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The Lindenwood Common Course

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THE LINDENWOOD COMMON COURSE
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Common

"There is, in fact, little difficulty in identifying moments when humanity swings out of its old paths on to a new plane, when it leaves the marked out route and turns off in a new direction"

Geoffrey Barraclough

We live in a time of obvious change. The transformations of the last few generations far transcend the normal evolution of ideas and institutions. All times are by nature transitory, but Barraclough is right in saying that some periods of man's development are marked by extreme changes in direction and emphasis. Old institutions prove inadequate to present day challenges and must be phased out in favor of newer ones. Those who are caught in the midst of this alteration may react in a variety of ways. They may oppose the changes, talk about the "good old days," lament the deterioration and decay of manners and morale. There are others who are enthusiastic about the changes and welcome all the newer practices. But there are many others who are frightened and confused by the seeming uncertainty and aimlessness of their times. This confusion and uncertainty is particularly hard for colleges, which are places of traditional rebellion and identity-seeking anyway.

When the Lindenwood faculty approached the task of curriculum review and reconstruction in the 1966-67 academic year, this discontinuity with the past was uppermost in their minds. The accepted types of historically-oriented courses seemed inadequate to approach present realities. Some new way of probing the present was needed. The faculty's answer was the Lindenwood Common Course.

The course grew gradually out of a multitude of discussions and suggestions involving almost everyone on the faculty. We wanted to meet several problems at once. The first of these was the cry of this generation for relevance. We wanted a course that would speak to and about the prevailing problems of our time - a course that would jump past the boundaries of the campus. Hence the theme - "Dynamics of the Twentieth Century." We took this business of change and discovered in it relevance across the face of all our disciplines. Political forms and beliefs are under attack; moral standards are being defined to the delight of some and the distress of others; music is abandoning the comfortable, familiar forms of the 19th century and is experimenting madly with atonal, discordant, sometimes electronic sounds; art is bursting out with "what is it" all over the place, literature and films have broken all the old bounds of subject matter and forms, theologians and laymen are debating the reality of God and the future of the church. In every case, we wanted to ask some simple questions: Why are the old forms being rejected? What new forms are rising to take their places? Is there any pattern to it all?

The course was also deliberately designed to form a compromise in a long standing faculty dispute at Lindenwood and many other colleges. We have some members of our faculty who insist that, at the freshman level, single instructors can range across the entire face of knowledge and carry on discussions with students which are deep probing and intellectually adequate. Such discussions would have obvious cross-disciplinary value. On the other hand, many of our faculty were convinced that no one person has the breadth and depth of knowledge necessary for this kind of activity and that the resulting

courses and discussion would be infantile in the extreme. We designed the Common to form a bridge between these two points of view. We asked the faculty members from the various divisions to represent their total divisional contribution. Thus, the political scientist who enters the Common represents the entire range of social science activity - not just political science. The biologist who joins the Common faculty represents the entire scientific point of view.

On the other hand, no one is compelled to represent all knowledge equally. We hoped that this arrangement would provide cross-disciplinary but intellectually stimulating discussions and insights for students. Gradually, in the inter-play of the faculty members themselves involved with the course, we hoped that a large amount of intellectual carry-over between disciplines would occur. We are finding that this indeed is the case as we go along.

This kind of course involves us immediately in a new kind of teacher-student relationship. When we talk to students about our own disciplines, we can be reasonably sure that we are on superior ground. This isn't true when we range broadly outside our own immediate concern. When we discuss the future of representative democracy in the second half of the twentieth century, we have no ultimate answers. If we ask the question, "How can man be so inhuman to his fellows as to create concentration camps and gas chambers?", we can give no satisfactory response. It becomes for the faculty and for the students a matter of mutual exploration. We can suggest to

students ways to look and methods of checking the results, but we cannot give them the results; we don't have them. But we do know that the search for answers is important. We do know that if we have no insight into the process and direction of change, we become prisoners of it. In that sense, the course carries a kind of implicit conviction that before protest and change must come understanding and conviction. To use a familiar analogy, we do not want to indoctrinate students to either swim upstream, drift downstream, or just hang onto the bank and watch. What we do want is that they understand the nature and direction of the river so they can make their own intelligent choices about direction. That is what freedom is; not license, but choices.

