

Let Us At Least Return to Autumn 1945

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Jonathan Cole, former provost of Columbia University and author of *The Great American University: Its Rise to Preeminence, Its National Role, and Why It Must Be Protected* (2010), recently extolled the University of Chicago, where I work, as preeminently representing the virtues of academic freedom and meritocracy. I'm not interested in challenging such praise today, or indeed, the notion that US institutions of higher learning are especially distinguished by their contributions to civilization. But given the vaunted autonomy, especially autonomy from politics, customarily invoked in such discourse, it's worth reflecting on two contributions from the University of Chicago that have impacted all lives on our planet. The first is the development of the atomic bomb through the Manhattan Project; the second, the theoretical and practical elaboration of market fundamentalism associated with the name of Milton Friedman. The first is directly related to the topic of this roundtable. As for the second, it hardly needs saying that the economic devastation wrought by the unfettered workings of the market has devastated whole societies and robbed the foreseeable future of hope for many. For purposes of this roundtable, we need to keep in mind not only weapons manufacture and trade as a source of immense wealth for some, but the congeniality between war and prevailing conditions of poverty.

It's a consolation, but a sobering one, to realize how vigorously many of the atomic scientists, including Chicago faculty, rose to the challenges posed by their creation, even before it was dropped on Hiroshima, and certainly after the war, when they were "devastated" (Hans Bethe, <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-5569630864746703469#> by photos of the devastation and rose in action. They formed the Federation of Atomic Scientists (now the Federation of American Scientists) in November of 1945; the following year, they published a pamphlet that sold 100,000 copies, becoming a *New York Times* bestseller. Its title succinctly captures their message: *One World or None* (republished 2007). Prominent atomic scientists pressed the urgency of world government. No less than the "permanent elimination of war" was understood to be the true purpose of the work of the "Emergency Committee of Atomic Scientists" as reported in the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* in January of 1948. These scientists understood that their expertise obligated them to serve as educators of the public. Sadly, their voices were to be silenced by the forces of the Cold War, culminating in McCarthyism.

That early clarity, about how only *world* government dedicated to eliminating war *forever* can save us from extinction, is astounding and humbling. I've found that one of the crucial aspects of teaching about the atomic bomb—and conversely, one of the great benefits accruing from it—is to make clear the tragic inadequacy of nation-centered analysis. For East Asianists, it's essential to unravel patiently the dichotomy of victim and victimizer that leads to the deadly trap—for all humans—of short-circuited reasoning: because Japan was an aggressor nation, Japanese people deserved the bomb.

In getting there, I have found it useful to take a side trip to examine the well documented multiple cases of intentional exposure of US citizens to radiation by the US government. As a House Subcommittee report from 1986 titled *American Nuclear Guinea Pigs: Three Decades of Radiation Experiments on US Citizens* (available at <http://www.hss.energy.gov/healthsafety/ohre/roadmap/overview/070350/2.html>) states in its preface, "Literally hundreds of individuals were exposed to radiation in experiments which provided little or no medical benefit in the subjects ... American citizens thus became nuclear calibration devices." (Both the University of Chicago and its hospital appear several times in the documentation, for such practices as feeding subjects fallout from the Nevada test site or injecting them with plutonium.) The Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission hospitals in Hiroshima and Nagasaki existed to document and not to treat. The American institutions sponsored by government agencies to deliberately expose citizens to radiation were also not concerned with treatment. Students are usefully shocked to discover that their own governments are prone to not prioritizing their wellbeing.

Not so incidentally, I believe it is this kind of critical self-disclosure by the government that is in true keeping with the spirit of academic freedom. The first atomic scientists were deeply wary of the easy recourse to secrecy that atomic weaponry encouraged. This propensity alone, let us note, makes it inimical to democracy.

But there would be no point in arguing on behalf of democracy or any other form of governance if we could not presume a living citizenry. And it is here that we rub up against the deadly effects of American ignorance, both willful and imposed, about the effects of radiation, an ignorance that entails refusal to recognize the atomic bomb as an instrument of genocide. It was not that long ago that going to war was justified on the supposed presence of "Weapons of Mass Destruction." The atomic bomb, in whatever smart or miniaturized package, is the weapon of mass destruction par excellence.

And here I come back to the American university, great and otherwise. How, as educators, can we justify the continued neglect of a history the knowledge of which represents one of our best resources for our continued existence as a species? And acknowledging that, how do

we teach it? First and foremost, by using all the means (genres and media) at our disposal to tackle the great wall of ignorance and indifference with an account of what happened.

Is that sufficient? It is surely an immensely estimable beginning. Do we worry about being "too" political? Surely, as with any topic whose distortion, not to say dismissal, has been vital to a dominant national narrative; and especially in times of economic distress, which casually promotes censorship as a by-product in a sea of anxiety. (The so-called free market doubles and triples its flourishing in conditions of devastation, as Naomi Klein has shown so compellingly in her book *Disaster Capitalism*.)

Do we present this material neutrally? I believe that a thorough and accurate presentation of the atomic bombs and their long-lasting consequences is its own best argument for the incompatibility of nuclear weapons and human existence. At the same time, we might ask ourselves this: (a) is it possible to have what counts as a liberal education today that is not premised on respect for life? and (b) is it possible to profess neutrality toward slavery in the context of such education? toward genocide?

Let us not confuse objectivity with neutrality. And that, in turn, requires us to be scrupulous in our presentation, sensitive to student doubts, and vigilant about updating our knowledge. *That* requires collaboration.

And we could do worse than seek to attain the level of awareness of the atomic scientists in 1945, after Hiroshima.