purposes and driving directions of American society.»² That peoples mirror themselves in their communal and political institutions and create for themselves in these organizational forms incarnations of their understanding of the world —this is not a new thought. It is the basis for the assumption in traditional foreign— language pedagogy that knowledge of the institutions of a foreign country permits inferences about what that country understands its culture to be. The same holds for the school and higher-education system of a foreign country, which is thus the legitimate object of attention in any educational involvement with foreign civilizations and cultures.

¹ *The Great Core Curriculum Debate. Education as a Mirror of Culture* (New Rochelle: Change Magazine Press, 1979).

² FR. RUDOLPH, *Curriculum. A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study Since 1636* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1978)

a) *Harvard's Special Position*

«Education as a Mirror of Culture» indicates too the position of preeminence accorded by the American public and educational institutions to pedagogical measures taken by Harvard. In the world of scholarship as well as in the American public at large, Harvard is the crystallization point both for true scholarship and for what a person can attain by academic and scholarly means in terms of new insights as well as secure professional status. That this is not mere conjecture can be seen in a comment Adele Simmons, the President of Hampshire College in Amherst, made on the reaction to Harvard's new core curriculum for its undergraduates:

The widespread reaction to the «Report on the Core Curriculum» reflects a desire of many Americans to believe that the academy, led by Harvard, is assuming an authority they themselves have abdicated and is taking charge of their children³.

b) *The Intermesh of University and Society*

President Simmons's comment not only presupposes Harvard's leadership role, which is based on its tradition as the oldest scholarly institution in the United States of America —founded in 1636 on the model of Emmanuel College, Cambridge— as well as on the reforms often undertaken in its long history, but also reflects the importance students and parents attach to university studies as the key to both expanded experience and upward social mobility. The term *in loco parentis* characterizes the proxy function of university education in America, for American students enter college at a younger age and are integrated by their extracurricular activities to a greater degree than are their German university counterparts⁴.

The responsibility of American universities to the greater community, which can be traced back to the spirit of the founding fathers of modern universities in the US —John Dewey, for example— at the beginning of this century, is a further distinctive feature of the intermesh between university and society. As the educational centers of the nation, universities must fulfill citizenship-training tasks which go far beyond traditional European concepts of academic education and university autonomy. This leads to the conclusion that the influence of German universities, which was especially strong in the second half of the 19th century, has not been a lasting one. Charles Wegener defines this function of American universities as

³ A. SIMMONS, «Harvard Flunks a Test», *Harper's*, March 1979.

⁴ Cf. F. RUDOLPH, *The American College and University, A History* (New York: Knopf, 1962), p. 363.

A. CHASE, *Group Memory. A Guide to College and Student Survival in the 1980s* (Boston, 1980), chapt. 6: Student Living: Whatever Happened to *In Loco Parentis*?

a dedication of the university's energies to serving the needs of the community which directly supported it⁵.

He thus justifies the manifold intertwinement of the universities with all sectors of society as well as the oversensitivity, perhaps, to societal trends and fashions that results in the constant search for the «relevance» of scholarly work for social progress.

c) *The «Crisis» of American Culture*

The upswing Harvard is currently experiencing with its reform is the result, too, of the insecurity which has been abroad in American curriculum theory since 1950 and has peaked in the consciousness of a «cultural crisis of the greatest proportions.»⁶

The search is intensifying for new and precise concepts of value to serve society and especially young people in college as guides. The scholarly world is increasingly turning away from the individualistic principle that sees in the pursuit of personal happiness and self-fulfillment the essential goal of education; the interdependence of individual and society and of societal forces is increasingly seen as a prime mover for the desired cultural change. The class structure of society, which in America never quite reached full flower and with the War of Independence lost its tie to the European motherland, today finds its correspondence increasingly in functional elites which, under great pressure to legitimate their status, watch over and advance high-technology industrial society. The Harvard Reform accepts the challenge this state of affairs represents for higher education and has produced, as we shall see, a new curriculum for the general-education segment of undergraduate studies which addresses the current need for values and goals in society at large and in the professions. The Harvard Reform renews the tie with the medieval tradition of *artes liberales* which in the US led to «liberal arts» colleges as general-education institutions in the tertiary sector.

d) *The Decline of «General Education»*

It is noteworthy that this clear affirmation of a general education which reflects today's problems is the first step in a Harvard-led reversal of the decades-long tendency favoring early specialized training and is certain to make its mark on other institutions in the tertiary sector. Adele Simmons

⁵ Ch. WEGENER, *Liberal Education and the Modern University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 33.

