

Remembering Laurence Veysey (1933-2004)

Larry Veysey was my colleague and friend at UC Santa Cruz for almost twenty years. We shared a common fascination with utopias past and present; we talked often; and we taught several graduate seminars together. Though Larry never aspired to be anyone's mentor, I learned much from him about intellectual history. He was a complex individual—a difficult and at times infuriating colleague but also a loyal and generous friend, and a person of extraordinary intelligence and at times alarming bluntness. In faculty meetings he never failed to speak his mind, and he could rarely resist baiting and provoking colleagues with whom he disagreed. But he was also a tireless, fair-minded and thoroughly conscientious participant in search committees, for which he compiled detailed, carefully nuanced evaluations of the leading candidates, often with grades attached. He also graded sunsets and dinners. He appeared to be intransigent and set in his ways, but he believed in change and relished risk-taking. He loved to walk near the edge of the cliff, pushing and testing himself.

Larry Veysey was full of contradictions. But at the center of his personality, I think, lay an irresistible, often mischievous, penchant for truth-telling, combined with a barely concealed scorn for whatever and whomever he regarded as bland, half-hearted, facile or perfunctory, and a conviction that the truth is generally darker and less appealing than we would like it to be. When he inscribed a copy of The Communal Experience for me, he wrote: “In the hope that it may not too greatly dampen your enthusiasm for utopia.” He often commented sardonically on the amount of myth-making and sheer fabrication that went into the writing of politically correct movement history. But he was no less hard on the conservative recourse to comforting myths about the “good old days.” The truth for him was never simple and rarely uplifting; and his own sympathies went first of all to the mavericks and iconoclasts and idealists who refused to compromise their bold visions.

It might be argued that much of Larry's work represented an attempt to make his peace with his parents, both of whom were, as he later put it, “intensely committed to mystical and occult ideas, pursued not with the aim of achieving success in this world, but in the opposite sense of a consuming inward quest.”¹ His father, who died when Larry was four, had devoted much of his later life to spiritual contemplation, recording his dreams, visions and ordeals in 27 volumes of journal notebooks. Entering college in the 1950s, Larry initially tried to put distance between himself and the mystical preoccupations of his parents. He had already developed what was to become an enduring passion for the history of the street car. As an undergraduate at Yale he also worked for a time on the publication of the Horace Walpole papers. But it was in graduate school at Berkeley, working under the direction of Henry May, that he embarked on the dissertation on the emergence of the American university that, when it appeared in book form in 1965, was to make his reputation.

The Emergence of the American University has had an extraordinarily long life. After forty years it continues to be assigned regularly in courses on the history of American education and it has attained the status of a classic. One reason for this, apart from its sheer quality, is that,

¹ The Communal Experience. Anarchist and Mystical Colunter-Cultures in America (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 4.

although the analysis focuses on the period prior to World War I, much of it has a direct bearing on today's university. In the first part of this book Larry described the process by which three powerful academic philosophies took shape in the generation following the Civil War. These were the practical and utilitarian conception of the university as offering training for real life and public service, the vision of the university as a haven for research scholars, and the vision of the university as providing its students with an introduction to liberal culture. After sketching each of these academic philosophies, he went on in the second part to show how they lost their distinct outlines in the years between 1890 and 1910 with the emergence of the large, bureaucratically organized and business-minded modern university. Granting that the modern American university was in many ways an impressive achievement, Larry noted that it was (and is) dedicated more to public image than to any clear-cut academic philosophy. "With the passing years," he observed, "talk about the higher purposes of the university became increasingly ritualistic." For the university had become "an organization too powerful and complex to be explained by the several ideas which had sought to preside over its foundation."²

Moving to UC Santa Cruz in 1966, Larry continued to publish on the history of education. In 1982 he could write a particularly scathing critique of Jacques Barzun's invocation of an imagined academic golden age to justify an attack on the "wasteland of American education."³ Throughout his years at Santa Cruz Larry was also an astringent commentator on the gradual dismantling of the pathbreaking experiment in public education initiated at UCSC in the 1960s. But by the late '60s his scholarly interests had largely shifted from the history of education to the history of utopian experiments.

Larry Veysey's second major work, The Communal Experience: Anarchist and Mystical Counter-Cultures in America, which appeared in 1973, remains, I believe, the best single attempt to place the communal movement of the 1960s in historical perspective. In this work Larry set in-depth studies of four communities—two anarchist communities and two mystical "communities of discipline"—within the context of an original interpretation of the history of American radicalism. Arguing for the existence of an indigenous American tradition of cultural radicalism, he asked questions having to do with continuities and changes within that tradition. What, he asked, was and wasn't genuinely new in the attitudes toward religion, authority, violence, sex, drugs, property, individualism and community that marked the surge toward cultural radicalism in the 1960s? Beyond this, he raised the "supremely fascinating question" of "whether Western civilization [would] ever transcend itself because a few determined people choose experimentally to reorder some of its most basic categories of thought."⁴ Larry's answer to this question was not entirely negative. Noting the capacity of American society to "swallow up" movements of cultural revolt "in a world of conventional praise and aspiration" or to absorb them "in patriotic consensus," he concluded by suggesting that "at its best" what cultural

² The Emergence of the American University (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965, reprint 1970), 258-259.

