The Conditions For and Against Educational Experimentation in the Experience of Alexander Meiklejohn

by Cynthia Stokes Brown

It is a deep pleasure for me to join you in the effort to keep alive the ideas of Alexander Meiklejohn and to discuss with you the issues that confront us as we continue to struggle to educate students for freedom.

One of the basic reasons I was attracted to Meiklejohn is the clarity he usually maintained about his purposes. Many people, perhaps no more in colleges and universities than elsewhere, are either not aware of their purposes or are unwilling to reveal them. But not Meiklejohn. "What am I trying to do here?" he always asked, and usually answered.

We can only understand the conditions for and against Meiklejohn's educational experimentation if we keep clear about what his purpose was in experimenting. Throughout his life's work as a teacher, his purpose was to teach young adults to be free. To do this, he wanted to create a liberal college. For him, this meant a place where students and teachers could consider all the problems common to human beings. The purpose in doing this was to teach students to govern themselves in a free society. Meiklejohn's purpose was not to demonstrate that some method was better than another, some curriculum superior, some combination of faculty more effective.

Here is a statement by Meiklejohn of his purpose, as presented long ago at the annual meeting of the National Education Association in 1914, two years after he became president of Amherst College. Meiklejohn's language poses a problem for our ears; when he uses "men" he means "men and women," except when he refers to students--at Amherst they were all men.

> The fundamental principle of the liberal college, like that of all advanced education, technical or professional, rests on the opposition of action by custom and action by intelligence. All schools alike believe that activities guided by ideas are, in the long run, more successful than activities determined

by habit and hearsay. The liberal college has, therefore, selected one group of activities for study. Just as the bridge builder studies mathematics and applied mechanics, just as the physician studies chemistry and biology, so the teacher in the liberal college studies those activities which are common to all men. We believe that human living can be made more successful if men understand it. We set our boys, or should set them, to the study of the religious life, the moral problems, the social and economic institutions, the world of physical and natural phenomena, the records of literature and history. Here are the features of human living common to all men. To understand them, to be acquainted with them, is to be liberally educated.

There are men who would prefer that their sons be not educated with regard to religion, morals, social and economic problems. These men want all the new appliances in farming, all the newest devices and inventions in transportation and engineering, but they would prefer that the fundamental things of life be left to habit, tradition, and instinct. As against such men the liberal college is up in arms. There never was a time when men needed light on the great human affairs, the things we have in common, more than we need it now. Intelligence has improved our roads and bridges; it will improve ourselves, our living. The task of the liberal college is just as definite as that of any technical school. Its day is not ending; it is just beginning to dawn.

When Meiklejohn began his presidency at Amherst, the conditions for his work there included his choice as president by unanimous vote of the trustees. The old definition of Amherst--a place to train men of capitalist, Christian character by means of a fixed classical curriculum--was breaking down. The sheer bulk of knowledge and the number of academic disciplines needed to organize it were expanding at an explosive rate. Amherst's trustees were willing to give free rein to someone who could synthesize piety and knowledge and arrive at a new definition of a liberal college.

The conditions against Meiklejohn's work were more numerous. First and foremost, he was a newcomer and had no allies among the faculty, most of whom had hoped that the new president would come from within. The chairman of the math department had been their choice. Meiklejohn gradually chose his own faculty members who, by attracting more students, seriously threatened the older faculty. Meiklejohn wanted required, interdisciplinary courses and brought teachers able to create them. By the end of his presidency, eleven years later, the faculty deadlocked itself on every issue, half voting with Meiklejohn and half against him. In my attempt to understand the trustees, I believe this was probably the

the most pressing reason why they felt they had to fire Meiklejohn. He could not keep the faculty with him and therefore could not keep the college going.

Two other conditions against Meiklejohn were the provincialism of Amherst and World War I. Amherst was a small town of only 5000 people, almost entirely Congregationalists. This was a big change for Meiklejohn from Providence, Rhode Island--a large cosmopolitan city of people from various national, ethnic, racial and religious backgrounds. Meiklejohn and his family affronted the beliefs and customs of Amherst in many ways. His wife was from an Italian family and did not belong to the ladies' group of the Congregational Church. Meiklejohn did not attend town meetings. They brought guests from England and Scotland, including the great English socialist R. H. Tawney. When Meiklejohn noticed that students were not paying attention to the Bible in daily chapel, he substituted The New Republic. Meiklejohn encouraged the Intercollegiate Socialist Society on campus, and when Calvin Coolidge came to give a speech on preparedness for war, Meiklejohn insisted on having a speaker against war. When it came, the war practically shut down the campus for the duration.

By the time he was fired in 1923, Meiklejohn felt that what he envisioned as a liberal college could not be supported within existing U.S. universities. The basic conflict hinged on the fact that most people within colleges and universities did not share his purpose. The majority of teachers, administrators and trustees did not want to teach students to be free; they wanted to teach them to be professionals.

Reflecting his bitter experience at Amherst, Meiklejohn wrote in 1923 about one of his heroes, Benjamin Andrews, who had been president of Brown when Meiklejohn was a student there:

> Sometimes I think that no man should be allowed to have administration in his charge unless he loathes it, unless he wishes to be doing something else. I dare not trust the willing middlemen of life, the men who like arranging other men and their affairs, who find manipulation satisfying to their souls. These men if they can have their way will make of life a smooth, well-lubricated meaninglessness. . . .For him /Andrews/ administration was Idea guiding and controlling circumstance. It was not, as many men demand it should be made,

mere circumstances slipping smoothly past each other in the flow of time.