⁶ G. R. SCHMIDT, «Die Wert- und Zielproblematik in der amerikanischen Curriculum-Theorie seit 1950», *Z.f.Päd.*, 17. Jhg., 1 (1971), 31-54, p. 39.

cites the 1977 findings of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education: «General education in America is a disaster area.»

That the American educational system has dipped to this point zero is the result of a more than hundred-year development which, according to Frederick Rudolph, originates in a deficit in motivation for scholarly education following the Civil War⁷. At that time higher education had to be made attractive to a generation that could easily reach lucrative positions in a soaring economy borne by industrial revolution. The solution to this problem was found by another Harvard president, Charles William Eliot, who led the university for four decades beginning in 1869. His introduction of the elective curriculum lured the missing students back to college. This innovation, which was reinforced by the burgeoning of the natural sciences, brought about decisive changes in attitudes towards scholarly work. The interchangeability of courses and subjects came to be accompanied by the conviction that knowledge was compartmentalized and hence one's responsibility towards knowledge segmented. The justification for taking the path of least resistance was found in the sentiment that no educated person could know everything, that there was no uniform principle behind all knowledge. At the same time the interest of the universities shifted from the subject matter itself to the student, who in his pursuit of his not unselfish aims discovered the highly specialized professor as an unexpected ally and friend. The thus favored elective principle led to a professionalization of the university faculty in the form of an increased intensity of specialized research and to an overproportional strengthening of the departments, which made it impossible for the university as a whole to maintain a uniform principle of education and inflated the university's organizational and administrative apparatus. For the recent president of Harvard, Derek C. Bok, this problem manifested itself in the implementation of his general education program in the difficulty «to find enough professors who are trained to teach such courses and willing to make the attempt», as he put it in a report to the Board of Overseers⁸. He thus criticizes the overspecialization of the university teacher, whose famous «tunnel vision»⁹ permits him to ignore the larger context. The tailoring of the student's exposure to knowledge to suit the student's own perception of what he needed to know became synonymous with the American conviction that the individual has a right to education, to the pursuit of happiness, and to self-fulfillment. Nevitt Sanford, then director of the Institute for the Study of Higher Education, was referring to this adjustment of curricula to individual students when he wrote in 1966:

⁷ Frederick RUDOLPH, *The American College and University*, *loc. cit.*, pp. 287 ff.

⁸ Cf. Kenneth S. LYNN, «Son of "GenEd"», *Commentary*, 1978 (Sept.), 59-66, p. 65.

⁹ A. CHASE, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

Education in our society today is a right. It is a human right, like the right of children to grow up in a stable home. To deny it is to say that some people have no right to survive and to maintain themselves as individuals¹⁰.

e) *The Effects of Overspecialization*

The overspecialization of students and teachers effected in the Sixties and Seventies by individualized curriculum led to an inflation of course offerings and to the dissolution of the general-education element in college studies. Frederick Rudolph says it more drastically:

The death of the classical course of study opened the way to a curriculum burdened with such a diversion of purpose, style, and institutional form that the word *curriculum* became a concept of convenience rather than precision¹¹.

In the Sixties a normal four-year course of study at an American liberal arts college still included the following:

1. compulsory courses in English composition, a foreign language, and mathematics;
2. general-education courses with interdisciplinary introductions to world literature, Western European culture, and basic questions in the natural sciences;
3. requirements for a major;
4. distribution requirements, i.e. the study of subjects without a direct relation to the major.

Alston Chase points out that the number of general-education courses offered at Harvard quadrupled between 1951 and 1979, reducing the curriculum to the absurd in the sense of «the more options, the less real choice.»¹² Indeed, specialization in the guise of general education bore strange fruits, which were even cultivated by university administrations anxious to offer «innovative» programs to attract students and money. Kenneth S. Lynn names a few offerings from such «academic boutiques, into which trendy shoppers were enticed to browse»: «The Scandinavian

¹⁰ N. SANFORD, «Implications for Education and for Adjustment of Curricula to Individual Students», in Earl J. McGrath, ed., *Universal Higher Education* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), pp. 40-64, p. 44.