Beyond the belief that it is possible to glimpse something of the direction and purpose of change, we wanted students to realize the essential unity of knowledge. We have divided and subdivided knowledge into the myriad academic disciplines of our day. This subdivision has progressed so far that the practitioners of one special field of knowledge often cannot appreciate or even communicate with specialists in another field. The distinguishing mark of the small liberal arts college is that it serves as a mediating factor among the disciplines. We are not so large that the professor of music never sees or talks to a sociologist. We wanted students to realize that the principle of discontinuity that might be discussed in a class in mathematics may also be reflected by an artist in his work.

Students also need exposure to a variety of disciplines and professors before they make important choices about majors. The Common brings

them into contact with nine members of the staff in a single course, and with three or four of these teachers she has a close contact.

To realize all these goals, we created a course rather like an onion - it has a series of concentric layers, all contributing to each other. Looking at the approach we wanted - long discussions, difficult, challenging readings, full-length films - it was obvious that the old fifty-minute classes would not work. They were too constricting. So we set aside Monday and Thursday mornings for the course. Students enrolled can have no conflicts on these days, and we can pile the mornings full of activities. It required a total revamping of our class scheduling to accomplish this, but we felt then - and we know now - that the effort was justified.

The outer layer of our onion is the plenary series. This brings the whole class together to hear outstanding presentations both by our own faculty and by outside speakers who share with the students their special knowledge and feelings about this process of change. In the first year of operation of the course we had a particularly varied selection of outside speakers who joined us. We had an actress who not only discussed new forms in the theatre but "emoted" right there in class. An urban economist outlined the major problems that seem to be eroding the quality of life in our large cities; a political scientist analyzed why American society is turning more and more to government for solutions to its problems. James Dickey, the poet, read from his work; a practitioner of modern dance insisted that everyone must join in, no spectators allowed.

A biologist discussed the moral responsibilities of the scientific community; an ecumenical churchman speculated about the forms that religious expression might take in the future, assuming that many present forms will be abandoned. This sort of continuous commentary formed the background for our consideration of 20th century change.

In much the same way, a series of films provided a visual commentary on our times. This is particularly important for students whose memories are all postwar. We tried to give them films that evoked our century as it was, the pacifism of the 1920's recalled in "All Quiet on the Western Front," the depression years of the dustbowl portrayed in "The Grapes of Wrath," some of the dilemmas of right now in "Dr. Strangelove" or "The Pawnbroker." Some twenty programs of films were used during the year, particularly involving us with the long, effective films that would never fit into a class format before.

But the real heart of the course is the discussion group. There are nine in all - three social science groups, three humanities groups, and three science groups, with nine faculty to match. Through a rotation system, students experience all three areas during the year. In these groups of about twenty, students read about the serious problems of our time, talk about them among themselves and with the instructor, and write about them. The papers come thickly, every week or so, but it is in the writing that our thoughts come clean, as it were. These papers not only serve the purposes of the course, they also constitute training in composition. An English instructor is attached to the course to help them in their writing efforts.

The science sections focused on the evolution of scientific thought in the 20th century beginning with a section which they called Newtonian Physics: The Reification of Man. In this they exploit the notion that man had been displaced from the center of his universe by the Newtonian physical system which had resulted in the gradual rise of materialism and a replacement of man by the machine. Newton's physics experienced some difficult times before the turn of the century, especially with the work of Maxwell concerning the wave nature of light and the ultimate proof of the wave nature of light by Hertz: this meant the invention of the "ether" as a medium through which light waves were supposed to be propagated in order to make the wave nature of light conform to the Newtonian physics, which says that everything operates according to a very strict causal plan, following definite laws which are as certainable, and, therefore, future events are predictable once the facts are known.

The huge flaw in the Newtonian physics is that it presumes that substance is involved in the operation of all nature's laws and leaves no room for the absence of substance. It makes substance the "ultimate actual entity," which, according to Whitehead, is the "root doctrine of materialism." Newtonian physics serves well in cases involving events experienced on the sub-atomic level. It is, however, not absolutely correct even there.

