The Life of Students

There is a view of history that puts its faith in the infinite extent of time and thus concerns itself only with the speed, or lack of it, with which people and epochs advance along the path of progress. This corresponds to a certain absence of coherence and rigor in the demands it makes on the present. The following remarks, in contrast, delineate a particular condition in which history appears to be concentrated in a single focal point, like those that have traditionally been found in the utopian images of the philosophers. The elements of the ultimate condition do not manifest themselves as formless progressive tendencies, but are deeply rooted in every present in the form of the most endangered, excoriated, and ridiculed ideas and products of the creative mind. The historical task is to disclose this immanent state of perfection and make it absolute, to make it visible and dominant in the present. This condition cannot be captured in terms of the pragmatic de-
›n of details (the history of institutions, customs, and so on); in fact, it eludes them. Rather, the task is to grasp its metaphysical structure, as with the messianic domain or the idea of the French Revolution. It is worth taking the trouble to describe the contemporary significance of students and the university, of the form of their present existence, only if they can be understood as a metaphor, as an image of the highest metaphysical state of history. Only then will it be comprehensible and possible. Such a description is neither a call to arms nor a manifesto; each of these is as futile as the other. But it casts light on the crisis that hitherto has lain buried in the nature of things. This crisis will lead on to the resolution that will overwhelm the craven-hearted and to which the stout-hearted will submit. The only way to deal with the historical significance of student life and the university is

to focus on the system as a whole. So long as the preconditions needed for this are absent, the only possibility is to liberate the future from its deformations in the present by an act of cognition. This must be the exclusive task of criticism.

The question to address is that of the conscious unity of student life. This is the starting point, for there is no point in distinguishing between specific problems—of science, politics, or ethics—if the courage to submit is missing overall. What distinguishes student life is just the opposite of that: it is the will to submit to a principle, to identify completely with an idea. The concept of "science" or scholarly discipline [*Wissenschaft*] serves primarily to conceal a deep-rooted, bourgeois indifference. To measure student life by the yardstick of this science does not necessarily imply any panlogism or intellectualism—as is commonly feared—but is a legitimate criticism, since science is normally adduced as the students' bulwark against "alien" demands. So our concern here must be with inner unity, not with critique from outside. And our reply is that for the vast majority of students, academic study is nothing more than vocational training. Because "academic study has no bearing on life," it must be the exclusive determinant of the lives of those who pursue it. The innocently hypocritical reservations people have about science include the expectation that academic study must lead to a profession for all and sundry. Yet scholarship, far from leading inexorably to a profession, may in fact preclude it. For it does not permit you to abandon it; in a way, it places the student under an obligation to become a teacher, but never to embrace the official professions of doctor, lawyer, or university professor. It leads to no good if institutes that grant titles, qualifications, and other prerequisites for life or a profession are permitted to call themselves seats of learning. The objection that the modern state cannot otherwise produce the doctors, lawyers, and teachers it needs is irrelevant. It only illustrates the magnitude of the task entailed in creating a community of learning, as opposed to a body of officials and academically qualified people. It only shows how far the development of the professional apparatuses (through knowledge and skill) have forced the modern disciplines to abandon their original unity in the idea of knowledge, a unity which in their eyes has now become a mystery, if not a fiction. Anyone who accepts the modern state as a given and believes that everything must serve its development will be forced to reject these ideas. One can only hope that such a person will not call for state protection and support for "learning." For the true sign of decadence is not the collusion of the university and the state (something that is by no means incompatible with honest barbarity), but the theory and guarantee of academic freedom, when in reality people assume with brutal simplicity that the aim of study is to steer its disciples to a socially conceived individuality and service to the state. No tolerance of opinions and teachings, however free, can be beneficial, so long as there

is no guarantee of a form of life that these ideas—the free ideas no less than the strict ones—imply, so long as people can naively deny the huge gulf between ideas and life by pointing to the link between the universities and the state. It is misleading to raise expectations in the individual if the fulfillment of these expectations negates the spirit that unites these same individuals, and the only remarkable and even astounding point to be emphasized here is the extent to which institutes of higher learning are characterized by a gigantic game of hide-and-seek in which students and teachers, each in his or her own unified identity, constantly push past one another without ever seeing one another. The students are always inferior to the teachers because they have no official status, and the legal constitution of the university—embodied in the minister of education, who is appointed by the sovereign, not by the university—is a barely veiled alliance of the academic authorities with the state over the heads of the students (and in rare, welcome instances, over the heads of the teachers as well).

