

An Analysis of the Salient Features of René Hurtubise's Conception of the University

AL FIORINO*

ABSTRACT

In recent years an attempt to formulate an "idea of the university" suited to the Canadian scene has been made by René Hurtubise, undoubtedly a key figure in Québec higher education. An examination of this attempt reveals, what I would consider, a positive tendency in Canadian higher educational research to be more theoretical and philosophical. However, at the same time, it also discloses, as does much of the literature in this field, a lack of self-evaluation, a quality important to the elaboration of a sound and viable educational model.

RESUME

Durant les dernières années, un essai à formuler une conception de l'université adaptée au milieu canadien fut donné par René Hurtubise, indubitablement un figure principal dans l'enseignement supérieur du Québec. Un examen de cet essai révèle une tendance positive dans la recherche canadienne d'enseignement supérieur d'être plus théorique et philosophique. Cependant, il dévoile simultanément, autant que beaucoup de littérature dans cette discipline, un manque d'évaluation de soi, une qualité très importante pour l'élaboration d'un sain modèle éducationnel et viable.

The gist of René Hurtubise's conception of the university can be found expressed in two commissioned reports on higher education of which he is co-author. These reports are: *The Report of the Commission on the Relations Between Universities and Government* (1970), also known as the *Hurtubise-Rowat Report*, which upon its publication was immediately disowned by its original sponsors (the Association of Universities and Colleges, AUCC; the Canadian Association of University Teachers, CAUT; the Canadian Union of Students, CUS; and l'Union général des étudiants du Québec, UGEQ); and the *Rapport du Comité d'Étude du Conseil des Universités du Québec sur les Objectifs de l'Enseignement Supérieur* (1973), published in a larger work entitled *L'Université Québécoise du Proche Avenir*. It is my object in this short presentation to abstract from these two reports the

*Dr. Fiorino is a graduate of the Department of History and Philosophy of Education, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto.

salient features of Hurtubise's conception of the university and, subsequently, to submit this idea to a few critical remarks. In the process, it is my hope to be able to identify some of the fundamental problems that pervade this area of educational research.

René Hurtubise's Conception of the University

In both reports, Hurtubise adapts Abraham Flexner's socio-historical model to conduct his reflection on the university, a model proposed by Flexner in his well known book *Universities: American, English, German* (1930). Hurtubise contends that since and including the later Middle Ages, there have been three types of society, each characterized by a corresponding social organization: the medieval society, the industrial society, and the post-industrial society. Correlated to each of these societies and their respective social organizations there is a particular type of university, namely, the medieval university (with its emphasis on teaching and research), the liberal university (with its stress on freedom and utility), and the conglomerate university (highlighted by its concern with service to the community). Viewed within this socio-historical model, the idea of the university becomes, for Hurtubise, a relative concept, a fluctuating notion; that is, it is a socio-cultural variable representing an institutionalized response by society to specific socio-cultural needs of its members. "Il y a entre l'université et la société une compénétration et une osmose qui font que l'une et l'autre s'influencent mutuellement dans une relation dialectique."¹ Thus, the idea of the university can change from one era to the next depending upon the kind of response that a given society makes.

Nevertheless, without any preliminary explanation, in both reports Hurtubise proceeds by defining the university in terms which are intended to denote the very nature and essential characteristics of this institution of higher learning. Thus, in the *Hurtubise-Rowat Report* he defines the university as "a social institution the specific mission of which is the transmission and the advancement of higher learning."² Likewise, in *L'Université Québécoise du Proche Avenir* he ascribes to the university ultimate ends or general objectives which, according to Hurtubise, constitute the very essence of the university. He writes: "... les finalités dernières (ou les objectifs généraux) de l'université peuvent être considérées comme immuables puisqu'elles constituent l'essence même de l'université: la transmission, l'avancement et l'application des connaissances."³ As a consequence of these general objectives, the university assumes the functions of teaching, which involves the transmission of knowledge; research, which involves the advancement of knowledge; and service to society, which involves the application of knowledge. In providing this essential definition of the university, Hurtubise proceeds, without any demonstration and hence without justification from a relative to a universal conception of the university.

