

History of Education Society

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History of Education Quarterly



Fall 2005

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History of Education Society

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COVER PHOTO: A science classroom, Carlisle Indian Industrial School, circa 1890. Photo courtesy of University of Texas.

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Introduction

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Retrospective: Laurence R. Veysey's *The Emergence of the American University*

Introduction

Christopher P. Loss

This year marks the fortieth anniversary of the publication of Laurence R. Veysey's *The Emergence of the American University*. Hailed by Frederick Rudolph at the time of its release as a "major contribution . . . tough-minded . . . [and] brilliant." Veysey's work is still widely read, taught, and cited.¹ Every scholar who wrestles with the historical development of the modern American university must at some point come to terms with the institution as Veysey so brashly conceived of it. All disciplinary subfields have their founding text—a singular work that defines an entire intellectual discourse and lays out the "rules of the game" for all those who follow. For historians interested in tracking the organization, production, and consumption of knowledge in the United States, *The Emergence of the American University* is and remains that text.

My goal in organizing this retrospective was simple: to bring together a group of historians to critically reflect upon *The Emergence of the American University*. How well has Veysey's work held up under the weight of four decades of scholarly revision? Does it show any obvious signs of wear? In short, how has *The Emergence of the American University* weathered the tests of academic time? Based on the essays that follow, the unequivocal answer to this last question is: very well, indeed.

The retrospective is organized in a more or less chronological fashion. The contributors tackle a wide range of topics that are germane to Veysey's book and to contemporary scholarly debates about the history of American higher education more generally. In an illuminating historiographic essay Julie A. Reuben contemplates the challenges of writing about the history

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¹Frederick Rudolph, review of *The Emergence of the American University* by Lawrence R. Veysey, *Journal of American History*, 53 (December 1966): 616-17.

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of the American university since the publication of Veysey's book. Adam R. Nelson explores the potential benefits of shifting the international context of the emergence of the American university from a narrowly Western European to a more global perspective. Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz ponders the fate of the liberal arts college as an object of scholarly inquiry in the wake of Veysey's work. Rebecca S. Lowen compares Veysey's Progressive Era research university with Clark Kerr's Cold War "multiversity" and finds some surprising continuities between the two. Christopher P. Loss examines Veysey's treatment of the concept of bureaucracy and posits that his "presentist" conceptualization of it was molded by the escalating tensions of the 1960s university as much as it was by the historical record of the 1890s. The concluding essay by Mark Schwehn scrutinizes Veysey's treatment of religion in the development of the modern university and speculates about the role that religion might yet play in the university's twenty-first century incarnation. It is my hope that readers will both enjoy these essays and use them as points of departure in their own studies of the history of the American university.

On a more somber note, the passing of Laurence Veysey in February 2004 brought an added sense of timeliness to this endeavor. I am thus all the more grateful to Jonathan Beecher, a colleague and friend of Laurence Veysey's at the University of California, Santa Cruz, who generously agreed to write the opening memorial for this retrospective. Beecher's essay not only provides a personal glimpse of Laurence Veysey as a teacher, scholar, and friend, it also offers a poignant reminder of the myriad ways in which private beliefs and experiences play a determinative role in shaping the professional commitments of individual scholars.

Finally, I would like to thank my fellow contributors and the editorial staff at the *History of Education Quarterly* (*HEQ*). In what I took as a sign of the continued significance of and admiration for Veysey's work, all of the contributors enthusiastically agreed to submit essays on what was, by academic standards anyway, a relatively short time frame. The entire *HEQ* editorial team, but especially Richard Altenbaugh and Bruce Nelson, likewise deserve a heartfelt thanks: from start to finish their support for this project made all the difference.

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Bureaucratic Tyranny: "The Price of Structure" in the American University

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Bureaucratic Tyranny: “The Price of Structure” in the American University

Christopher P. Loss

I first encountered Laurence Veysey as an undergraduate at Pennsylvania State University in the early 1990s. I did not meet Veysey, who had long since left the academy. Nor did I read *The Emergence of the American University*, which happened years later in graduate school. Actually, my first contact with Laurence R. Veysey occurred without me knowing it.

Despondent over the size of and lack of rigor in many of my general education classes and encouraged by my academic advisor—a child of the 1960s counterculture and an acolyte of authenticity—I picked up my dormitory room phone. “Hello, my name is Christopher Loss. I’m a third-year student at Penn State. I’d like to speak with President Thomas about the problems with the undergraduate curriculum.” [Silence] “What’s your name, again,” asked the receptionist? [Writing] “The President is unavailable at this time. Give me your Social Security number. I’ll call you right back.” A few minutes later I received a call confirming a one-on-one appointment with the president for the following week.