¹¹ F. RUDOLPH, *Curriculum*, *loc. cit.*, p. 245. «The death of the classical course of study opened the way to a curriculum burdened with such a diversity of purpose, style, and institutional form that the word *curriculum* became a concept of convenience rather than precision.»

¹² A. CHASE, *op. cit.*, p. 74 and p. 100. Cf. also pp. 101-106. 13 K. S. LYNN, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

Cinema», «Classical Music of India, Pakistan and Bangla Desh», «The American City in the 70s-Cambridge»¹³. The consequences, however, of taking this tack were profound. They were, briefly:

1. As a result of the bloating of their course offerings, the universities cease to participate in a pedagogical philosophy, a curriculum theory, which addresses the interests of the national whole.
2. The tailoring of the course offerings to the interests of the students, who ultimately guarantee a good measure of the financial survival of the institution, denies the existence of scholarly standards and encourages students to adopt a consumer attitude and satisfy their intellectual needs as if they were at Disneyland.
3. The lack of a comprehensive educational program incorporating courses from the different departments places the departments under strong pressure to legitimate their very existence, which in turn undermines staff morale.
4. The anxiety generated in the faculty and the departments produces an inflation of good grades, since the departments seek to justify their existence by being as attractive as possible to as many students as possible. The consequence is «nonpunitive» grading.
5. The discarding of a general-education program leads to the strengthening of certain departments over others, since they assume new responsibilities as a result of the delegation of educational authority. Those departments best survive this form of «natural selection» that concern themselves least with pedagogical ideals. Such departments view a general-education program as a threat to their autonomy.
6. The specialization in undergraduate studies is multiplied in graduate studies. Doctoral candidates especially in the humanities possess such a narrow educational background that they are sometimes hardly employable. In 1985 only about 20 per cent were able to count on a job in a market that is already saturated with people with advanced degrees. The 1977 Princeton Conference on «Alternate Careers for Ph.D.'s in the Humanities», which brought together academic leaders and life insurance executives, arrived at no practical solution of the problem these people face in a job market where they are not competitive against vocationally trained applicants¹⁴.
7. Potential university teachers face the same problem. Great numbers of applicants apply for the few openings there are —up to 500 for a

¹³ K. S. LYNN, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

¹⁴ C. RIGOLOTT, ed., *Alternate Careers for Ph.D.'s in the Humanities*. Report of a Conference of Academic Leaders and Executive Officers of Life Insurance Companies at Princeton Univ., March 10-11, 1977.

single position—, but they are often so overspecialized that they cannot carry out the duties they have applied for. The 10 per cent drop in Graduate Record Exam mean scores since 1965 is indicative of the fact that students are receiving less and less necessary general education¹⁵.

8. These changes in university studies have brought about a transfer of the pedagogical responsibilities from the actual course of study to the counseling services. Counselors must pursue the integral educational goal that the teaching and research sector no longer has in view. Great sums of money are being spent on such services¹⁶.

f) *The Decline of the National Educational Norm*

From 1963 to 1978 the mean score on the 800-point scale of the Scholastic Aptitude Test sank 49 points in the verbal part and 32 points in the mathematical part¹⁷. This drop led to an intense public discussion of the state of basic skills. The alarming inability of college freshmen to write a short essay in acceptable standard English or to perform simple arithmetic, algebraic, and geometric calculations directed the attention of the American public to the inefficiency of the educational system and brought about a back-to-basics movement. The disastrous situation diagnosed in the National Academy of Education's March 1978 report on «Improving Educational Achievement» may have contributed to the reform movement at Harvard, although the initiators of that reform tend to disclaim the connection¹⁸. Leon Botstein, the president of Bard College, who has written a number of articles on the death of good general education and the Harvard Reform, sees this drop in achievement in connection with the greater cultural crisis and with the alienation from which today's student generation apparently knows no escape. He makes the pervasive influence of the mass media and young people's shortness of memory and lack of motivation responsible for diminishing educational achievement¹⁹. Critical observers speak of the Harvard Reform as a «flag of warning to the

¹⁵ Cf. «Die Funktion von Tests im amerikanischen Hochschulwesen», in R. AHRENS, *Amerikanische Bildungswirklichkeit heute*, pp. 57-86, p. 81.

