THE WISCONSIN IDEA AND SOCIAL CHANGE*

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The Wisconsin Idea

The Wisconsin Idea known as “the boundaries of the campus are the boundaries of the state” is a comprehensive concept. Yet, in stating that a University of the people must be taken to the people, its originator, President Van Hise, identified only one of the areas of concern for enlightenment. Simultaneously, the University of Wisconsin became one of the great graduate schools of the nation and the world. This dual development needs to be kept in mind when considering what became known as the Wisconsin Idea. Many of the state universities around the turn of the century concentrated on services to the people of their states since their financial support depended upon the legislators of these states. In Wisconsin, however, as in the ivy covered private institutions of the East, great stress was also placed upon academic excellence and scholarly research. Therefore one immediate objective of scholarship practiced at Wisconsin was involvement with significant public concerns.

As teacher, researcher, and extension lecturer, the professor’s concern with the public interest was intimately intertwined with his academic investigation in his subject area. This integrated approach without sacrifice of vigorous research methodology was possible in the days before specialization and fragmentation. Today, public service is associated merely as extension education.

Under Van Hise, a group of scholars influenced by German Universities with stress on scholarship and participation in decisions of public policy came to Wisconsin. These scholars under the leadership of this great president appreciated the importance of making all the resources of the University available beyond the college walls.1

In Wisconsin, Agricultural extension and general University extension became enriched by this broader dimension of the Wisconsin Idea. Around the turn of the century, the spirit of co-operation between the two homes, the Capitol and old Bascom Hall, at each end

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1 Cf. Dr. William Cohnstaedt, “Die Universitaet von Wisconsin,” Frankfurter Zeitung, Frankfurt-am-Main, Germany, September, 1909; “The great inner and outer modernization of the German professor in both personality and attitude toward life in recent years became surprisingly evident on this side of the Atlantic. The German professor is more ‘Americanized’ than the American.”

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of State Street, promoted public service. This emphasis required an off campus extension faculty to supplement the resident scholar who also served as extension lecturer. The later development of an Agricultural Agent in each county was a mere expansion of this concern to be of service. For a longer period of time Agriculture Extension rather than general extension, was able to preserve a closer identification of public service linked with vigorous resident scholarship. Specialization within agricultural subject fields enabled continued public contacts while a separation became sooner inevitable in the humanities and the social sciences. Political and institutional conditions within the College of Agriculture enabled a longer period of direct co-operation between research scholar and public. Even today the role of the College of Agriculture within the University is unique among the University’s family of schools.

Social Change in Wisconsin

A Population of Consumers. The majority of the citizens of Wisconsin, once predominantly engaged in farming, are now defined as urban residents by the 1960 census. The services offered to the farming population, the distribution, processing and transporting of farm products and supplies are no longer the predominant services among the state’s activities. Consumers irrespective of occupation or residence, dominate the economic scene and demand the major portion of the state’s resources. Of course this shift from a producer to a consumer economy in Wisconsin is not unique for it is similar to the national trend.

Technology and Production. Many social changes are directly attributable to the expansion of our industrialized society with its technological improvements and steady increase in mechanization. The change in farming methods due to mechanization is well known. Fabulous improvements in technology now enable a small number of agricultural producers to satisfy the total national food demand creating severe economic, social, and not least of all, political problems.

Metropolitanization. The most complex of all the changes can be traced to the current trend of metropolitanization. Starting as a small tendency concerned with concentration of peoples in cities, it presently is a major problem, both economically and culturally. An additional change, a counter movement of the urban population results in the dispersion of large numbers throughout the adjoining country-side of the central cities. An entirely new pattern of human habitation has come into being with the emerging suburbs. Older, established suburbs, like the city proper, had characteristics of internal organization and community cohesion which are not found in many of these new subdivision developments. In these re-
cently developed areas innumerable physical and material problems now clamor and press for solution. However, the necessary knowledge and information upon which to base social and political decisions are not yet available.

**Communication Breakdown as Social Change**

Today's society requires scientific knowledge for the basis of intelligent decision making. The presence of a multitude of experts, all specialists in their respective areas of professional training, would seem to assure the availability of all needed scientifically arrived knowledge. Yet, in a democratic society it is assumed essential that all people make the decisions affecting their own way of life. However, the delegation of decision making has now denied many the opportunities for critical thinking. Also, narrow routines which channel men's lives today do not enable comprehension of the "whole" of society.

In an urban society social contacts are no longer geographically oriented. Place of work and residence are usually in two separate areas of the city, while the man who controls one's employment lives in still a third part of the community. The latter may be more significant to the employee's total life than the neighbor next door. Similarly, friends with whom one shares in common special and significant interests may live in ever widening circles throughout the metropolitan area. The geographic neighborhood seldom represents a meaningful environment, that is to say, becomes significant in the life of families, until their relationships outside this restricted area become meaningful and comprehensible. Successful Neighborhood Councils are found only when the people concerned are adjusted to their larger economic and political environment. The immediate geographic community cannot be "developed" until there is this functional adjustment.

