

REVIEW ESSAY

Great Books at Berkeley in the Sixties

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The Beleaguered College: Essays on Educational Reform, by Joseph Tussman. Berkeley: University of California, Institute of Governmental Studies Press, 1997, 208 pp., \$14.95 paperback.

Habits of Mind: The Experimental College Program at Berkeley, by Katherine Bernhardt Trow. Berkeley: University of California, Institute of Governmental Studies Press, 1998, 485 pp., \$19.95 paperback.

It is a jubilee year in educational writing when a book appears that is distinguished by personal passion, pedagogic wisdom, circumstantial pathos, and pleasantly pungent prose, all at once. The collection of essays by Joseph Tussman, the founder of a promising but short-lived reform program for undergraduates, is of this sort. Although its five pieces are not all new or previously unpublished, there is nothing dated or redundant about them; the thinking is still fresh and the essays together make a whole. Tussman's book should certainly be on the education shelves of every university library, but it also makes gripping reading for the laity.

That said, I should confess to a bias of interest. As a forty-three-year-long tutor at St. John's College, I follow with avid engagement the fate of kindred programs, and as Tussman's friendly references to St. John's show, he would acknowledge the kinship. Not only is there always something to be learned along practical lines, but with each advent of such a program, there stirs the hope that one tide may float all our boats, and with each demise the fear that there, but for the grace of God, go we.

The reference to luck and to circumstance is not idle. Tussman's first essay, so far withheld from publication, deals with the causes of the failure of his Experimental College. "Failure" is really the wrong word. The college didn't survive; the program was discontinued—by Tussman's own decision—after four years and two cycles of graduates (1965-1969). The failed programs I know of have usually been half-measures, not so much *misconceived* as *unconceived*, born of ungrounded longing for a better way married with timid

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compromise. But Tussman is right in ending the essay defiantly: “These convictions, with which I began, survive in me unimpaired, although shadowed now by frustration and defeat.” His program was a principled plan, a radical departure from the standard ways of universities, a good and a practicable conception. I am thoroughly persuaded that it was done in by recalcitrant conditions and unlucky circumstances. His college was indeed beleaguered from its inception.

Tussman did well to put his account of the end of the Experimental College first, where friendly observers, who have long wondered what the inside story really was, would quickly become absorbed in it. Yet it might be more helpful to the reader to say something first about the Tussman program (and, incidentally, similarly conceived programs).

The second essay, a shortened version of Tussman’s *Experiment at Berkeley* (1969), sets it out. It is a *reform* program in the sense that its tenets were derived from a keen critique, still perfectly applicable (since the changes of the last four decades have not often been for the better), of the undergraduate education administered by universities. To put concisely a weary tale vividly told by Tussman: The university teacher “gives” courses; the student “takes” them. Good teaching consists of laying out authoritative, well-arranged subject matter, delivering it in attention-sustaining lectures, and making tangible demands on the students’ time. The students take an aggregate of these independent course units, not often well sequenced or integrated, and develop evasive strategies for appearing to meet the professor’s demands; success is expressed in grades. What goes by the board is the students’ education as a whole and leisurely, mind-expanding reflection.

Hence in the Experimental College there were no professing experts, no course units, no students driven to mimic the modes of specialized scholars. This is what there was to be instead: a corps of collegial, inquiring teachers jointly responsible for a cohesive non-cellular curriculum; students “liberated from the thralldom of [their] so-called interests,” free to pursue issues without anxiety, “docile” in the best sense; without the self-protective armor of resistance to learning, a coherent two-year, all-required curriculum not based on disciplines but on issues—two years so that students could still benefit from the more professionally directed courses of the university.

Concerning this curriculum, Tussman says:

We read great books, classics, masterpieces, and very little else. If we deny that we are a “Great Books program” it is because we perhaps do not share [their] educational and metaphysical assumptions. But we prefer great books to lesser books.

And he gives a well-phrased defense of this preference: “a classic escapes from its generative context,” and it also eludes disciplinary pigeonholing; it obviates backgrounding and specialization.

