

Counter-Commencement - Queens College, June 3, 1969

As the last speaker, I feel obliged to turn your attention back to the beginning of public dissent on our part, and of disorder created by the Administration and the police force on the part of the other side of the conflict. Those students without whose personal commitment and without whose risking of their careers this counter-commencement would not have been possible--those students who demonstrated the breakdown of a ritualized consensus--those students are being called Radicals. Being labeled that way means being placed on the fringes of society: that is, irresponsible and criminal elements at worst, and idealistic and zealous utopians at best. But let us remind ourselves of the true meaning of this word which is being used to slander and to ridicule us. Radicals are those who are not satisfied with the curing of ills merely on the surface; radicals are those who cannot and will not put up with superficialities and shallow analysis; radicals are those who make the noble attempt to go to the guts of the issues that are of general concern. Radicals are those who try to grasp the very heart of those problems we are faced with--today and tomorrow.

At the beginning of those events on this campus which have been labeled "disruption" and "interference with orderly processes" lay the valiant attempts of a few radicals to expose the fact that social, economic and political disorder in this country, as well as in large parts of the outside world, are the results of activities of large corporations bent upon making profits for their stockholders, with fractional shares only for the working majority, and without any regard for the welfare of the poor in this country and abroad. We should be self-critical enough to admit today, and on this occasion, that they have only partially succeeded, and that by and large we, the faculty of Queens College and the majority of those present today have failed to live up to this challenge. After weeks of intensive debates and caucuses, we have "succeeded" instead in forgetting, or in suppressing, the original and very real issues. We have indulged in the luxury of talking about the shortcomings and personal weaknesses of this and that administrator, or public official on and off campus, and we lost sight that these parochial features are only the microcosmic reflections of more general ills and structures. What is it that we should have been talking about?

We have talking about the budgetary cuts by the New York State Legislature and its disastrous effects on the educational institutions in this city, and we found ourselves in agreement on this point with practically every faculty member and college administrator. But we should have been talking about the reasons for these cuts--the draining of resources from the least powerful, that is, from the least profitable sector of society and the economy for the benefit of the big corporations and their vested interests in armaments and an ever-expanding defense industry. One cannot, in the last--radical--analysis, protest against the slashing of funds for the universities and simultaneously lend a helping hand to the corporation recruiters on campus who are responsible for the impoverishment of federal, state and city budgets.



We have been talking about the necessity of urban renewal in general and about the need to provide for a better education for the underprivileged large minorities in this society, be they black, Puerto Rican or poor white. Again we found, and find ourselves in agreement with almost everybody in this country, from the President of the United States downwards. But we should have been talking about the roots of this situation: the fact that poverty in general and the ghettos, unemployed blacks, high crime rates among the underprivileged, and racial discrimination, are part and parcel of a socio-economic system that needs a cheap and poorly organized labor force for its maintenance; we should have been talking about the fact that, short of the destruction of exactly those economic structures which are responsible for the existence of ghettos in the first place, and which once originated through the importation of slave labor and the employment of semi-slavery techniques in the accumulation of wealth and power, that, short of the radical re-making of this system of corporate capitalism, there will be no end to discrimination socio-economically, as well as educationally and psychologically.

We have been talking about the War in Vietnam and again, from the President of the United States downwards, we find ourselves in agreement that this war should be ended. But we have not been talking about the systemic logic of this war in the context of American foreign policy in general, and of its purposes for the defense of actual or potential profits for the U.S. corporations and banks. How could any morally and politically committed university or faculty, who would be, and usually is only too easily ready to condemn the atrocities of genocide by the American government, let its students be recruited on campus and under the principle of "free speech", by respected enterprises as, for example, the Chase Manhattan Bank, if it knows that their Vice-President declared in 1965: "In the past, foreign investors have been somewhat wary of the overall political prospect for the (Southeast Asia) region." I must say, though, that the U.S. actions in Vietnam this year of 1965, (the year, I remind you, of the beginning of the systematic aerial destruction of the North as well), have considerably reassured both Asian and Western investors... The same thing also took place in Japan after the U.S. intervention in Korea removed investor doubts." How else can one effectively and radically take action on campus against this attempt to bomb a small but brave people, representative of millions in other parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America, back into submission to the economic and security interests of the big corporations if not by at least denying them the right and privilege to recruit our best, but politically naive students?

