

October 15, 1991 (Vol. 7, no. 4)

Dear Colleague:

The ancient Greek city-state has often been held up as a model of achievement. Voltaire thought so, and I think Fan Lizhi the Chinese astrophysicist and leader of democratic movement would agree. For all its grievous faults, Periclean Athens boasted participatory democracy and a standard in philosophy and the arts that still commands the respect of the generality of humankind. By contrast, the modern world--and the United States in particular--offers urban sprawls, which for all the millions that live in them have added relatively little to humankind's permanent collection of cultural treasures.

And yet the United States has created city-states that rival ancient Athens in splendor. I have in mind the great public universities, of which UW-Madison is a shining example. The similarities between the ancient city-states and modern land-grant universities are striking. The ancient city-states were highly competitive. Competing for what? For excellence in speech, in the arts, in philosophy, and in games. Athenian politics, rather than being primarily a domain of force or even a sphere for determining who gets what, justified itself as an arena of excellence and responsibility, where citizens by acting together and inspiring each other, could become truly free. And who were the true citizens of Athens? In the end, whoever wanted to and could participate in the city's disputatious (yet civil) life, whether this be conducted at the agora or in the lyceum. By the end of the fourth century B.C., cosmopolitan culture had so penetrated Athenian institutions that those who dominated its intellectual discourse were all foreigners--Aristotle, Theophrastus, Zeno, Cleanthes, and Chrysippus; only Epicurus was of Athenian stock, though by birth a colonial (E. R. Dodds, The Greeks and the Irrational, 1951).

An American institution of higher learning qualifies as a mini-city by virtue of its size and its service and civic functions, which include residential halls, gardens and "wilderness" areas, shops and restaurants, police force, hospital, committees for adjudicating justice, etc. A great university such as Madison is a participatory democracy: only a few years ago, faculty met on the Pnyx and debated their views without the intermediary of representatives. Our reason for being was and still is excellence. Many universities carry some such transcendental-universalist motto as "Light and Truth." The thrust of our enterprise is to seek more light and move closer to truth. And in this enterprise, American universities are highly competitive, as were the Greek city-states. We are always challenging our rivals: we demand to be ranked in the arts, in the sciences, and in athletics. We hope to be number one in football as we hope to be number one in geography. We go to football games wearing the Badger sweater, and we go to scholarly conferences wearing our institutional affiliation on our name tags. And like ancient Athens, the university-city, in its effort to attain prominence and fame, welcomes talented and motivated

individuals from everywhere, in disregard of hair color and ancestry.

The ancient Greek city offered a double advantage to its citizens: an abstract realm of truth and beauty that is the home of the mind, and a particular place--Athens--that is the home of the whole, multifaceted and contingent person. A Greek citizen, nurtured by both homes, owed allegiance to both. The American university offers a similar double advantage to its members: the open cosmopolis of thought and the place-specific campus. Significantly, while participating in an intellectual Olympiad away from the home campus, a scholar knows that she can win laurels for herself and for her institution only by cutting emotional ties to her own past and to her campus.

In the last two decades, however, the great American public university has moved in a direction that, should it continue, will radically change the university's character. Envisage the following scenario. At a future Olympiad of geographers, the name tags of the participants will carry ethnic or sexual, rather than institutional, labels. So-and-so will be identified as an Asian American or a Lesbian, rather than as a a thinker and a citizen of UW-Madison. The cosmopolis of thought in which minds, by nature indifferent to roots and place, can engage one another to arrive (tentatively) at common truths disappears. Instead, there will be passionate contestations of viewpoints and programs, all of which proudly subjective, driven as they are by one's ethnic, class or sexual loyalty. Politics will have lost altogether its ancient tie to the lure of excellence, and will have become nakedly the domain of power, a ceaseless struggle over who gets what.

I can imagine someone saying, "Well, the lure of excellence has never existed, not even at the university. And politics, despite how the Greeks would have liked it, has always been the primary domain of power and the sphere of working out who gets what." I think such a view too reductionist, untrue to history, and a calumny on human nature. But, if enough people believe it to be true, it will be true. Thus, unless we examine the virtue of diversity closely, we will one day construct a university that is indeed diverse, but diverse as New York is diverse--that is, a city in which municipal forms are printed in seventeen languages but in which very few citizens speak more than one tongue, and each ethnic-language group determinedly locks itself into its own ghetto for a specious sense of security.

Best wishes,

*H. J.*