

# Liberal Education and the Social Sciences

## Second Presentation to the Libby Workshop

Colorado Springs, June 1990

Last week I mentioned briefly an idea from Rebecca West's old essay "The Meaning of Treason" – the idea that, as she says it, "we live outward from the center of a circle and what is nearest to the center is most real to us." She is speaking of nationalism, which she defines as "simply a special devotion of a people to its own material and spiritual achievements." But that definition is broad enough to include culture, and one's liberal education is part of one's culture. So it should not be stretching things too much to let West's circle represent what is liberal in one's liberal education. I was, and am, interested in West's circle, with its notion of devotion and its implication of concentric rings, for what it can offer us in our concern over how to define and provide a liberal education. "We live outward from the center," she says, "and what is nearest to the center is most real."

Now, in reading Plato and du Bois and Martin Luther King, I keep thinking in terms of West's circle. I'm struck, for instance, that although by all measures Plato would have to be seen as near the center of my circle, since I am a pretty typical Western academic, in rereading the selection from *The Republic*, I have to conclude that there is not much there in Plato that seems very important to me personally anymore. I find I've come to reject his idealistic philosophy and replaced it with the ideas contained in modern phenomenology (a relatively young set of ideas) and hermeneutics (a relatively specialized, even esoteric set of ideas). I reject his notion of truth as something immutable and unchanging, and therefore, though I agree with the importance of creative oppositions and dialectic, Plato's particular version of the dialectic doesn't seem too useful. I'm inclined to replace it with something like Karl Popper's notion of trial-and-the-elimination-of-error. As a teacher I even reject the so-called Socratic method, highly touted though it may be as a teaching strategy: To me it seems like just another version of arrogant and condescending student abuse in which poor Glaucon is expected forever to play Costello to Socrates' Abbot. It reminds me too much of that horrid and obnoxious law

professor in *The Paper Chase*. And yet in spite of all of this rejection, Plato must still be somehow at the center of my circle.

On the other hand, King and du Bois seem to me to speak with a vision that is still alive and moving, and I find that I resent it that they are not nearer the center of the circle. They are out there on the periphery -- and beyond. This point was made best for me by Harding's *There Is a River*. It was not until I read Harding last week that I knew anything at all about the betrayal of the blacks of the Carolinian sea islands. And I resent that fact. That is a crucial part of our national history. It is something that no democratic society can afford to forget. And yet it was not part of the American history that I was taught. Of course, I can't really just blame the system, for no one was there sitting on my chest and stopping me from reading Black history rather than reading, say, works on phenomenology and hermeneutics. But still I resent the fact that it was not till I was 55 years old that I first heard that bit of history, and then pretty much by accident.

But for what they're worth, I offer the following notes to help us begin towards one way to answer the overriding question of this seminar: How do we teach this stuff?

Picture a circle, West's circle, with an X marking its center. Then picture a Y lying well outside the circle. In West's terms that X marks what is most real to us. Though, as I've said, the relationship is complicated, let the X mark the general area where Plato's work lies in the circle of a Western academic. The Y is outside, in a certain sense less real for that more or less typical Western academic. Let it represent du Bois's ideas on race.

For a long time it has seemed to me that the opposition between in and out is somehow very, very basic to our culture. Just consider how many word-pairs we have in English that express the notion of *inside* vs. *outside*: *entrance* and *exit*, *introvert* and *extrovert*, *domestic* and *foreign*, *native* and *alien*, *centrifugal* and *centripetal*, *input* and *output*, *inhibition* and *exhibition*, *import* and *export* . . . . It just keeps going, enough so that it makes for a

pretty good car game while you are driving through the plains: "How many word-pairs can you think of that convey the opposition between *in* and *out*?" For our language to lavish such attention on it suggests that the *in* and *out* distinction is really an important one to us.

But back to West's circle with its central X and out-lying Y: I believe that to embrace something new into the circle, two things must happen. Like a good phenomenologist, I believe that our reality emerges out of the dialogue between us and the surrounding not-us. I believe, too, that as we engage in dialogue with that out-lying Y, trying to make meaning of it, it moves closer to our center. And I also believe that the circumference of our cultural circle reaches out. The Y moves in; the circle moves out. And what once was outside is now inside.

I think that is the way all learning takes place, as we go along adding new information to the old information we already know, in a process of growing comprehension. *Comprehension* in its original sense refers to a grasping, an embracing. Remember that the *prehens* in *comprehension* is also in the word *prehensile*. It means to grasp, to embrace.

And so this labored, almost exactly 8-minute long, confessional comes down finally to a fancy way of saying that as we add new things to our cultural circle, it is not a case of one thing displacing another. It does not have to be anything like West's notion of treason, which was my original worry. It is, or at least can be, rather a more dynamic action in which what was once outside is brought inside, embraced, moved closer to the center of things. And the circle itself is enlarged. And the inner structure of the circle is changed in important ways, enriched, articulated more fully, made more complex in its interrelationships. But discussing that process would require much, much more than 8 minutes, or two weeks, or what little patience we still might have here for such phenomenological meanderings. Let us just say with West, again, "we live outward from the center of a circle and what is nearest to the center is most real to us."