The science groups next considered what they described as the Planckian-Einsteinian physics: the beginning of the de-reification of man. In this they considered the gradual return of man in scientific thought to his proper niche- the process initiated by fundamental

discoveries in physics, beginning at the turn of the 20th century: Planck's constant, relativity, quantum theory, photoelectric effect and Bohr's theory of the atom followed by the uncertainty principle and the concept of complementarity.

The great change that occurred at this time was to show not only that Newton's laws do not hold on the sub-atomic level, but even the possibility that his gravitational laws cannot be applied unaltered to the universe. Perhaps the greatest single thing discovered was that matter and energy are interchangeable, so that we no longer have a law of the conservation of matter and a law of the conservation of energy, but a single law of the conservation of matter and energy. The implications of this are not realized by the population as a whole until World War II. Also the law of causality has suffered a set-back in at least some areas, because we find that perturbations of nature are sometimes statistical and thus individually quite unpredictable. As Whitehead says, "The change from materialism to organic realism - as the new outlook may be termed - is the displacement of the notion of static stuff by the notion of fluid energy. Such energy has its structure of action and flow and is inconceivably apart from such structure.

And, finally, the science groups turned to their third area which they describe as Man As a Person and Not a Thing: Personalism. The recent discoveries made in the last fifteen years or so in the biological sciences, especially those that have to do with the physical

heredity of man, and its probably influence on man's ability to guide his own future evolutionary processes. Thus man is again becoming conscious of his freedom and mastery over both his genetic and his cultural heredity. This means that man is again thrust into the position where he will have to decide how automation and cybernation will serve him and free him from the burdens that he has borne. And thus he can again become the dominant force in the world provided he has the intelligence to use these forces advantageously for the common human good. Further, the control which he now has within his grasp over his genetic future opens to him new areas of freedom which he has never before had.

The humanities groups were concerned to show the changes which have occurred in the structure and matter of the arts, taking that term broadly, in the 20th century. In the latter decades of the 19th century the western world appeared smug and secure. The Victorian compromise was in force. Liberal theology had combined with social Darwinism to smother the protests of the unconvinced. A spirit of optimism pervaded most of society. Richard Strauss' operas composed in the class-romantic style are filled with complacent sentiment overly comfortable and quite bourgeois. The landscape paintings of Turner and Whistler and the endless portraits of the middle and upper class reflect the certainties of the period between 1870 and 1914, while the imperialistic poetry of Kipling tells of "the white man's burden." But after the shock and disillusionment of the first World War, the first tasks of 20th century art, literature, music, theology, and philosophy were to shake off the burden of a tradition that seemed false and no longer fruitful. The

easy answers of liberal theology and social Darwinism, the romantic complacency of Strauss and Turner, the imperialist message of Kipling were identified with those forces that had brought about the slaughter in the trenches and were refuted.

Following the "war to end all wars" and the peace which followed, the myths of the past began to die/^{the myths} that had created the comfortable foundations of complacency. The community of belief that enabled the Victorian and Edwardian to face his destiny with courage were no longer available in the old terms. The contemporary imagination nourished on the scientific synthesis and haunted by war could not recapture the spontaneous vitality assured by the myths of religion, class or worn out theories such as social Darwinism. Man saw himself now as shaped inevitably by a complex of economic, environmental and hereditary forces. He no longer believed in the uses of reason to help him solve the riddle of existence. Twentieth century literature, art philosophy begins with a rejection of social optimism; they demonstrate the ineffectuality of all temporal and historical remedies, and they search for new forms in which the new vision can best be expressed. Man, not nature or God, becomes the sole source of whatever meaning can be elicited from existence. It is through the mediating work of art that he confronts without illusions life in its new and threatening garb. He doubts the existence of eternal moral laws, and the religious faith that once sustained him is weakened and in many cases is gone. Weakened or destroyed are his beliefs in Heaven and hell, angels and demons, God and devil, grace, original sin, immortality and redemption. The symmetrical structure and harmonic repetition of phrases in music gives way to dissonance and

atonality of Schoenberg and Stravinsky. Realism in painting gives way to cubism and abstraction. The humanities groups particularly explored these changes in form and the reasons behind them.