However, he does make a very interesting and valuable distinction between general and specific objectives of the university in *L'Université Québécoise du Proche Avenir*. He maintains that the general objectives of the university are trans-cultural and trans-historical. In other words, they are universal; that is, they are the common objectives of every university in the world. They are the fundamental starting points of the university, considered both as a social institution and as an integral part of the educational system. On the other hand, specific objectives "variant d'un pays à l'autre et même d'une institution à l'autre. Ils sont ordinairement fixés dans une conjoncture particulière, dans un pays donné et pour une

période de temps limitée. Ils font l'objet d'une révision et d'une réévaluation périodiques."⁴

The distinction between general and specific objectives constitutes a very important insight in Hurtubise's thought. This distinction, though often realized in practice, is seldom stressed in theoretical discussions of the nature that are carried out in commission reports. From a speculative point of view, the value of this distinction lies in distinguishing between the cultural and the trans-cultural, the historical and the trans-historical dimensions of the university. From a purely methodological perspective, its value lies in providing a rudimentary but extremely useful conceptual framework within which to treat questions and issues concerning higher education in a holistic and systematic manner.

Another important area to which Hurtubise has addressed himself is the much debated question concerning institutional autonomy and academic freedom. In short this is his view:

He rejects the notions of the university as an "ivory tower," or as "a state within a state". He is of the opinion that these notions are long overdue for "a funeral", "not only because the interests of the larger state must be safeguarded and promoted, but also because the main purposes of our universities cannot be realized apart from society and without the means that society, via its governments, allots to them."⁵ The university is a social institution and as such it performs special functions for society. Academic freedom is required in order that the university can fulfill these functions. According to Hurtubise, how the university fulfills these functions rests ultimately on the judgment of the larger community, society. Furthermore, he contends that implied in the very idea of the university, as he conceives it to be, is the imperative that the university must actually exercise these functions. Consequently, if society is to allow the university to remain faithful to itself, it must make a special provision for the protection of academic freedom, the necessary condition for the execution of these functions.

Thus, it would seem that for Hurtubise it does not really matter who governs the university. What is important is the promotion and protection of academic freedom. Nevertheless, if at this time institutional autonomy is deemed necessary for the fulfillment of this end, then it should be strongly supported and defended, keeping in mind that academic freedom does not necessarily imply institutional autonomy. Ultimately, Hurtubise maintains, the whole question depends very much upon the political climate and the socio-political structures within which the university finds itself. If these structures are conducive to the promotion of academic freedom, then there may not be any real need for the university to have any substantial autonomy, assuming that any transference of institutional responsibilities from the university to the government or any other appointed agency will not be in the long run detrimental to academic freedom. It may be added that, while Canadian universities are currently enjoying a high degree of substantial autonomy, they should take the opportunity to exploit more fully all the possibilities provided through academic freedom.

A Few Critical Remarks of René Hurtubise's Conception of the University

René Hurtubise's conception of the university represents an attempt to view the whole question concerning the nature of the university from both a socio-cultural and a trans-cultural perspective. The result is an idea of the university whose nature discloses itself historically in the midst of a dynamic socio-cultural process.

Hurtubise explains the trans-cultural and trans-historical dimension of the university on the basis that the university is essentially a social institution and an integral part of the educational system. By saying that the university is a "social institution" he means that it is part of a framework of institutions which structure society. It becomes an integral part of the educational system in virtue of its role of transmitting knowledge. In doing so, it participates in the process by which members of society are socialized; that is, in the process by which individuals are taught to live in society. To what extent this basis, derived from empirical sociology, is tenable is doubtful. It would appear that within the socio-historical model which he employs in both reports, "social institution," and "educational system" are relative concepts. Their respective functions and meaning are socio-culturally conditioned. If the latter is true, then it would be very difficult to base on them any definition of the university which is trans-cultural and trans-historical. That the idea of the university is fundamentally trans-cultural and trans-historical may be true. However, it requires, I maintain, more than a socio-historical model, or a sociologically derived basis to make it so. Nonetheless, the determination of such a basis is of the utmost importance in any similar conception of the university; otherwise, there would be no reason why one idea of the university should be preferred over another. Understandably, it would be going beyond the scope of any commission mandate of this kind to furnish such a basis by first elaborating an exhaustive philosophical framework. At the same time, this does not completely justify the exclusion of such a very important consideration in commission reports on higher education. This exclusion may explain, at least in part, why most commission reports proceed very uncritically and in many cases without reference to the underlying philosophical presuppositions. But, in all fairness to Hurtubise, it can be stated that in making the above distinction, between the cultural and the trans-cultural elements of the nature of the university, he points to this very methodological difficulty.

Admittedly, the idea of the university he elaborates in both reports is a tentative formulation intended primarily to stimulate discussion and debate. As such it is a praiseworthy attempt. The suggestion may be made that any future formulation will have to go beyond the socio-historical model if it is to explain and justify the transcendental dimension of the university.