The uncritical and spineless acquiescence in this situation is an essential feature of student life. It is true that the so-called independent-student organizations [*Freie Studentenschaft*], as well as others with one social tendency or another, have attempted to resolve this problem.[1] Ultimately, however, their answer lies in the complete assimilation of academic institutions into bourgeois conditions, and nothing has shown more clearly that the students of today as a community are incapable of even formulating the issue of the role of learning, or grasping its indissoluble protest against the vocational demands of the age. It is necessary to criticize the independent-student organizations and the ideas of those close to them because it will throw light on their chaotic conception of academic life. To this end, I shall quote from a speech I gave to a student audience in the hope of contributing to a reform movement.

> There is a very simple and reliable criterion by which to test the spiritual value of a community. It is to ask: Does it allow all of an individual's efforts to be expressed? Is the whole human being committed to it and indispensable to it? Or is the community as superfluous to each individual as he is to it? It is so easy to pose these questions, and so easy to answer them with reference to contemporary types of social community. And the answer is decisive. Everyone who achieves strives for totality, and the value of his achievement lies in that totality—that is, in the fact that the whole, undivided nature of a human being should be expressed in his achievement. But when determined by our society, as we see it today, achievement does not express a totality; it is completely fragmented and derivative. It is not uncommon for the community to be the site where a joint and covert struggle is waged against higher ambitions and more personal goals, but where a more profoundly organic individual development is obscured. The socially relevant achievement of the average person serves in the vast majority of cases to repress the original and nonderivative,

inner aspirations of the human being. We are speaking here of academically trained people, people who for professional reasons have some kind of inner connection with the spiritual struggles and skeptical or critical attitudes of students. These people appropriate a milieu entirely alien to themselves and make it their workplace; in this remote place they create a limited activity for themselves, and the entire totality of such labor lies in its alleged utility for an often abstractly conceived society. There is no internal or authentic connection between the spiritual existence of a student and, say, his concern for the welfare of workers' children or even for other students. No connection, that is, apart from a concept of duty unrelated to his own inner labor. It is a concept based on a mechanical contrast: on the one hand, he has a stipend from the people; on the other, he is acting out his social duty. The concept of duty here is calculated, derivative, and distorted; it does not flow from the nature of the work itself. This sense of duty is satisfied not by suffering in the cause of truth, not by enduring all the doubts of an earnest seeker, or indeed by any set of beliefs connected with an authentic intellectual life. Instead this sense of duty is worked out in terms of a crude, superficial dualism, such as ideals versus materialism, or theory and practice. In a word, all that socially relevant labor represents not an ethical intensification but only the timid reaction of a spiritual life. Yet the deepest and most crucial objection is not that such socially relevant labor is simply left floating, abstractly opposed to the true activities of a student, and so constitutes an extreme and thoroughly reprehensible form of relativism, one incapable of any true synthesis and hence one that anxiously and timidly strives to ensure that every mental activity is accompanied by a physical one, every intellectual commitment by its opposite. The decisive factor, then, is not that socially relevant labor is nothing but an empty, undirected desire to be "useful." The truly decisive criticism is that despite all this it lays claim to the gesture of love, where only mechanical duty exists. This duty is often nothing more than a deflection of purpose, an evasion of the consequences of the critical, intellectual existence to which students are committed. For in reality a student is only a student because the problems of spiritual life are closer to his heart than the practice of social welfare. And last—and this is an infallible sign—this socially relevant student activity does not succeed in revolutionizing the conception and value of such social work in general. In the public mind, such work still seems to be a peculiar mixture of duty and charity on the part of the individual. Students have not been able to demonstrate its spiritual necessity and for that reason have never been able to establish a truly serious community based on it, as opposed to one bound by duty and self-interest. The Tolstoyan spirit, which laid bare the huge gulf between bourgeois and proletarian existence; the concept that service on behalf of the poor is the task of mankind, and not a spare-time student activity—that concept clearly called for a total commitment or nothing at all. The Tolstoyan spirit, which developed in the mind of the most deeply committed anarchists or in Christian monastic orders, this truly serious sense of social work, which had no need of childlike attempts to empathize with the soul of the workers or the people—this spirit failed to develop in student communities. The attempt to convert an academic community into a social-welfare organization failed because of the abstract nature of its object and the students' lack of inner connection with it.

> The totality of will [*des Wollenden*] could not find any expression, because in that community its will could not be directed toward the totality.