¹⁶ Cf. M. BAUS, «Beratung im amerikanischen Bildungssystem», in R. AHRENS, *Amerikanische Bildungswirklichkeit heute*, loc. cit., pp. 25-56.

¹⁷ R. AHRENS, «Das amerikanische Universitätssystem und die "Harvard Reform"», in A. Glaser, ed., *Hochschulreform - und was nun? Berichte - Glossen - Perspektiven*. (Frankfurt: Ullstein, 1982), pp. 397-423, pp. 418 ff.

¹⁸ B. O'CONNELL, «Where does Harvard Lead Us?», in *The Great Core Curriculum Debate*, loc. cit., pp. 25-42, p. 38.

¹⁹ L. BOTSTEIN, «A Proper Education», *Harper's* (Spet.), 1979.

secondary schools», as a challenge «to rethink the entire relationship between high school and college.»²⁰

g) *Other General-Education Programs*

It would be wrong to ignore past efforts to strengthen general education as a counterbalance to the specialization brought about especially by the natural sciences. The New Humanism movement after World War I, led by Irving Babbitt, T. S. Eliot's mentor at Harvard, was also a reorientation towards general-education goals²¹. In the years after 1919, the «Contemporary Civilization» program at Columbia was to communicate to college freshmen the new American self-consciousness as a uniform educational goal. These efforts have continued to the present day at Columbia²². Robert Maynard Hutchins, who became president of the University of Chicago in 1929, worked tirelessly for a reform of undergraduate studies. Many curricular elements of these programs resurfaced, unacknowledged, in the first Harvard Report after World War II, *General Education in a Free Society* (1945), which went down in American university history as a «Redbook». Just as after World War I, the principles of American democracy were to be rethought and placed in the center of attention. (It is noteworthy that the 1972 reform of the last three years of the German university-preparatory secondary schools, the *Gymnasium*, which divided the material to be taught and learned into three general areas, language and literature, the social studies, and mathematics and natural sciences, goes back to the concepts put down in *General Education in a Free Society*²³. It is not unlikely that, the most recent Harvard Report will also exert influence in Germany). And let us not overlook the Dahl Report, which a Yale study group brought out in spring 1971 under the name of its chairman, Robert A. Dahl. The Dahl Report, which was never acted upon, dealt with the balancing of concentration and distribution in the curriculum; it also introduced the concept of «lifetime learning.»²⁴

²⁰ Fr. RUDOLPH, «Harvard's Curricular Reforms», *The Berkshire Eagle*, (22.7.1978); K. S. LYNN, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

²¹ Cf. B. LÜKING, *Der amerikanische «New Humanism» . Eine Darstellung seiner Theorie und Geschichte* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1975) and same one, «Von M. Arnold zu T. S. Eliot: Versuch einer kommunikativen Literaturtheorie», in R. Ahrens and E. Wolff, eds., *Englische und amerikanische Literaturtheorie*, vol. II: *Viktorianische Zeit und 20. Jh.* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1979), pp. 143-212.

²² Robert L. BELKNAP and Richard KUHN, *Tradition and Innovation. General Education and the Reintegration of the University. A Columbia Report* (New York: Columbia, 1977).

²³ K. S. LYNN, *op. cit.*, pp. 60-63. Cf. also *Richtlinien für die gymnasiale Oberstufe in NRW, Englisch*, ed. by KuMi of NRW (Köln: Greven, 1981), p. 20. Cf. characterization of «Redbook» by A. LEVINE, *Handbook on Undergraduate Curriculum* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1978), p. 359.

²⁴ Cf. text in *The Great Core Curriculum Debate*, *loc. cit.*, pp. 79-102. Further texts of reform movement cf. A. LEVINE *op. cit.*, pp. 329-370.