The loss of territoriality, that is the shift of social ties from the geographic neighborhood, and the change of significance of the local community does not necessarily mean the malfunctioning of a pluralistic society. If people were to participate in a plurality of special interest organizations in which they presently hold membership, alternative ties and social relationships would replace those found in a more community-oriented older society. There are sociologists who consider social organization in the existing mass society possible without the presence of community organization.² However this may be, the development of a mass society means a

withdrawal from responsibility of citizenship. What brings about such withdrawal? The breakdown of communication accompanying “withdrawal” results from the difficulty citizens have in identifying personal or community problems. For instance, the wide-spread abstention from participation in the making of decisions affecting public affairs usually takes place initially as apathetic non-participation in the citizens’ associations of special interest groups. Time does not permit an analysis of the causes for the much lamented and little understood reasons for “lack of participation.” It is a theoretical presupposition of this discussion that there are lags and maladjustments in the social structure of our contemporary society. To make issues, values, and practices in the community visible to those who need to be concerned is the problem of a mass society. The structure of a social organization needs to provide occasion to those variously located in that structure to perceive the norms obtaining in the organization. Also, it needs to provide relative ease in perceiving the “character of role-performance” by those who run the organization.

The Urban Agent

A clearer perception of the interrelatedness of social structure with institutional requirements of the culture is needed. An inadequate analysis of the existing social structure may account for some of the shortcomings of currently practiced community development, here and abroad. The prevailing practice of “accepting” the local culture and then attempting to get change introduced by “innovators” or “change-agents” leaves institutional adjustment to a “laissez-faire” condition of unguided change. Local institutions and their persistence have proven a chief stumbling block to lasting, that is, not temporary, acceptance of change.

In an “advanced” society the abundance of experts and the availability of professional services have not prevented the disintegration of urban community processes or the breakdown of communication. This has given rise to a recent search for a new kind of adult educator: the Urban Extension Agent.9

The agent would serve as a communication link. The results of urban research findings with respect to community-wide activities and problems would be translated by the urban agent into terms meaningful to the various components of the urban population. While thus serving as “implementor,” the agent might simultaneously bring the needs of this urban population into focus for the researcher if the two were brought into a relationship, such as a university-based Urban Extension Service.

The function of the urban extension agent is to clarify, assist and to enable people to function more adequately in a complex, specialized, technically oriented society, of which their community and their neighborhood are parts. With this aid citizens may gain understanding of the forces impinging upon them and an awareness of a fuller life. Fundamental to the work of the urban agent is the assumption that public and private services available will be drawn upon more meaningfully when their potential users have greater clarity and understanding concerning those services.

The agent serves as a communicator between the community and all professions, enabling urban residents to make more effective use of the services offered by professions and organized agencies. With the emerging sense of community, individual citizen will join together to provide for common unmet needs.

The Future

For a people dedicated to democracy there are a number of encouraging trends. Recently a distinguished group of adult educators from throughout the nation, under the chairmanship of Dean Adolphson of Wisconsin, prepared a statement on Today’s Critical Needs and University Extension. Their document states that University Extension has become an intimate and essential aspect of the total enterprise of the modern public university. As a philosophy, they contend university extension sees the campus as a community of scholars making itself as useful as possible to the total society from which the institution draws its inspiration and support. Due to the high degree of specialization essential for exploring the frontiers of knowledge this philosophy may clash with prevailing pressures of academic life. Advancement in many professions is at the cutting edge of knowledge. This dilemma to be resolved by the universities demands courage and insight. In their statement of critical needs, the adult educators identify the function of university extension in much the same manner as the function of the Urban Agent; University extension seeks to identify public problems and public needs, to interpret these concerns to the university, to focus university skills and resources upon them, and thence to translate university insights into educational progress throughout a state or region. This statement implies that a city can be a more powerful teacher than formal classrooms. Many approaches to urban problems ignore this and become managerial. Much can be lost when educators seek to manipulate people and resources to solve urban problems. When that occurs little attention is paid to human values, whether people understand their problems or participate in seeking a solution.
The Wisconsin Idea was begun by scholars exploring their subject matter within the framework of public policy and the needs of the residents of Wisconsin. Following social change one must go forward avoiding unimaginative revival. Therefore, in our day of extreme specialization it is not possible to expect the contemporary scholar to imitate an earlier generation, however distinguished and successful. However, it may be worth while to identify institutional conditions which prevailed when state-wide university education achieved its fame and made a place for itself. In Wisconsin, few would question the position the University’s College of Agriculture has had in the development of the state and the respect and affection earned by it for the state university. It may not be unreasonable to propose that in our day of urbanization the University’s urban college, the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, may achieve such an enviable place in the minds of the people of the state and the entire nation. In order to learn from the past and to guide widely the future, it should be remembered that the College of Agriculture performed its service not as an independent unit. The Agricultural College was merely one integral unit drawing systematically on all the other resources a great University had to offer. Within the family of colleges on the University campus it had a much closer relationship to the state and its practical problems than the other schools. While it engaged in both pure and applied research in some fields of knowledge it did not aim to duplicate activities and facilities in other parts of the University. The College of Agriculture was dedicated to the constant improvement and development of its constituents. Thereby political support was gained which was of considerable importance to the entire University. With the rapidly expanding political power due to fairer apportionment the urban voter needs to identify his needs with that of his University.

In the past, first through the organizational support of county agents and later through the fiscal policies of direct farm subsidies the American farmer has been assisted in economic and technological adjustments within an ever changing industrial and corporate economy. At this time in our national history very complex social and economic problems arise from ever increasing state and municipal expenditures, as but one example. The rapidly rising costs of urban living stagger the taxpayer. Let it be said in the future that the University found in its Milwaukee unit an institution serving diverse but ever so practical problems of the people in an urban state.