The symptomatic importance of these attempts on the part of the independent students, including Christian-Socialists and many others, is that in their desire to demonstrate their utility in the state and in life, they reenact in the microcosm of the university that same conflict that we have noted in the relationship of the university to the state. They have conquered a sanctuary in the university for egoisms and altruisms of almost every kind, for every self-evident mode of being in the real world. Only radical doubt, fundamental critique, and the most important thing of all—the life that would be willing to dedicate itself to reconstruction—are excluded. What we see here is not the progressive spirit of the independent students as opposed to the reactionary power of the dueling fraternities. As we have tried to show, and as we can see from the uniformity and passivity of the universities as a whole, the independent students are very far from having a well-thought-out intellectual strategy. Their voice has not made itself heard on any of the issues that have been raised here. Their indecisiveness makes them inaudible. Their opposition runs on the well-oiled tracks of liberal politics; their social principles have not developed beyond the level of the liberal press. The independent students have not thought out the problem of the university, and to that extent it is bitter historical justice that on official occasions it is the dueling fraternities, who in the past did experience and confront the problem of the academic community, who now appear as the unworthy representatives of the student tradition. On fundamental issues the independent students do not display spirit that is any more exalted or determination that is any greater than those of the fraternities, and their influence is almost more pernicious than theirs. This influence is more deceptive and misleading, in that this undisciplined, bourgeois, and small-minded movement claims the role of champion and liberator in the life of the university. The modern student body cannot be found in the places where the conflicts over the spiritual rebirth of the nation are raging—in the controversies about a new art, or at the side of its writers and poets, or indeed at the sources of religious life. This is because the German student body does not exist as such. Not because it refuses to join in the latest "modern" movements, but because, as a student body, it is completely unaware of all these movements; because, as a student body, it constantly drifts in the wake of public opinion; because it is courted and spoiled by every party and alliance, is flattered by everyone, and submits to all. And with all that, it remains in every respect devoid of the nobility that up to a century ago gave German students a visible profile and enabled them to step forward as the champions of life at its best.

The perversion of the creative spirit into the vocational spirit, which we see at work everywhere, has taken possession of the universities as a whole

and has isolated them from the nonofficial, creative life of the mind. The mandarin contempt for the activities of independent artists and scholars who are alien and often hostile to the state is a painful proof of this. One of the most celebrated German university professors referred in a lecture to those "coffeehouse literati according to whom Christianity is finished." The tone and accuracy of this statement balance each other perfectly. And if a university organized in this way is hostile toward academic study, even though such study can pretend to have claims to "relevance" to the immediate concerns of the state, how much more sterile will its approach to the arts and Muses be? By directing students toward the professions, it must necessarily fail to understand direct creativity as a form of communal activity. In reality, the uncomprehending hostility of the academy toward the life that art requires can be interpreted as a rejection of every form of direct creativity that is unconnected with bureaucratic office. This is confirmed, in terms of inner consciousness, by the immaturity and schoolboyish outlook of the students. From the standpoint of aesthetic feeling, the most striking and painful aspect of the university is the mechanical reaction of the students as they listen to a lecture. Only a genuinely academic and sophisticated culture of conversation could compensate for this level of receptivity. And of course the seminars are worlds away from such a thing, since they, too, mainly rely on the lecture format, and it makes little difference whether the speakers are teachers or students. The organization of the university has ceased to be grounded in the productivity of its students, as its founders had envisaged. They thought of students as teachers and learners at the same time; as teachers, because productivity implies complete autonomy, with their minds fixed on science instead of on their instructor's personality. But where office and profession are the ideas that govern student life, there can be no true learning. There can no longer be any question of a devotion to a form of knowledge that, it is feared, might lead them astray from the path of bourgeois security. There can be neither devotion to learning nor the dedication of life to a younger generation. Yet the vocation of teaching—albeit in forms that are quite different from those current today—is an imperative for any authentic learning. Such a hazardous self-dedication to learning and youth must manifest itself in the student as the ability to love, and it must be the source of his creativity. But by the same token he must also follow in the footsteps of his elders; he must acquire his learning from his teacher, without following him in his profession. With an easy conscience, he can take his leave of the community that binds him to other producers, since that community derives its general form exclusively from philosophy. He should be an active producer, philosopher, and teacher all in one, and all these things should be part of his deepest and most essential nature. This is what defines his profession and his life. The community of creative human beings elevates every field of study to the universal through the form of