Apart from this basic criticism that can be levelled at the formulation of his conception of the university, his description of the relationship between the university and government, as elaborated in the *Hurtubise-Rowat Report*, did not really deserve, I contend, the negative reaction it received, viz., one case in point, the reaction of the AUCC Board of Directors in a reply to the report, which appeared in the November issue of *University Affairs* (1970).

Judging from the very brief and direct reply, the then AUCC Board of Directors must have felt intimidated by Hurtubise's view that the university, as a social institution, is an integral part of the educational system and an instrument of the state. "This board is particularly disturbed by the philosophy which seems to underlie the document. The report leaves the impression that universities and educational institutions are instruments of the state (the state being synonymous in Canada with the provinces)."⁶ This impression would seem to have been caused by a questionable theory of the "state" entertained by the Board of Directors. They go on to say: "It is contrary to Canadian tradition to regard the instruments of higher education as subject only to state controls and decisions, in order to safeguard the 'vital interests of the state'. The public at large has always been regarded as en-

titled to a major influence in the development of our systems of education and in the governance of our institutions of learning.”⁷ Implicit in the latter is the view that the state is some “alien creature,” to be set completely apart from the rest of society. Surely, in our judgment, this is not Hurtubise’s understanding of the state. It would seem that what Hurtubise maintains is that the state, through government, is at the service of society. The state is, in a very real sense, society striving to make itself just and humane by making optimum use of its resources (both material and human) without simultaneously undermining its ends. Therefore, it would follow that, once it becomes impossible for private enterprise to maintain an institution such as the university, then the state, through government, has the duty to assume the institutional responsibility of the university. However, this is not to say that a government would necessarily assume it. Certainly this view of the state is not incompatible with another AUCC statement, “that within the Canadian society we regard education as existing for the satisfaction and fulfillment of the individual, as well as for the benefit of society as a whole.”⁸

One last point must be made about Hurtubise’s conception of the university. In *L’Université Québécoise du Proche Avenir*, he leans very heavily on such works as the *Report of the Commission on Educational Planning, Alberta, 1972*, John Porter’s *Towards 2000*, Kenneth Galbraith’s *The New Industrial State*, Daniel Bell’s article “Notes on the Post-Industrial Society,” and Alain Touraine’s *La Société Post-Industrielle*. He employs the central insights expounded in these works to formulate a model within which to discuss the future of Québec higher education. This model consists of a series of descriptions of the fundamental features of a post-industrial society, of education in general and of the university in particular in this kind of society. Without stopping to examine these descriptions which may or may not be a valid depiction of present or future realities, one comment needs to be made concerning this approach in treating such matters. It would seem that despite Hurtubise’s dynamic and dialectical conception of the relationship between the university and society, his descriptions represent a somewhat passive view of the role of education within the socio-cultural process. It would appear that he assumes the inevitability of the advent of a post-industrial society and in the process neglects to consider the possibly critical and intervening role the educational system, and in particular the university, can play in either retarding or expediting this advent. For this reason, these educational projections can ultimately be reduced to instances of self-fulfilling prophecies, and nothing more.

In closing, I would like to pose a few questions that are implicit in the preceding analysis and that might be given more serious reflection than they have received in the past.

1. If there is a transcendental dimension to the university, as Hurtubise claims, what is its justification? Does it make any difference to the university to have a comprehensive answer to this question? Should it make any difference to the members of the university community and to society at large?
2. How compatible is the concept of the university viewed as the result of an institutionalized response to specific socio-cultural needs of a particular society in a given age with the idea of the university defined as a community of men dedicated to the objective pursuit of truth?
3. What direction should research and teaching follow in our universities? Should research

be allowed to continue as a fragmented effort among the ever-increasing number of disciplines? How can teaching or instruction truly become a viable means for shaping new horizons for contemporary man?

4. In an age of rapid change on all levels of society, what should be the role of the university? Should it merely reflect this change, or should it provide society with an objective perspective of the social process so as to enable its members to assume a more conscious and critical attitude in planning for their future?

Footnotes

1. *L'Université Québécoise du Proche Avenir*, p. 27.
2. *Hurtubise-Rowat Report*, p. 37.
3. *L'Université Québécoise du Proche Avenir*, p. 27.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Hurtubise-Rowat Report*, p. 72.
6. *University Affairs*, (November, 1970), p. 15, c. 1.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*