These books were oriented about two problem foci. The “original source of inspiration” for Tussman was Alexander Meiklejohn’s Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin (1927-1932), and from it he borrowed the dual focus on Greece and America. This is not only in itself an enticing juxtaposition, but it has good warrant in history; recall Jefferson’s lifelong love for the Greek poets, his (highly critical) attention to the Greek philosophers, and his wide reading in the Greek historians—a preeminent example, to be sure, and yet indicative of the almost obsessive regard for antiquity of America’s founding generation and its more mindful descendants.

The variation on the Wisconsin experiment seems to have been an interlude of seventeenth-century readings, the King James Bible, Shakespeare, Hobbes, Milton, “to tap the other great stream in our living tradition and to set the stage for the American venture.” The second, the American year seems, however, not to have quite jelled, for an interesting reason discussed below.

In sum,

Our curriculum . . . takes as its “subject” a cluster of perennial moral and political problems and takes as its materials a relatively short and varied list of great works drawn from the Western tradition, to some extent historically clustered, and culminating in the study of the problems in the American context.

Tussman is very definite about the importance of having a required, faculty-determined curriculum, but not about the particular book list; he can imagine a range of substitutions that would preserve the central concerns.

Consequently the “experiment” had two aspects, clearly distinguished in the founder’s mind: a curricular content and a pedagogic mode. To the latter belonged the prescriptive, non-course, *programmatic* nature of the program, the downplaying of lectures, the small discussion seminar, the sustained and carefully monitored writing requirements, and above all, the participatory rather than authoritative role of the teacher.

This educational conception is—the name “Experimental College” was merely Tussman’s homage to Meiklejohn—no experiment. No educational plan ever *should* be experimental, first because it is wrong to experiment with student lives, second because success or failure is not an empirically ascertainable result, and third because a program should not be conceived as a testable hypothesis but as a passionate faith to begin with. Tussman had plenty of passion, and his students had, as will be seen later, lifelong profit from his plan. Its realization at Berkeley *should* have become a permanent feature on the scene of higher education.

From the perspective of St. John’s College, there were, to be sure, two aims involved that are somewhat at odds with each other. This was the intellectual price paid by Tussman for his passionate personal agenda—clued out by the student in no time: One ardent aim was to educate young Americans to civic virtue, to develop the moral citizenry required by American democracy. This

passion and its educational consequences did not, such is the human condition, jibe altogether with Tussman's fervent belief in freedom—the deepest aim of the program was, after all, to free students from the artificialities of university modes for the liberal exercise of all their cognitive powers. For if one of the teachers, particularly the founder, has forceful opinions about what the issues are and whither inquiries are to tend, two things will happen: the reading of the books will be skewed toward finding these issues, and discussions will tend toward debate. That is exactly what did happen. It is to prevent preconceived problem-setting and advocating debate that in the St. John's curriculum the Great Books (however much that appellation may annoy text-egalitarians) are unabashedly at the center of the program, and free conversation about their meaning and truth is preferred over issue-bound argument. Determining what are the great commitments to be made, for example, whether to follow Cicero's political Socrates who brought the heavens down to earth, or Plato's philosophical Socrates who spurned the earth in favor of a heaven beyond the heavens or, for that matter, neither—that is what we want our students to be doing for themselves by means of conversation that is intense in its interest yet relaxed in its openness. We, their teachers, may arouse their intellects by our questions, but at our best we don't pre-channel their preoccupations, not even into civic goodness—for which we nonetheless ardently and not always ineffectually hope; perhaps this hope expresses one of the "metaphysical assumptions" Tussman considers to be implicit in an acknowledged Great Books program: the Socratic claim that an examining intellect makes for responsible conduct.

I mention these differences because they represent diverse notions about the most desirable kind and end of learning, the sort of subtle but significant distinctions that cognate ideas of education best bring out. But this much is clear to me: that the survival and present flourishing state of St. John's College and the early demise of the Experimental College have nothing whatsoever to do with these conceptual differences, but with circumstance alone, which brings me back to Tussman's first essay.

He saw himself forced to shut down the college after four years because of a number of uncircumventable obstacles, one of which was *not* that much maligned university administration. They were in fact looking for a focus of reform to dampen student unrest and supported Tussman's enterprise. High-up administrators tend to have much vaguer entrenched interests (apart from their responsibility for the bottom line) than the idea-directed faculties and deans. And indeed faculty recruitment proved to be the unhappy crux of the matter. They were hard to get to begin with, because professional success comes from sticking to your lasts, and once persuaded to join, they were somewhat unruly, since they were unused to living under a prescriptive, coherent plan. Even when a fine faculty had finally been formed, the problem of permanence proved insoluble, since the university could not see its way to giving the

College its own tenure-lines. So Tussman, whose energies had been overstrained and who, most understandably, could not face the recurrent agony of composing and initiating a new faculty, gave up.