II. The Aims of the Harvard Reform

a) *The Aims in General*

The origins of the Harvard Reform can be traced back to the thoughts Derek C. Bok, the president of Harvard, put down in his annual report of 1971-72²⁵. These centered on the function and reorganization of the general-education sector in undergraduate studies. Since the curriculum had been judged inadequate in the light of recent developments, Bok called upon the faculty to give some thought to the elements of general education within the university framework. The «Letter to the Faculty on Undergraduate Education» which Dean of Faculty Henry Rosovsky sent to the arts and sciences faculty members in October 1974 got the ball rolling. He asked his colleagues and the students «to redefine the aims and methods of liberal education» (Report, p. 1). In 1976 a commission led by Prof. James Q. Wilson and several subcommittees produced the Wilson Report, which envisioned a core curriculum for general-education studies whose essential characteristic was not the piling up of disparate courses but a unifying principle, namely the focusing on «distinctive ways of thinking that are identifiable and important» (p. 2). The conceptual direction of the total reform thus shifted from knowledge to methods of thinking; content became subsidiary to the methodical steps towards it²⁶. The legislative process of implementation of the core curriculum was not completed until spring 1978. By that time the eight major fields of study originally provided for had been reduced to five.

Dean Rosovsky circumscribed the aims of study as the answer to the question of «What it means to be an educated person in the latter part of the twentieth century» (p. 3). His answer had five parts:

1. «An educated person must be able to think and write clearly and effectively.
2. An educated person should have achieved depth in some field of knowledge. Cumulative learning is an effective way to develop a student's powers of reasoning and analysis, and for our undergraduates this is the principal role of concentrations.
3. An educated person should have a critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain and apply knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society and of ourselves (...).

²⁵ In the following I refer to the *Report on the Core Curriculum*, ed. Harvard Univ., Faculty of Arts and Sciences, rev., May 1979, also edited in *The Great Core Curriculum Debate*, cited here as «Report», *loc. cit.* Cf. also Introduction to the Core Curriculum (1982), referred here to as «Introduction».

²⁶ Cf. Th. EWENS, «Analyzing the Impact of Competence-based Approaches on Liberal Education», in G. GRANT et al., *On Competence: A Critical Analysis of Competence-based Reforms in Higher Education* (San Francisco, 1979), pp. 160-198, p. 173.

4. An educated person is expected to have some understanding of, and experience in thinking about, moral and ethical problems (...).
5. Finally, an educated American, in the last third of this century, cannot be provincial in the sense of being ignorant of other cultures and other times. It is no longer possible to conduct our lives without reference to the wider world within which we live (...).

The first requirement can be taken care of in writing courses, the second in upper division courses in the student's major. The last three pinpoint the actual aims of the general-education core curriculum, which are to provide the student with intellectual capabilities of generalized and lasting significance outside his major. The curriculum's principal aim is the communication of a «critical appreciation of the major approaches to knowledge» (p. 4), to which a quarter of an undergraduate's four years would be devoted. The equivalent of two years would be spent on the major and one year on electives in which the students may pursue other «aspects of their intellectual development» (p. 5).

In the *Introduction to the Core Curriculum* which Harvard brought out in 1982, the general aims of the new curriculum are more clearly stated. Here it says that Harvard subscribes to an educational theory which addresses the demands today's, democratic society places on the educated citizen. This philosophy of the core curriculum is founded on a broadly-based general education which, however, is not arrived at through the study of «great books» or a piling up of dead knowledge, but via «approaches to knowledge», methods of knowledge. It is this unifying principle that has sparked criticism on the grounds that it takes recourse to a formal element of scholarship without sufficiently ordering content²⁷, that it stresses the methodical procedures of the sciences while ignoring the question of the cultural significance of their contents²⁸. Indeed, it is to be feared that the emphasis of methods consciousness will further the alienation of the students by removing them, as Alston Chase writes, «one step farther from reality, for rather than studying the world, students are asked to study how scientists and humanists study the world»²⁹. Justified as this criticism is, the striving for a unifying principle of general-education scholarship is to be applauded. The Core Curriculum's five major fields of study become parts of a unified program.