The social science groups explored the notions of how the old liberal democratic forms of the 19th century have been adapted to the uses of the 20th century mass man. Under the impact of urbanism, industrialism, and population growth old economic, social, and political structures were forced to adapt themselves to new conditions. The social science groups particularly focused on three kinds of problems which have resulted from this. The first of these dealt with the adaptation of capitalism to the new demands of modern mass democracy - the giving way of the old laissez-faire robber baron technique of capitalism to the directed capitalism of our times. To illustrate this we explored the 1920's to an extent, looked at the impact of the depression on modern economic thinking and then looked at the growth of governmentally controlled capitalism in the 50's and 60's. We next turned our attention to the problems of government in the 20th century, particularly the forces in modern society which produced such aberrant forms as Fascism. In particular, we focused upon the Nazi manifestation in Germany and its attempt to annihilate the Jews, seeking in this uniquely German experience some sort of universal lesson in political behavior which is potentially possible at all times and in all places. Taking off from that point, we next explored the kinds of social and family forms that might produce what the psychologist would call the authoritarian personality. We were careful, however, to range beyond the historical aspect of authoritarian behavior seeking these behavior patterns in

our own lives and in the lives of others we know. The object at all times was to seek lessons that could be applied to our own lives in our own times.

All of these discussion groups focused their attention on readings of particular importance - books like THE BROKEN IMAGE by Matson, the work of George Beadle on genetics, Mosse's work on modern totalitarianism, distinctive modern novels such as CLOCKWORK ORANGE and HENDERSON THE RAIN KING, and important materials for music and art in the form of records and slides. These materials allowed us to view ideas about the changes of our times from every angle and from every insight - the perception of the scientist, the social scientist, the theologian, the artist, musician, the novelist. From all of these partial views come the raw materials from which the students and the faculty tried laboriously to construct their own ideas.

These nine discussion groups, incidentally, were formed around the student residence halls. The members of each group not only do their work in this course together; they live together as well. This results in an enormous amount of carry-over. The class need not end when the instructor leaves; it may go on or be resumed informally later in the evening. The students overwhelmingly testified that there was in fact an enormous amount of discussion in the dormitories about the materials which they were using in the Common. This discussion sometimes went on all night.

The second half of the spring term is free of classes in the Common. This allows seven weeks for each student to pursue a project of her choice - an exploration of some aspect of the course which has caught her interest. The end product is a long paper. We have now had one full round of these papers and many of them were outstanding. They ranged all the way from an 80 page discussion of Franklin Roosevelt's theory of the presidency to an experimental film done by two students in the course. The best of these papers will be selected and bound permanently for inclusion in the Lindenwood Library.

Based on our first year's experience in the Common Course, we have made several changes.

1) First, the scheduling philosophy for the plenaries has been changed. During the first year a potpourri arrangement was used, taking a great variety of speakers as they were available. This provided an extremely interesting but uneven series. Its primary lack was coherence. We had hoped that the students could take material in rather a jig-saw fashion and arrange it, but this was obviously more difficult than we thought for many of them.

This year the series has been structured around a narrower version of the theme. From the broad idea of "Change in the 20th Century", we have abstracted the idea of "Environment." Taking a simpler and more cohesive approach, we propose to have three inter-related series of plenary lectures, each of 7 weeks. These 7 week series also match the rotation of students through their divisional work. The first series deals with the world environment. Rather

arbitrarily we chose three topics with which to deal. The first is population, because it provides the basic limitations in environment for all human activity. We will define the population crisis in terms of numbers, in terms of the economic drag it creates in developing countries, and the very real limitations both human and scientific on solution. We will next deal with technology and its interaction with society. In a series of three plenaries we will discuss the inter-relationships of science and technology, the economic and social consequences of technology, and the promise for the future of technological change. In the last topic under the rubric of world environment, we will take up the topic of war, trying to root out the generic types of contemporary wars - the Vietnam sorts of conflicts - and place them in social and scientific context. The contemporary wars will be defined carefully in terms of the 1960's, the so-called wars of national liberation will be analyzed and the scientific instinctive bases of aggression and war will be discussed at the end.