That was the old obstacle to reform that never budes, but there were also local and merely current hindrances. The Experimental College opened as a part of the University of California at Berkeley, a year after the beginning of the Free Speech Movement (1964), in the midst of teach-ins and sit-ins, and the time of its duration coincided with ever-escalating student disturbances. Actually it is not so clear that this roiled environment was a hindrance. It did not seem to affect student recruitment, it put the participating students in the tense and conflict-ridden frame of mind that was probably in tune with the moral bent of the program, and it distracted the university faculty from attending too closely to this truly radical upstart in their midst. But it was a hard time for carrying on a steady intellectual and serious civic endeavor. The long and the short of it is: Tussman was at once too much alone and too much enmeshed in the university system.

The remaining three essays are not explicitly about the experiment at Berkeley. There is an inaugural talk given in 1991 at Malaspina College in British Columbia, whose program is a Tussman revival. Tussman tells why we should read the Greeks, and does it in a style I found refreshing, though in my case he was certainly preaching to the choir. I had to smile at the comparison of Euripides' bacchantes to Berkeley's flower children, and I have gratefully added this dictum to my stock of stolen wisdom: "If you learn the Greek themes, nothing after that will really surprise you."

The fourth essay is a charming homage to Alexander Meiklejohn, poignant with warm admiration but also with a sad sense of distance. The fifth and last essay is the most complex and the deepest. It serves, though implicitly, as an explanation of the principles and passions that went into the Berkeley college. It is a philosophical inquiry—Tussman was a professor of philosophy at Berkeley—into the governmental authority over, and the professional responsibility for, the teaching of the young and into the difficult relation between the "teaching power" and freedom. Here the equal dangers inherent in moralizing schools and in morally vacant schools are recognized, and these problems are set out in language that has bite.

A second book about the Experimental College, published the year after (1998), is written in a very different mode. It is a big research tome by Katherine Trow. Its title, *Habits of Mind*, is, intentionally or not, reminiscent of Robert Bellah's *Habits of the Heart* (1985, written with associates). Certainly Tussman's "moral" curriculum, whose purpose was to develop "a political vocation," might be regarded as an anticipatory response to Bellah's call for a society that attends to "personal meaning" *as well as to* "civic culture."

The bulk of the book is devoted to quotations from interviews with forty graduates of the Experimental College, out of a total of two hundred, those

still living near Berkeley. There are appendices containing the significant documents concerning the founding and the life of the program, including the reading list and a helpful table of student events concurrent with the College. There are furthermore samples of the questionnaires used, for this study was very consciously conducted with the full panoply of social science research.

Although, as I intimated earlier, I have misgivings about the usefulness of this sort of educational research, this project goes a ways toward reconciling me to it in general and in particular. In general, the very fact that such a study is mounted and published itself acts as a sort of *imprimatur* on an event that ought not to be forgotten; it is a kind of existence proof, a warranty that this happened in that place and was worth investigating. In particular, the study corroborates a faith that is necessary to all local reform: a tiny but conceptually dense venture can cast a long shadow on the educational scene; moreover, the study fleshes out its shade. Furthermore, the work was done most meticulously, perhaps even too meticulously, for the forty informants were drawn and quartered every which way, by gender, cycle, attitude—with no statistically significant results, as the author candidly admits. But then statistics are in any case non-significant when the life of the mind is concerned, except perhaps in this one extreme case: If all the interviewees had totally blanked out about their two years, one would indeed infer that the program was indubitably a dud.

Just the opposite was the case. These alumni remembered and remembered vividly. Since a mere forty souls really cannot turn into numbers, these interviews make such good reading just because they don't add up: Almost all the alumni had had a great experience in common, but it had seized them in almost forty different ways. To someone who has lived through the equivalent of over twenty of these student cycles, the students' observations were not so very unexpected, but nonetheless sympathy-arousing and even poignant. Their experiences were reported in the study under different headings, among which "Faculty" of course galvanized the keenest memories.