We have been talking about free speech, civil liberties and the right of dissent. But we should have been talking about how freedom of speech, civil liberties and the right of dissent are being abused to the point of becoming irrelevant in the present struggle, and a means to repress the necessary actions flowing from the freedom of speech and the right of dissent. Of course, every black man in this country can say what he pleases, and so can every radical. But the powers of those who make decisions, the organized interests of those who keep the black man down, the positions of those who run this country, or this college, are not affected by our dissent and by the speaking of our minds. Not only don't we have any control over the machinery of public administration or political organization in charge, among other things, of preventing elections, that might upset their consensus, from becoming meaningful and from materializing; moreover, we do not even have control and influence over the powerful media of the press and TV. Our voices, our concern, our analysis of the situa-



tion is never presented in its true form, but rather through the eyes and ears of journalists as self-appointed spokesmen of "the general public" who indulge in reporting dramatic "happenings" on campus rather than in presenting the underlying issues. What is "fit to print" about the recent events in Berkeley, for example, is not that a state of emergency has been in operation there since February of this year, that even basic constitutional rights of the freedom of assembly have been suspended, that the police have been arresting people off the street and treating them in a manner not at all different from the way Concentration Camp inmates were treated in Germany not too long ago; no, what is fit to print is not that the same techniques and the same chemicals have been employed there as have been tested on a large scale in Vietnam; what seems fit to print is simply that there have been "riots" and "disorder" brought about radical students.

What is fit to print is that students, radicals, organized by "outside agitators", disturbed the fact-finding mission of Nelson Rockefeller to various American countries, thus interfering with the attempt to "improve" U.S.-Latin American relations. What is not fit to print is that the same Nelson Rockefeller owns large estates in the West Indies, in Venezuela, in Ecuador and in Brazil; that the same Nelson Rockefeller owns up to 16% of Standard Oil of New Jersey, Mobil Oil Corporation, Standard Oil of California and Standard Oil of Indiana and that these oil companies, with 52% of their holdings abroad and chiefly in Latin America, are very directly responsible for the structural backwardness of the underdeveloped countries by extracting up to 200% in profits for their American stockholders. If Nelson Rockefeller, if the President of the United States, were seriously interested in improving the economic conditions of Latin America, in ending hunger, the high rate of children mortality, in ending political repression by corrupt dictatorships supported by feudal aristocracies and a small landholding comprador class, then he should dispose of these holdings; then he should restore their control to the economic benefit of the masses down there, rather than impose sanctions on the first country to attempt to break out of this vicious circle of foreign domination and exploitation, that is, Cuba, rather than train the Latin American military in counterinsurgency warfare to repress revolutionary forces more effectively, rather than to send American military advisors and American military hardware. Those who prevented Nelson Rockefeller from entering their countries--students and workers, some of whom even gave their lives for this cause of social liberation--have won a modest, but not an insignificant victory for all of us.

Is it then enough for us to have our fine and orderly Counter-Commencement in this June, 1969, while students in Argentina are battling their way through the police and the army, while whole faculties in Brazil have been dismissed only a few weeks ago, and to which the official American response was the promise of the largest share of foreign aid to Brazil, and this aid is destined to improve exploitative capitalist structures in the hands of the ruling oligarchy? Is it enough for us to voice public dissent in the face of the yet hopefully still temporary establishment of fascist



repression in at least one American community right now, in Berkeley, California? One thing is certainly not enough: that "concerned faculties" are only concerned with supporting the right of dissent as such at the time of its attempted repression. We have passed the time when we could indulge in the luxury of standing up for the freedom of expressing opposing views for the sake of the principle of "free speech." Not the legitimacy of dissent can be our concern any more today, but the necessity of dissent, the necessity of non-cooperation with established institutions, the necessity of striking back, radically, at the very heart of these institutions by forcing them with all means available to become what they are supposed to be: the servants of the people, subject to their control rather than servants of uncontrollable interests.