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"Plight of the University," New York Review of Books, 29, 3 (March 4, 1982).

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The Communal Experience, 73.

radicalism could offer was “the possibility of a short season of rare exhilaration, a ‘magic moment’ of suspension from the dreary claims of time and society.”⁵

The distance between the two intellectual realms in which Larry Veysey made his mark is sufficiently great that it is worth asking how, in his own mind at least, the two were related. I think the key connection lies in Larry’s conviction that both the educational reformers of the late nineteenth century and the utopian communalists of the twentieth century had a faith in the power of ideas to remake the world that was simply overcome by the realities of American life. Each of Larry’s major works was an attempt to explain the failure of idealist visionaries and reformers to extricate themselves from the values and habit patterns of mainstream America. In the case of the American university he argued that the visions of the idealistic reformers had been thoroughly watered down; professors deluded themselves into thinking that their students were actually listening to them; and administrators concealed their capitulation to the standards and practices of corporate America behind a “soothing” style of “ritualistic idealism” in which lip-service was paid to high-minded goals.⁶ “The American university,” Larry observed acerbically, “was not created for those who took ideal goals with deadly earnestness.”⁷

While Larry Veysey never unequivocally identified himself with the academic idealists whose jeremiads he analyzed with sympathy and care in The Emergence of the American University, his discussion of anarchist communities in The Communal Experience concluded with something close to a gesture of identification. He also carried empathy to an ingenious extreme in providing an intellectual rationale for such seemingly silly forms of revolt as the refusal to wash.⁸ But the conclusions that he eventually came to in his survey of “the trend of American cultural radicalism” were bleak indeed. In one of his last articles he suggested that the communal movement of the 1960s may have been “a mere flash in the pan,” and he wondered if the 1960s in general had left any “long-term mark on American society or on the history of American communal movements.” He concluded:

The broadest generalization we can draw from all this is unhappily the familiar one—that American society has never been a very receptive environment for communal experiments, even though so many of them have indeed begun there. If we want a simple

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The Communal Experience, 195, 476. Interestingly, in The Emergence of the American University, 164, Larry used the same language to describe the qualities of intellectual freedom and “driving dedication” that made Johns Hopkins a model for American graduate schools in the 1880s: “in their purest form they . . . provided only a magic moment.”

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The Emergence of the American University, 336-338, 433-438.

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The Emergence of the American University, 433.

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The Communal Experience, 470-471: “The loss of faith in the long-range future perhaps explains another striking characteristic of the recent counter-culture, the previously unknown willingness to let one’s body stay physically dirty for long periods. Washing is a form of planning, a way of making oneself ready for future occasions. In a world which is believed to have no future, it becomes senseless. Going dirty reduces the need for devoting time to upkeep and makes one’s life far more flexible. The mind is freed for immediate experience.”

explanation, American acquisitiveness, or individualism, is no doubt the best answer. Ideology requires sacrifice; the impulse toward personal sacrifice has been too weak in American culture, whether a hundred or more years ago or now. What this analysis implies is that idealism has been vastly overstated by some historians and other writers as an element in the so-called American character. Many crucially important forms of idealism have been notoriously weak or absent in America, and this may be one of the striking continuities during the long historical period we have been briefly looking at. I personally wish it had been otherwise.⁹

This essay, which he described to me as “meant to be controversial” and “probably the last article I shall ever publish,” was his farewell to the academy.¹⁰

In 1986, after suffering a major heart attack at the age of just fifty-three, Larry took early retirement from the university. Giving away all his books and leaving behind most of his other possessions, he moved to Hawaii. For a few years he continued to read history and to write occasional reviews. But he probably put more time and energy into the compilation of a 68-page annotated bibliography and guide to street car videos than into any more conventional historical project. In the late 1980s he wrote that he did not regret abandoning teaching and writing history and that most of his reading consisted of Victorian novels. He said he was glad to give up History Department meetings. “It seemed I was always arguing for standards no one else believed in, and I could see why.”¹¹ In the 1990s further heart problems and several strokes made it increasingly difficult for him to read or write. But he did manage to produce a final article for a nudist monthly expressing his delight at having given up both clothing and bathing and having attained “what I like to think of as wisdom and serenity.”¹² He thus spent his last years engaged in an experiment in living in and for the moment, not unlike some of those he had analyzed in The Communal Experience, but conducted largely in solitude. I miss him.

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“Ideological Sources of American Movements,” Society, 25, 2 (January/February, 1988), 61.

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Letter to me, February 18, 1988.

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Letter to me, October 2, 1986.

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“Wearing Nothing and Doing Nothing in Lahaina,” Nude and Natural, Oshkosh, Wisconsin, 16, 1 (August, 1996), 45-46.