philosophy. Such universality is not achieved by confronting lawyers with literary questions, or doctors with legal ones (as various student groups have attempted). It can be brought about only if the community ensures that specialized studies (which cannot exist without a profession in mind) and all the activities of the special disciplines are firmly subordinated to the community of the university as such, since it alone is the creator and guardian of philosophy as a form of community. This philosophy, in turn, should concern itself not with limited technical philosophical matters but with the great metaphysical questions of Plato and Spinoza, the Romantics, and Nietzsche. This, rather than conducted tours through welfare institutions, is what would create the closest links between life and the professions, albeit a life more deeply conceived. This is what would prevent the degeneration of study into the heaping up of information. The task of students is to rally round the university, which itself would be in a position to impart the systematic state of knowledge, together with the cautious and precise but daring applications of new methodologies. Students who conceived their role in this way would greatly resemble the amorphous waves of the populace that surround the prince's palace, which serves as the space for an unceasing spiritual revolution—a point from which new questions would be incubated, in a more ambitious, less clear, less precise way, but perhaps with greater profundity than the traditional scientific questions. The creativity of students might then enable us to regard them as the great transformers whose task is to seize upon new ideas, which spring up sooner in art and society than in the university, and mould them into scientific shape under the guidance of their philosophical approach.

The secret tyranny of vocational training is not the worst of the deformations, whose appalling effect is that they invariably poison the essence of creative life. There is also a commonplace view of life that trades intellectual activity for various surrogates. It has met with increasing success in disguising the hazards of a life of the mind and hence in ridiculing the few surviving visionaries as starry-eyed dreamers. A deeper problem arises from the unconscious distortion of student life by the dominant erotic conventions. Just as the vocational ideology of the professions has become the accepted truth and has fully monopolized the intellectual conscience, so, too, does the concept of marriage, the idea of the family, weigh upon the notion of eros. The erotic seems to have vanished from a space that extends, empty and undefined, between childhood and founding a family of one's own. Whether unity might exist between creating and procreating, and whether this unity is to be found in the family—these questions could not be posed, so long as the tacit expectation of marriage went unquestioned, since this implied an illegitimate interlude in which the most that one could do was to erect barriers to temptation. The eros of creativity—if any group were in a position to understand it and strive to achieve it, it would have

to be the student body. But even when external bourgeois conditions were absent and no prospect of founding a family existed; even where, as in many European cities, a hydra-headed mass of women based their entire economic existence on students (through prostitution)—even in such places students failed to ask questions about the eros appropriate to themselves. They must surely have questioned whether procreation and creativity should remain separate, whether the one should apply to the family and the other to their profession, and whether, since both were distorted by this separation, neither should flow from the existence peculiar to itself. For painful and humiliating though it may be to put such a question to contemporary students, it cannot be avoided, since these two poles of human existence are closely connected chronologically. We are faced by a question that no community can leave unresolved, and which nevertheless no nation has been able to answer since the Greeks and the early Christians. The question has always weighed heavily on the great creative minds: How could they do justice to the image of mankind and at the same time share a community with women and children, whose productivity is of a different kind? The Greeks, as we know, resolved the problem by force. They subordinated procreation to creativity, so that in the long run, by excluding women and children from the life of their state, they brought about its collapse. The Christians provided a possible solution for the *civitas dei:* they repudiated separate existence in either sphere. The most progressive among the students have never gone further than endless aestheticizing talk of camaraderie with women students. They did not shrink from hoping for a "healthy" neutralization of the erotic in both men and women. And in fact, with the aid of prostitutes the erotic has been neutralized in the universities. And where it wasn't, it was replaced by an unrestrained harmlessness, a heady atmosphere of high spirits, and the unladylike young coed has been boisterously welcomed as the successor to the ugly old spinster teacher. It is difficult to resist the general observation here that the Catholic Church has a much greater (though timid) instinctive appreciation of the power and inexorable demands of the erotic than does the bourgeoisie. In the universities, a huge problem lies buried, unresolved, and denied. It is a problem that is much larger than the countless causes of friction in society. It is this: How are we to unify spiritual life, when what we find before us is the lamentable division into the intellectual autonomy of the creative spirit (in the fraternities) and an unmastered force of nature (in prostitution)—a distorted and fragmented torso of the one erotic spirit? To transform the necessary independence of the creative spirit and to bring about the necessary inclusion of women, who are not productive in a masculine sense, in a single community of creative persons—through love—this indeed is the goal to which students should aspire, because it is the form of their own lives. At present, however, we are so dominated by murderous conventions that students have not even

brought themselves to confess their guilt toward prostitutes. Moreover, people still imagine that this whole blasphemous process of human destruction can be halted by appeals to chastity, because they lack the courage to look their own more beautiful erotic nature in the face. This mutilation of youth goes too deep to waste many words on it. Rather, it should be entrusted to the minds of those who think and the resoluteness of the intrepid. It is inaccessible to polemic.