During this struggle, we shall be hearing a great deal more about the dangers of a backlash if the radicals go too far, too fast. But, please, keep in mind a simple fact: the very phenomenon of such a backlash (and there can be no doubt that it is a very real backlash administered not in terms of a Wallace, but of a Humphrey or a Nixon) indicates only that this radical movement is beginning to score a few triumphs. As long as there has been no backlash, there has been no success; the radical critique would have remained an inconsequential radical critique which hurt nobody. And, secondly, do remind yourself in the face of liberal criticism of radical action, that without the however feeble attempts to organize resistance, the well-oiled machineries of the established institutions and governments all over the world would have embarked on a course they are embarked upon anyway--only smoother, only less openly repressive, only with more benevolent features. We did not create the military-industrial complex; we did not create slavery that existed up until one hundred years ago, nor did we create the ghettos of today; we did not create an abysmal educational system--things which every liberal will join us in condemning, but which every liberal is unable to offer constructive advice of meaningful change is to take place.

Let me add one final point. What must have seemed to most of you who were concerned with the internal state of affairs on this campus as basically a local matter, a specific issue concerning mainly problems of this college, this administration, this faculty or this police bust, turns out to be of much more general relevance, with much more radical ramifications than many of you might be prepared to accept. But you cannot, and you should not, close your eyes to the things that your fellow students and my fellow faculties are engaged in other parts of our, the so-called free world as well as in many countries under Communist political systems. As a foreigner, being privileged to teach American students for one academic year, and trying to practice teaching more like a common learning enterprise than like a one-directional communication of knowledge, I was profoundly impressed indeed to realize that I have more in common with those actively engaged in this struggle for radical change here than I have in common with many of my own fellow countrymen on the other



side of the invisible barricades. Those of you who refuse the draft, who risk jail and their personal careers, and sometimes even their lives--they speak truly the same language as those who are fighting repression and the systematic depoliticalization of the people in West Germany, as well as in Western Europe in general. Something like a new international in mutual concern, mutual value orientation, and mutual analytical understanding of some of the basic defects in our societies is emerging in the East and in the West, in the North and in the South. At least you should be aware that these peoples are in many parts of the globe, and particularly the students as the present vanguards among them, who are directly or indirectly affected by the power, the accumulated wealth, and the actions of your country, are watching you very intensely. We know that in West Germany we are going to lose our uphill battle against the emergence of a more democratically refined version of fascism if you lose yours here in this country--and this truth holds, under different conditions, for the Latin Americans as well as for the Vietnamese and the peoples of Asia, for the Greeks as well as for the blacks in South Africa and in Rhodesia. Since you sometimes pride yourselves in living in the most powerful nation today, this puts a very heavy burden on all of you who have decided, however reluctantly, to take up this struggle. Given the magnitude of this task, you should be aware that changes do not come overnight, and that the revolution is not around the corner. As you go on, the more you persist, the more sacrifices will have to be made. Your fellow students in Berkely can testify to this fact, and so can the three hundred faculty members being dismissed for political reasons during this past year from universities all over the country.

But for all the actions you have to take, keep in mind that as students it is equally your responsibility to be not just good students, but to be the best students. To be radical means to employ all your intellectual skills to the best of your capability in the unending search for the truth rather than in making high grades. The best students, the radical students whose education does not end when they leave college formally, can never celebrate their "graduation."

-- Ekkehart Krippendorff