The *Introduction to the Core Curriculum* stresses the practical applicability of having students learn about methods with which they can «gain and apply knowledge of the natural world, of society, and of them-

²⁷ Cf. A. SIMMONS, *op. cit.*, and K. S. LYNN, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

²⁸ L. BOTSTEIN, *op. cit.*: «The idea of the liberal arts as mere techniques, as teaching *how* to reason, appreciate, write, read, holds sway.»

²⁹ A. CHASE, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

selves» (p. 2). The readiness to consider the possible applications of knowledge goes back to the recognition after World War II of the potential destructiveness of the fruits of science and technology. The question of relevance served to underline the need for applied learning, on the one hand to neutralize the dichotomy of theory and praxis, on the other hand to redress a widespread student grievance³⁰. At the same time, the intention of the core curriculum is to temper the basic pragmatism and positivism of American university education by tying in with ethical questions. The students are expected to become practiced «in thinking critically about moral and ethical problems» (p. 2), by which means the curriculum seeks to further the students' consciousness of the value contexts surrounding the sciences. Character-building has always been of major importance in AngloSaxon academic culture, compounded in America by the religious-denominational impulse that led to the founding of America's oldest universities and has been retained to a much greater degree than in Europe. The importance of «traditions of ethical thought and practice» (p. 2) in the program of general education must be understood against this historical backdrop. In the debate on the core curriculum between proponents and critics of the reform, which took place at the instigation of the national College Board, Frederick Rudolph put it this way: «Liberal education should prepare us to know a good man or a good woman when we see one»³¹. For Alston Chase, too, the value context of scholarly work is, along with the aspects of unity and continuity, an important element of general education³². Chase considers the practice of analysis as it is commonly engaged in the various disciplines and demanded of the students in the core curriculum «an uncreative activity» unless it is followed up by a synthesis which integrates scientific knowledge into the system of our world view, for this world view is the basis for the necessity of general education in the first place.

b) *The major fields of study*

The Harvard Reform does not limit itself to a general outline of what is to be learned, but it names the fields of study in which its concept of general education is to be realized. The course offerings reflect the following five major fields of study:

1. literature and the arts
2. historical study

³⁰ Cf. C. DEWITT HARDY, «Higher Education in the Present Age», in: R. HOFSTADTER und C. DEWITT HARDY, *The Development and Scope of Higher Education in the United States* (New York: Columbia UP. 1952).

³¹ *The Great Core Curriculum Debate*, loc. cit., p. 67. cf. by the same author, *The American College and University*, loc. cit., chapt. I: «The Colonial College».

³² A. CHASE, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-72; siehe auch p. 129.

3. social analysis and moral reasoning
4. science
5. foreign cultures

The unbroken tradition of the elective system is apparent in the fact that students are required to choose eight courses in these fields of knowledge during their four undergraduate years. The Standing Committee on the Core Program and seven special commissions have worked out a catalogue of about a hundred core-curriculum courses for the students to choose from. A catalogue of a hundred courses would seem not to offer the assurance of a unified general education, but it represents a significant concentration vis-à-vis the eight hundred or so courses previously offered and is to be seen as a victory over the decentralistic tendency of the departments, which doubtless had to make sacrifices of power and money with the institution of the core curriculum. The still considerable number of elective options shows that the faculty and the departments have not surrendered all of their influence, all the more so since there are under the core program prestige and budgetary implications that accompany the designation of an introductory course as a core course. This naturally promises much greater enrollments than for courses which are introductory only for the departmental major³³.

Let us take a closer look at the five major fields of study and at how they realize educational goals of the core program. In the field of *literature and the arts* the goal is to «foster a critical understanding of how man gives artistic expression to his experience of the world» (*Report*, p. 6). Three categories of courses, which analyse art works of major significance, serve this aim. Group A deals with important texts of world literature, classics which are to be read for their universal and timeless message, for example the great novels of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the knightly epos of the middle ages, pastoral poetry, etc. It is noteworthy that the course descriptions ignore the boundaries of national literatures and orient themselves on literary genres. The courses cover long time spans. The texts themselves dominate. Analysis procedures are oriented on the text-immanent close readings favored by New Criticism. Group B deals with painting and music. Group C is devoted to «contexts of culture», and here a different methodical principle, the interdisciplinary approach, was supposed to find application. Courses like «Periclean Athens», «Weimar Culture», and «The Sublime in America» would seem ideally suited to interdisciplinary treatment, but the most recent descriptions no longer call these courses interdisciplinary, probably because past experience has shown that faculty and students are not particularly interested in the interdisciplinary principle³⁴.