By and large, as one would expect, these alumni had admired and even loved their teachers, for students will love where they can. But there is, to my mind, something somewhat sad about the quality of their feeling for their faculty; I would not want to be praised in terms like these:

Some of them were absolutely outstanding, just brilliant guys Some of them took me to the bushes and beat the crap out of me intellectually.

Careful teachers have no business committing brilliance before their students and evacuating them intellectually. The impression left is that the teachers of the first cycle, dragooned into the program from diverse departments, were much too self-assertive and combative with the students and indeed with each other. When Tussman brought in his own friends, philosophy professors, for the second cycle, the overuse of rhetorical pant-hooting seems to have

ceased. But the scrappiness of the early faculty appears to have conspired with the strenuous informality of the community to let some students' language stay on the level of breezy kid-speak (to which I imagine the alumni were reverting in the interviews); the unselfconscious use of restrained, accurately expressive, literate language probably thrives better when social relations are healthily formal. The applicants to the program (and there was never a dearth of applicants for admission) were, as was natural for the times, more immediately attracted by the intimacy of small classes and the promised closeness to the teachers than by the curriculum. And though the interviews show that these promises were fulfilled, it seems to me that the community of learning never quite found a communicative mode that was both invigorating and stabilizing, the sort of conversation that bypasses personalities and eristic triumphing in favor of reciprocal listening to something more deeply human, in accordance with Heraclitus's injunction: "Listen not to *me* but to my *logos*." But that would have come in time.

Certainly, and again not surprisingly, personalities loomed large in alumni memories. As I mentioned, the students quickly discovered that the founder had a passionate agenda (although his invitational letter to prospective students had, perhaps innocently, perhaps craftily, failed to mention the moral and civic intention of the program). They both suspected and admired him particularly, but they also speculated about the other four (later five) faculty members' personalities and motives with all the irritable and worshipful intensity of students who choose such a program anywhere—and then some.

It was not surprising that Tussman attracted the most admiration, and that the most despised character was a psychiatrist, the administrator of one of the mental health clinics on campus, who had been insinuated into the community by one faculty member as an adjunct for the purpose of evaluating the "personality development" of these students as compared to non-program students. I have no doubt that both men deserved their reputations. The unauthorized evaluator was evidently your worst nightmare of a "participant observer." He betrayed confidences, fomented discontent, and had no conception of the sociological analogue to the uncertainty effect in physics: that a meddling observer will skew the situation. To my mind, his project was in any case misconceived, not only because students' personalities should not be intrusively scrutinized but because you can't actually measure a soul expanding, and, moreover, as Katherine Trow rightly observes, the effects of such a program are slow to show; graduates take decades to digest their experience. (I don't mean to say that it is totally impossible to overcome these difficulties; when St. John's came under sociological observation by David Riesman and Gerald Grant—as reported in *The Perpetual Dream*, 1978—they somehow summoned the discretion and insight to gauge fairly the effects of a program of studies they had not themselves undertaken and could therefore not evaluate intellectually.)

What the alumni had to say about their own studenthood made especially good reading. For almost all of them the program had clearly been a great event that brought out unexpected capacities. My impression is that their out-doing themselves was more than an academic version of the industrial “Hawthorne effect”—the heightening of productive energies sociologists have observed in people who are participating in novel programs they know are being monitored from the outside. Indeed, this community was, as such groups really need to be, mostly inward-looking. And from that arose some of the poignancy of the students’ struggles.

They were involved in a program described in the seriocomic language of education research as “neo-classical telic reform,” meaning in plain words that the teaching style departed from the standard university mode and that the curriculum included good books of all ages, the reading and discussion of which were intended to make the students humanly better. They found themselves housed at the other end of the campus from the Free Speech demonstrations, in an isolated intense environment, encouraged to speak freely but constrained by the curriculum to speak about issues in *non-topical* ways. They were just as obligatorily rebellious against the older generation, resistant to old pieties, and resentful of authority as their peers on the outside, but they had joined an all-prescribed program devoted to the Western *tradition* and guided by a man who believed and said that *authority* merited a certain respect. They had come out of a radical impulse and found themselves in a conservative setting. For these reform programs *are* conservative, not in the political, right-wing, sense, since they need not have—and, I think, should not have—any built-in party-political bias whatsoever, but in the conservationist sense, the disposition to keep alive that most endangered of species, the wisdom of the past. To be sure, the second cycle faculty was perceived by the students as being in fact politically conservative, but the teachers seem to have been discreet about it, and the program was apparently—to their great glory—never politicized. Students were confronted with adult opinions, which they considered excitedly and seriously, but to which they were, by their own testimony, not converted.