How does the younger generation regard itself? What image does it have of itself, if it can permit such an obscuring of its own ideas, such a distortion of its own values? This image has been formed by the fraternities, and they are still the most visible embodiment of the student conception of youth, at which other students, with the free-student organizations at their head, hurl their social slogans. German students are to a greater or lesser degree obsessed with the idea that they have to enjoy their youth. The entirely irrational period of waiting for marriage and a profession had to be given some value or other, and it had to be a playful, pseudo-romantic one that would help pass the time. A terrible stigma still attaches to the much-vaunted lighthearted fun of student songs, of the "Gaudeamus igitur . . ." It represents a fear of the future and simultaneously a complacent pact with the inevitable philistinism that one likes to picture fondly to oneself in the shape of the "old boys."[2] But because students have sold their souls to the bourgeoisie, along with marriage and profession, they insist on those few years of bourgeois freedom. This exchange is effected in the name of youth. Openly or in secret—in a bar or amid deafening speeches at student meetings, a dearly purchased state of intoxication is created, the right to which is not to be denied. This experience arises between a squandered youth and a bought-out old age that longs for peace and quiet, and it is here that every attempt to inspire students with higher ideals has come to grief. Yet just as this way of life makes a mockery of every reality, as revenge it finds itself punished by every natural and spiritual power, by science through the agency of the state, by eros through the agency of prostitutes, and thus, as decimation, by nature. For students are not the younger generation; they are the aging generation. For those who have wasted their early years in German schools, it is a heroic decision to acknowledge the onset of age, when their university years appeared to offer them at long last the prospect of a youth full of life, only to postpone it year after year. Nevertheless it is important to recognize that they have to be creative producers, and therefore lonely, aging people, and that a richer generation of children and youths has already been born, to whom they can only dedicate themselves as teachers. Of all feelings, this is the strangest for them. This is why they cannot accept their existence and are ill-prepared to live with children from the outset—for that is what is involved in being a teacher—because children have not yet

entered the sphere of loneliness. Because they do not acknowledge the process of aging, they idle their time away. To have admitted their yearning for a beautiful childhood and worthy youth is the precondition of creativity. Without that admission, without the regret for a greatness missed, no renewal of their lives can be possible. It is the fear of loneliness that is responsible for their lack of erotic commitment, a fear of surrendering themselves. They measure themselves against their fathers, not against posterity, and this is how they salvage the illusion of their youth. Their friendship is bereft of greatness and loneliness. That expansive friendship between creative minds, with its sense of infinity and its concern for humanity as a whole even when those minds are alone together or when they experience yearning in solitude, has no place in the lives of university students. In its place, there is only that fraternizing which is both unbridled and personally limited. It remains the same whether they are drinking in a bar or founding societies in cafés. All these institutions are nothing but a marketplace for the preliminary and provisional, like the bustling activity in lecture halls and cafés; they are simply there to fill the empty waiting time, diversions from the voice that summons them to build their lives with a unified spirit of creative action, eros, and youth. There is a chaste and abstemious form of youth that reveres those who are to succeed it, and that is echoed in Stefan George's lines:

> Inventors of rolling verse and sparkling dialogues
> by quick-witted orators: time and distance
> allow me to engrave on my memory my former foe. Do likewise!
> For on the scale of ecstasy and passion we are both in decline;
> Nevermore will the praise and rejoicing of youth flatter me;
> Never again will verses thunder thus in your ear.[3]

Faintheartedness has alienated the lives of students from insights like this. But every way of life, with its own specific rhythm, follows from the commandments that determine the lives of the creative. So long as they shy away from these, their existence will punish them with ugliness, and hopeless despair will strike the hearts of even the dullest.

At present it is this highly endangered necessity that is still the issue; it requires strict control. Everyone will discover his own imperatives, the commandments that will make the supreme demands on his life. Through understanding, everyone will succeed in liberating the future from its deformed existence in the womb of the present.

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Notes

1. *Freie Studentenschaft:* A radical group of university students that emerged from the German Youth Movement. These "independent students" were opposed both to the conservative dueling fraternities *(Korps),* which traced their lineage back to the nationalism of the Romantic movement, and to the more recent *Wandervögel* movement with its back-to-nature ideology. Benjamin was elected president of the Berlin branch of the *Freie Studentenschaft* in the spring semester of 1914, and held this post until the outbreak of the First World War.—*Trans.*
2. Old boys: The *alten Herrn* are the former members of fraternities who still retain influence in these organizations and are sources of patronage for the next generation.—*Trans.*
3. Stefan George, "H.H.," in *The Year of the Soul* [*Das Jahr der Seele*].—*Trans.*