³³ Cf. J. Q. WILSON, «A View from the Inside», in: *The Great Core Curriculum Debate*, loc. cit. pp. 43-50, p.49.

³⁴ K. S. LYNN, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

In the field of *historical study* the students must choose one course from each of two groups, the first dealing with «major issues of the contemporary world» and the second with «some transforming event or group of events in the deeper past» (*Introduction*, p. 4). The courses in the first group stress the present-day relevance of historical developments, whereby both the late nineteenth and the twentieth century count as our historical present. Courses like «International Conflicts in the Modern World», «Tradition and Transformation in East Asian Civilization: China», «Modern Political Ideologies», etc., invite interdisciplinary treatment, as do the historically more removed topics in the second group of courses. Sociology, anthropology, political science, theology and the natural sciences are all called upon to contribute to the illumination of momentous events such as «The Thirty Years' War», «The Scientific Revolution», «The Russian Revolution». Harvard's commitment to instilling a sense of history in a generation that tends more to the ahistorical whirl of the moment has been unanimously applauded.

Leon Botstein writes in his essay on «A Proper Education»:

History is needed because today's student has little intellectual sense of how the past has fashioned the present and how the present will shape the future. The sense of time, of memory, of common purpose with individuals whom one can never know would help expand the horizon of the current generation of students³⁵.

The category of *Social analysis and moral reasoning* also falls into two parts, social science topics and ethical problems, which are connected in a thematic approach (*Introduction*, p. 5) in courses like «Crime and Human Nature», «Explaining Revolutions in the Modern World», «War», «Women, Society and Culture», etc. In the ethical sector the student may choose from offerings like «The Theory of the Just War», «Democratic Theory», «Law and Social Order», etc. Here again, such topics would seem to invite interdisciplinary teamwork. The student is expected to grapple with the views of philosophers, political scientists, psychologists, anthropologists, etc., within this only loosely defined area of the core curriculum.

The field of *science*, a traditional element of the *artes liberales*, is accorded particular attention due to present-day technological progress. The two sub-categories require the student to immerse himself on the one hand in biological and physical systems, including their mathematical quantitative descriptions, on the other in complex biological and geological problems. Course titles are «Modern Physics: Concepts and Development», «The Astronomical Perspective», «From Alchemy to Elementary Particle Physics», «Evolutionary Biology», etc.

³⁵ L. BOTSTEIN, «A Proper Education», *loc. cit.*

Of particular interest is the field of *foreign cultures*, since it touches on a sore point in American cultural consciousness. The declared aim of this core-curriculum requirement is to counteract the «provincialism rooted in the enormous size and geographical isolation of the United States» (*Introduction*, p. 6) and thus combat a trend that has held sway in American education since the turn of the century. The multilingualism that was firmly anchored in the public schools in the nineteenth century lost ground in the isolationist period that followed World War I, and after the Sputnik shock of the 1950s, which stimulated the long-term furthering of the natural sciences, knowledge of foreign language was practically dropped as a university entrance requirement. Charles R. Foster, a late expert on bilingualism in the Office of Education in Washington, notes that

Most colleges today require only a foreign language reading proficiency, thereby indirectly discouraging active verbal and comprehension skills³⁶.

