

UNIVERSITIES: STRIKE, STRIKE, STRIKE?

Amitai Etzioni

The "elaborate rationales [that] have evolved to explain the virtues of striking universities" are "thinner than the paper on which they are stenciled," says Dr. Etzioni. Since "protest we must," he recommends some other "effective ways to be heard without . . . forcing teachers and fellow students out of the classroom" and cutting off education.

ON 14 MAY 1970, the faculty of Columbia University Teachers College was quite reluctant to suspend classes again; classes had recently been suspended following the violation of Cambodia and the killings at Kent State. But when black students pointed out that if the institution closed "for" four white students, it would be "racist" not to shut down for the six blacks killed in Augusta, classes at Teachers College again came to a halt. Many seniors who graduated from Columbia on June 2 had completed only two of their four years in college. In 1968 and 1970, the last weeks of the spring semesters were, in effect, cancelled, and easy "pass" grades were widely available without the standard term papers and final exams. The majority of professors of Columbia University's Department of Sociology, which I chair, voted on May 13 to strike "until the conditions for a free university are restored." These conditions included the termination of the war and of racist suppression. Many students and professors across the country favor keeping colleges closed this fall, at least until the November elections. If students can be sent home for the harvest, asks James Reston, why can't they be released to campaign?

Once, in the remote days of 1964, striking for one day involved awesome moral, educational, and political decisions. That was because a strike involves certain responsibilities:

it coerces those who wish to study to stay out (after they have paid for their education); it gives the impression that the entire university community is united in protest, which it may not be; it violates the contracts of the teachers and may even break state laws.

Now the cries of "Close it down" and "On strike" are routine. Hundreds of colleges are closed for weeks, and the original notion of an academic strike has acquired considerable legitimacy. Rather elaborate rationales have evolved to explain the virtues of striking universities. These rationales are thinner than the paper on which they are stenciled. Ways to express our grief and protest can—and must—be found without cutting off education to spite the White House. Surely, I do not favor "business as usual" as our society is torn apart and acts are committed in our country's name which shame all Americans now living and those yet to be born. But striking is not the only way to conduct the unusual "business" of education and protest.

The strike as a sociopolitical instrument is, of course, borrowed from the world of privately owned factories, where stopping the production line damages the owners and managers. However, when a university strikes, the first to be hurt are the students; the professors' salaries continue to be paid, and full tuition is charged. (Professors often use the free time to pursue their own affairs—from

research to picnics.) Rather than being in the position of workers on strike, students are more like patients in a hospital who refuse to take their lunch and their medications.

The student strikers frequently counter that American higher education is "no good anyhow," since it is "technocratic": it is excessively specialized, fragmented, uncritical, and geared to serve the needs of the capitalistic society; and it is provided in a highly regimented environment not conducive to learning. There are strong elements of truth in these criticisms; many reforms of American higher education are long overdue. However, such educational reforms are usually not the goal of academic stoppages and only a few strikers make serious efforts between strikes to reform the university. They argue that education can best be achieved by action in the streets, demonstrating or sitting in, and working and living with "the people."

There are significant educational values in all these actions, but they provide very poor substitutes, indeed, for delving into the rich deposits of civilizations which are stored in college libraries and available in classrooms. These college offerings must be revitalized and complemented—but not replaced—by the curricula of the streets. Moreover, full appreciation of activism as an experience requires reflection and analysis, and the environment most conducive to such reflection is provided *on* the campus, i.e., on an open one.

Ineffective disruption

"The university complicity in the war (through defense research and other services for the Establishment) must be stopped," the strikers assert. But it is neither necessary nor effective to stop research on, for example, bacteriological warfare by blocking entrances to classrooms. Usually, such research is carried on in separate buildings or off-campus. And, frequently, well-organized protests "through channels" gain a more encompassing and lasting university disengagement from military research than, for instance, an assault on the fences of I-Lab at MIT, or on

the building housing the Institute for Defense Analysis at Princeton. Furthermore, the chances of halting societal services like engineering and law by disrupting universities are about equal to the chances of stopping the Indochina war by refusing to buy U.S. bonds.

The self-interest involved in completing one's studies is too great in a society where unemployment is still concentrated largely among the unskilled. And the energy spent to shut down universities could be better used to fuel projects for peace and social justice. The tension between those who oppose the war and racism but love their university and those who would destroy the university as they prepare to march greatly weakens the protest movement, already plagued by internal bickering and splintering. Unity of protest can be found by facing up to the real sources of societal malaise, not by blowing up alma maters.

We *cannot* go on with business as usual. But we should evolve, as we have in the past, ways to express our dismay, anger, and demands which do not disrupt higher education—which is, for many of us, an end in itself. The academic year is brief to begin with and punctured with leaves. If vacations, trips, and weekend parties are sacrificed by those who are now mobilizing in the broadening protest with the same willingness that classes are cancelled, surely much time and energy will be released for protest. The preferred procedure is illustrated by Princeton and Columbia, which are reportedly moving toward an adjustment of their calendars this year by cutting vacation periods to allow for a two-week cancellation of classes before the November elections. There would be no reduction in teaching time.

Study-protest combination

Even during those 150 days or so a year when classes are held, there is much slack time. Students and professors who wish could march in the evenings, campaign during the weekends, and chat with construction workers during their lunch hours. Surely, this would impose a strain on one's studies, but it would also give them a new urgency and reality. Rushing back and forth between education on campus and activism off campus

Amitai Etzioni is chairman of the Department of Sociology at Columbia University, and director of the Center for Policy Research. He is author of The Active Society.

would allow for much more cross-fertilization than either "business as usual" or "strike as usual." The combination of study *and* protest would provide no easy solution and would limit both for some—but who, then, is looking for an easy solution?

Students correctly point out that universities are readily shut down for other purposes. Universities close to celebrate the birthdays of national heroes, Moon Day, and other occasions. High schools, imitating the colleges, send students home at the drop of a hat. The answer is not to add cancellations to cancellations but to call on administrators and students to share in an effort to restore to education the status preserved by circus shows: whatever happens, the show must go on, because it is intrinsically rewarding, because one mark of the "pro" is a genuine commitment to his work, and because the captive audience paid for the teacher's services and must not be cheated.

Protest we must, but there are numerous effective ways to be heard without first forcing teachers and fellow students out of the classroom. The teach-in, in which extra education (throughout the night) was added to the usual fare, was a smashing, nationwide success (not only the first teach-in on Viet-

nam, but also the one on Earth Day). Guerilla theaters, mock funerals and cemeteries, chaining oneself to the pillars of unresponsive institutions, fasts, candlelight vigils, and other devices all appeal to the mass media, which carry the message only if it is sufficiently theatrical. There is no need to block libraries or classrooms to gain attention.

All these histrionics have been used without ending suffering, and strikes have been perpetuated without affecting dramatically the course of events we oppose. We must realize that peace and social justice—the revolution—are not around the corner. The struggle for the transformation of America will be prolonged. One must, then, prepare to combine marching with studies, or the marches will have to be limited to the period when classes are cancelled, or classes will have to be cancelled for the longest session ever.

Those who seek the transformation of our society will do well to choose means which unite us, which do not needlessly provoke more backlash, and which allow higher education to continue, for a major resource of the new America is the college-educated. Otherwise, we may destroy the university to facilitate the revolution—and, in the process, lose both.