After Amherst, Meiklejohn no longer believed his work could be done within the old structures. He moved to New York City, wrote and spoke about his vision, and hoped he could set up a new college to provide the conditions necessary for his work. Glenn Frank, the editor of the Christian Century, set up a committee to study the feasibility of a new college based on Meiklejohn's idea. But this plan never came to fruition. Meiklejohn went to Europe to bring back his fatally ill wife, who died within the year, and Frank, out of the blue, became president of the University of Wisconsin.

At Wisconsin the positive conditions for Meiklejohn's work included: a majority of liberal trustees, an extremely supportive president, a state with a progressive tradition, a period of growth and expansion, and expressed dissatisfaction from students over lectures as a method and over the content of the regular curriculum. President Frank was able to persuade the faculty of the College of ~~Arts~~ Letters and Science to approve an experimental college separate from the regular university organization, and he was able to fund it with special bequests given with no specific purpose. It would be an independent college within the university.

Meiklejohn accepted these conditions because they seemed to promise genuine autonomy. He had just five years before the conditions against his work again became overwhelming, and he was discontinued once more. The negative conditions at Wisconsin proved to be highly similar to the ones at Amherst: departmentalism, provincialism, depression (instead of war), and a new one, the separateness of the experimental college.

The problem of departmentalism at Wisconsin played out in a different way than it had at Amherst. Meiklejohn had complete authority to choose his own faculty at Wisconsin, but by the arrangements set up by President Frank the faculty of the Experimental College taught two-thirds time in the Experimental

College and one-third time in the regular department of their academic training. This arrangement created endless conflicts. The regular departments had to take on ~~one-third time~~ men chosen by Meiklejohn, in place of ones coming up in the ranks expecting these positions. Sometimes the departments felt that Meiklejohn's choices were not fully qualified academically; indeed, by their definition anyone who would teach both Greek and U.S. civilization could not be. Worst of all, from the departments' perspective, Meiklejohn set salaries in the Experimental College higher than those in the regular departments, so his men were not only crowding out the regulars, they were earning more. And, of course, these arrangements--new and different--were not always clearly understood by all parties.

Provincialism appeared in Wisconsin primarily as anti-Semitism. The Experimental College attracted a larger portion of Jewish students, about 40% the final year, than the regular university, which probably used a quota system to limit Jewish students to about 10%. These Jewish students were largely from large Eastern cities, and some of them were men of communistic and socialist sympathies. The school also attracted artists and free-thinkers. Possibly only one student in the Experimental College wore a cape, but he is the one depicted in the press, which constituted a fifth hostile condition to Meiklejohn's work in Wisconsin.

The coming of the Depression wrecked havoc on the Experimental College. Distribution of wealth was no abstract problem. Students had to drop out for lack of money. Many endured constant uncertainty about whether they could remain. Meiklejohn appealed to the wealthy students to set up a fund for the poor ones. Enrollment dropped each year. The faculty of the regular university suffered cutbacks and even waivers of their salaries.

When the faculty of the College of Letters and Science reviewed in 1932 whether it wanted to continue the Experimental College, it decided to set up a committee. The dean never named this committee, in view of the Depression. Because the

Experimental College was separate, tacked on to the organizational chart, it could be easily lopped off--as black studies, ethnic studies, women's studies can be today, if they have not become integrated into the regular structure.

For his third experiment, Meiklejohn left the traditional university structure completely and started, in 1934, an independent school for adults in San Francisco, funded by private donations and foundations. The existence of the Depression was probably a positive condition for the San Francisco School for Social Studies--by making students more eager to study and private donors more willing to give. But we all know how desperate and frustrating it is to operate with this kind of uncertain funding. The school could plan only from year to year, and the coming of World War II put an end to it in 1942. By then, the faculty had concluded that adult education must be supported by some public funds, either through libraries or universities.

What can we conclude about conditions for and against experimentation in Meiklejohn's experience? At the most general, we can say that members of our liked to say they believed in freedom, but they made no real provision for teaching it. In each of Meiklejohn's three experiments, whenever it became clear that he really believed in teaching all kinds of students to be free, the conditions for his work no longer existed within the college or the society. Meiklejohn's experience may not apply to all experimentation, since his purpose was specifically to make people capable of freedom, and many educational experiments have no such purpose. Meiklejohn was at odds with a capitalist society in which the majority did not want students to consider economic alternatives or to develop values that might challenge capitalism. Too many men preferred their sons not to be educated with regard to religion, morals, social and economic problems. Only in times of confidence, affluence, and economic expansion could traditional universities allow Meiklejohn's experimentation. When war, reaction to war, or depression occurred, his experimentation within traditional structures was cut off.

Meiklejohn seldom expressed discouragement at this. He expected it; he acknowledged it; he believed to go down with an idea is to make it live. He felt that the thinking power of people in the U.S. had diminished in his lifetime, that Madison Avenue was undermining our society more dangerously than the threat of the atomic bomb by undermining our ability to think, and that the U.S. experiment in free government may have run its course. But he never despaired that freedom would ever be completely crushed. He believed that at heart people desire freedom, dignity and excellence, that these inner qualities can never be crushed as long as people live. These qualities were to him closer to reality than space and time.

We may conclude with two paradoxes, one that Meiklejohn frequently told and one that summarizes his work.

In speaking of freedom, Meiklejohn often chose to quote a Greek slave, Epictetus, who said: "The state says that only free men may be educated, but wisdom says that only educated men may be free."

I believe that we can conclude that none of Meiklejohn's experiments survived for very long, and none of them ever died.