Then, emphasizing that we are in effect merely shifting the focus to a closer view, we move to a 7 week cycle on the urban environment, seeing it as a component of the larger environment. Again we consider three topics from the large list of available issues. We begin with race, the most potent of contemporary issues; the nagging issue of the connections between poverty and race in our urban ghettos is first explored; and then the question of a scientific evidence for the differentiation of the races, a very debatable point in a scientific community in recent

months. Then we move to the question of poverty and do three plenaries: The first on the concept of cultural poverty introduced several years ago by anthropologist Oscar Lewis, a concept which has been recently attacked; secondly, the question of Appalachia which violates our urban rubric somewhat but is still important; and thirdly, potential solutions to poverty, particularly the so-called guaranteed annual wage. The third aspect of the urban environment is dealt with in terms of space - how to utilize the urban environment to provide dignified, healthy, aesthetic living areas for human beings. Here again three plenaries are planned: First, the pollution of the environment - air, water, noise; secondly, city planning as a potential escape from the urban snarl; thirdly, public housing and its impact on poverty, upon race, upon the character of the city.

During the third seven week cycle, we shift the focus again to consider the individual and his reactions to his own environment. Seven plenaries are designed to explore this. The first of these - a discussion between a humanist and a scientist - will be called "RNA and the Spirit of Man." In the second one the alienation and reconciliation of contemporary man will be considered; in the third, the crisis of modern belief and unbelief; in the fourth, the consequences for individualism present in our modern mass world; in the fifth, the new art of our own times; in the sixth, the new music of the contemporary world; and then, finally, the human situation - a philosopher's view of man's predicament.

Significant readings have been assigned for all plenary topics so they become a regular part of the course and we avoid the problem faced by a speaker whose audience has no familiarity at all with the language of the subject. These readings are all short but have been selected as being

particularly significant by the faculty members of the Common Course team.

More of the plenaries, about one-half of them, will be done by our own staff people. This provides continuity and coherence which we did not obtain last year with an entirely visitor plenary series.

2) A second change based upon our experiences in the Common is this: to avoid leaving any plenary topic dangling in a vacuum, we will follow every plenary with a so-called "sub-plenary." The class will be split into three groups for discussion purposes presided over by a mixed team of faculty - one science person, one social science person and one humanities person - to continue the topic, exploring it from a cross-disciplinary approach every time. This we think will provide an extremely valuable addition to this year's practice.

3) The third change which we are making concerns films. This year all films will be shown within class times and in class contexts. They will be films appropriate to the topic which is immediately under discussion in the plenaries, chosen to provide a meaningful dimension to a student's understanding. All films will be followed by discussions.

4) A fourth shift is the addition of a bi-weekly series of faculty conferences. To provide a maximum carry-over from division to division we have scheduled a twice weekly faculty conference. All books used in all the divisional discussion groups, all basic ideas, all basic approaches will be discussed by all the nine discussion groups. Short position papers on all books will be prepared and sub-

mitted. We hope to cross-fertilize all the discussion groups with materials which are relevant.

5) In a fifth major change, we have carefully outlined the course with plenaries, sub-plenaries, its readings, etc., and will provide students this year with a syllabus. We hoped to avoid freezing the course and making it unnatural in any way, but last year the students were disturbed a bit by the apparent lack of structure. This year we hope we can free the student from all mechanical uncertainties about when and where he is supposed to perform. In that way we hope their attention will be concentrated on the material and not on the format.

6) A sixth revision in our approach this year is a modest one but a very helpful one. Because this course requires faculty to deal with material with which they do not normally deal and to become familiar with points of view which are often far outside their own discipline we have appreciated the fact that much of the reading which faculty members need to do for their own development must come from books which would not normally be on their shelves. For that reason the college this year has provided a fund allowing each of the nine members of the Freshman Common faculty to be reimbursed for up to \$100.00 worth of materials which they purchase for their own use in the course. This is not as extensive a program of faculty development as we hope to have, but it represents at least a first step in the process with which we develop cross-disciplinary faculty people. Such faculty people do not exist; they have to be created.