Although the federal government spends immense sums yearly on bilingual education, and the ethnic basis for multilingualism is certainly given, foreign language instruction remains an area of little pedagogical success. The fact that the Harvard reform program has not dared to bring about any sweeping change shows the degree to which this condition is rooted in the university system. Closer examination of the *foreign cultures* requirement reveals that the fulfillment of this requirement is not completely dependent on foreign language abilities. The *foreign cultures* courses thus become interchangeable with those offered in *literature and the arts*, *historical study*, and *social analysis and moral reasoning*. The necessary texts are mostly read in translation. Students who wish to study a Western European country must, indeed, demonstrate some language ability, including a course prerequisite in the foreign language involved, but this additional burden will tend to shunt the reluctant student towards the cultures of Africa and Asia, where no language knowledge is required. Although a one-year language requirement (or high-school equivalent) remains in effect outside the core curriculum, Harvard's «language policy» has, quite rightly, prompted some biting comments³⁷. The declared goal only suggests an intense study of language; the actual intention of the *foreign cultures* field goes in a different direction. It is no real departure from American insularity that the primary aim of these courses is not the penetration of a foreign language and culture, but «the hope that the careful

³⁶ Ch. R. FOSTER, «American Bilingualism: The Need for a National Language Policy», in: B. Hartford, A. Valdman, Ch. R. Foster, eds., *Issues in International Bilingual Education. The Role of the Vernacular*. (New York: Plenum Press, 1982), pp. 291-298, p. 292.

³⁷ Cf. K. S. LYNN, *op. cit.*, p. 65: «Foreign Language and Cultures is an inflated public-relations title that does not really mean what it implies».

consideration of another culture will provide American students with a mental vantage point, removed from their common assumptions and daily life, that will give them a fresh perspective on their own society.» (*Introduction*, p. 7). The mirror function of the foreign culture, which indeed is inherent in all foreign language instruction, nevertheless ought not become the sole object of an encounter with a foreign culture. One wonders even whether the disparity of the topics and their distance from the American mentality lend themselves to mirroring the students' own society: «Sources of Indian Civilization», «Introduction to Russian Civilization», «Chinese Culture», «Turn-of-the-century Austrian Culture», etc. In any case, the Harvard Reform does promote a global openness for foreign cultures and thus may spell the end of the American academic fixation on Western Europe.

III. Conclusions

Although not everything about the program is deserving of unequivocal praise, the Harvard Reform nevertheless represents a significant caesura in the development of the American college and university system, one that is sure to exert considerable influence nationally and internationally on tertiary education. What will this influence be?

1. Although the aims are in places unclear or even amorphous and hence not uncontroversial, the resuscitation of general education vis-à-vis specialization is of prime importance. The fact that a university like Harvard has taken this step makes it unlikely that general education of the sort the Harvard Reform proposes will become mass education; but it negates egalitarian thinking in this field of education.
2. The down-playing of one-sided specialization affords more room for the education of undergraduates and less for that of doctoral candidates of uncertain economic and professional future. The professors will have more time for their «actual» students, albeit perhaps to the detriment of their own interests. This trend promises to successfully counteract the segmentation of knowledge and extends the hope that a unity of educational concepts and aims can be found. This is, however, undermined by the reluctance to give up the old elective system, which allows the Reform program only limited space in the four undergraduate years. Students are still likely to remain ignorant of all the things they do not themselves deem interesting or useful at the moment, and the majority will, in spite of all good intentions, not come away in the consciousness of a cultural heritage and intellectual experience they share with others.

3. The primary aim of pointing out methods of scholarly work and the acquisition of knowledge has only been carried half-way. The methodological orientations —text immanence in literature, interdisciplinary and thematic approaches in history, the social sciences, and ethics— bear witness to a certain indecisiveness and reserve. And the idea of reducing scholarship to method and technique puts to the university the question of whether academic education has no actual cultural, ethical and social values to impart. The orientation away from Western European Culture towards a global cultural commitment is also only half-hearted. The opening towards foreign cultures is in any case tied up with a narcissistic urge to self-reflection which is at odds with the superordinate goals of the program. Nevertheless these failings needn't plunge us into pessimism over the Harvard Reform. It must be seen within its historical context and is in many ways itself an expression of America's own cultural identity. The Reform and its initiators have assumed a great responsibility. José Ortega y Gasset in his essay on the Idea of the University said of educational reform at the university level: «Reform is always re-creation»³⁸. The Harvard Reform does not yet live up to this high demand. Whether it will in the future will become apparent in the future development of the American university and the cultural identity they represent.

³⁸ J. ORTEGA Y GASSET; *Schuld und Schuldigkeit der Universität*, 1930 (München: Oldenbourg, 1952), p. 7.