The College, unlucky in other respects, seems to have been very lucky in some of its students. Their ambiguous situation turned them toward a more reflective, thoughtful consideration of questions concerning authority and equality. Tussman himself, present or absent, was often the focus of these discussions.

“Elitism,” that facile bugaboo of the time, also loomed large in their speculations; they were uneasily convinced that they were a select group, although one of Tussman’s endearing educational notions was that his program should *not* be selective, and admission had in fact been random for those who met the university’s entrance criteria. It seems to be the case that such reform programs (including St. John’s) are built on a faith that aristocracy and democracy can be made to coincide through liberal education (my term, not

Tussman's), that almost every *willing* human being can come profitably face to face with deep questions and complex answers laid out in difficult books. This proposition seems to be provably true—*sub specie aeternitatis* distinctions in academic merit become far less discernible and all kinds of people rise to the occasion. Nonetheless, the students not only thought of themselves as chosen but had the grace to wonder why—they were, after all, living in the midst of rampageous egalitarianism. Moreover they divided themselves into those who “got it” and the others, doomed to outsiderhood. There was, just as you would expect, continual speculation about the occult essence of the program, healthy insofar as students were reflecting on their own education, but somewhat harmful in introducing invidious distinctions among the participants; some students were more equal than others. Such intense navel inspection and distinction-making is, I suppose, endemic to any idea-driven community. But some of the students, more women than men, would evidently have been grateful if they had been more deliberately drawn into the community; they just didn't know how to make use of the friendships and the mentoring that were certainly on offer.

Concerning the curriculum, something gratifying but again not altogether surprising emerged. Students had joined an *issues* program, but it was the *books* that they remembered. Partly it was the simple pride of finding themselves reading these notorious classics on their own, a kind of “look, mom, no hands!” effect. But they were also captivated by the sheer grandeur and the manifest, yet untendentious, relevance to their own condition of some of the works they were reading. A reason mentioned for their sense that the second, the American, year of the curriculum never quite jelled was that it did not offer enough books of similar stature. To my mind this would have been an easily remediable lack, if only the reading list had not been bound to issues previously staked out; some of the books, especially the autobiographies, were evidently chosen more for their topicality than their quality.

Besides faculty, students, and curriculum, “the House” which was the focus, the hearth, of the program is singled out for a chapter—an indication that the author herself “got it.” No real community of learning can do without a local habitation and a place, and this old fraternity house was the well-remembered scene of great exhilaration and also of some pain. It was where the program lived, an intellectual home to the students and to the director a source of deep but fond anxiety, since where students congregate, there messes arise. There are also reports on the unsurprisingly unhappy use of teaching assistants in the first cycle, on the occasional career worries that participation in a “sub-disciplinary” program engendered in the students, and on many other facets of the College.

Just as letters customarily end in “sincerely yours,” so research studies usually sign off by asserting “the need for further research,” and so does this one. But to me the Experimental College seems now to have been pretty thor-

oughly covered. The concluding section, "Lessons from the Program," summarizes the valuable if unsurprising wisdom gained from this research project for future use: The faculty must come committed to the program and must have some staying power; someone must be in charge; the curriculum must be coherent and stable (which three conditions together imply that there must be some institutional autonomy); the program must have some overarching ethical (or, I would prefer, intellectual) intention; the pedagogical devices must promote a community of learning; discipline-bound textbooks should be replaced by original sources, and these should be of the highest quality.

In fact, a few Meiklejohn-Tussman replications, modified quite extensively to fit diverse circumstances, are now in operation: Malaspina College in British Columbia, a program at Evergreen State in Washington, and the Integrated Studies Program at Wisconsin. Katherine Trow clearly hopes that her work will encourage more future foundings. As Jacob Klein, the dean of St. John's College who was preeminently responsible for stabilizing its program, used to say (adapting a proverb from his native Russian): "Her word in God's ear!"