Our meeting was brief. President Thomas sat quietly, nodded thoughtfully, and allowed me to talk. But after about ten minutes, he interrupted. “Chris,” said the President, “I would like you to serve on the Undergraduate Life Committee of the Penn State Faculty Senate.” Flattered beyond belief, I agreed on the spot.¹

Had I read Veysey before my meeting, however, I would have been less impressed by my solo ascent to the summit of the Penn State bureaucracy. Had I read Veysey, I would have known that in the modern university

Christopher P. Loss is a Ph.D. candidate in history at the University of Virginia, where he is also a fellow at the Miller Center of Public Affairs. His dissertation, currently in-progress, is entitled “From Democracy to Diversity: The Transformation of American Higher Education from World War I through the Cold War.”

I am especially grateful to David Hollinger, for his suggestions and time; to Jonathan Zimmerman, for his intellectual generosity and friendship; and to Catherine Gavin Loss, for all of the above and then some.

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¹Dr. Joab Thomas served as the President of the Pennsylvania State University from 1990-1996. I served on the Undergraduate Life Committee during the 1993-1994 academic year.

bureaucratic problems beget bureaucratic solutions. Indeed, had I read Veysey, I would have realized that the university's "unreconciled," to use Veysey's apt term—especially an unreconciled undergraduate armed with real questions about the quality of his educational experience—invariably end up banished to the farthest, most remote reaches of the institution.²

The growth of the university's bureaucratic order (into which I was summarily tossed) was fundamental to Veysey's account of the emergence of the American university. Veysey dedicated the second half of his book, entitled "The Price of Structure," to exploring the ways in which the administrative machinery of the university took shape as a functional response to a series of interrelated intellectual and organizational "tensions"—between students and faculty, faculty and administrators, administrators and the wider public. From 1890 to 1910, according to Veysey, a remarkably durable administrative order took hold of American higher education that shaped and guided its growth and development thereafter. Integration, rationality, efficiency, predictability, subordination, and continuity were just some of the supposed benefits of the bureaucratic structure to which the modern university succumbed in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century. Believing the basic pattern of administrative organization was fundamentally fixed, Veysey concluded that, except for continued "quantitative aggrandizement," by 1910 the transformation of the modern university was all but complete.³

Yet the rise of bureaucracy exacted its own "price" on the American university. Although bureaucratization delivered order, stability, and public respect to the institution, it also sapped much of the university's eccentricity and free spiritedness. Bureaucratization, a process Veysey tellingly described as one of "fragmentation and centralization," helped the university quickly achieve the status of a mature institutional type; at the same time, however, it also crystallized an institutional structure that was in many respects indistinguishable from that of the modern business firm.⁴ Career administrators ran the university as if it were any other large-scale organization in the hopes of making "higher learning" as marketable as possible to the vast swath of middle-class Americans upon which the university's future well-being rested. For its part, the faculty played along with the pomp and pageantry, the sport and whimsy of the image-conscious university. In the hopes of keeping their professional identity located "somewhere between

²Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965/1970), 381.

³*Ibid.*, 338.

⁴*Ibid.*, 311.

a business career and exile,” the professoriate agreed to put aside its differences with the institution’s crasser elements in return for a modicum of the freedom needed to pursue their research and study without fear of external interference.⁵ Ultimately, Veysey judged the structural transformation of American higher education a “necessary evil”: *necessary* to accommodate increased public demand and scrutiny, to demarcate disciplinary turf, to distribute scarce resources, and to protect the exclusivity required for expertise; but *evil* because it transformed a grand experiment dedicated to idealism and the unfettered search for truth into yet another “agency of social control.”⁶

The slow but steady creep of bureaucratic tyranny, and the abhorrence and want that it suggested, belied the sense of cautious optimism that pervaded Veysey’s discussion of the intellectual foundations of the university in the first half of his book. How could the university ideal, borne of a spring time of intense idealistic expectancy, have arrived at such a winter of discontent? How could the university ideal have degenerated into a vertically integrated business enterprise specializing in the production of middlebrow values and tastes, pseudo independence of thought, and harmless collegiate fun? What happened, Veysey wondered, to the university ideal as it was first conceived by the institution’s founding generation of educational reformers and philanthropists—the one committed to truth, intellectual liberation, and democratic rejuvenation? The short answer to all of these questions was, in a word, bureaucracy, and the cadre of nameless, faceless academic executives that it produced.

The long answer, however, can be gleaned by surveying the contents of Laurence Veysey’s subsequent scholarship. Against the backdrop of the rapid dissembling of the social protest movements of the late 1960s, but with these protests movements very much on his mind, Veysey generated an enormous body of work that revealed an acute preoccupation with the problem of bureaucracy. By its very design, Veysey argued, bureaucratization—what he variously defined as “the system,” “the establishment,” “the liberal consensus,” or as “mainstream culture,” among others—snuffed out authentic experience and dulled the sharp edges of real life. Veysey followed *The Emergence of the American University* with two edited volumes and one more major work, *The Communal Experience: Anarchist and Mystical Counter-Cultures in America* (1973). He published additional essays and articles, but it was the decade after the publication of *Emergence* that was to be the most creative and productive of Veysey’s remarkable, if by academic standards brief, career. Even more important, when analyzed collectively, Veysey’s corpus of scholarship provides abundant evidence that *The Emergence of the American*

⁵Ibid., 443.

⁶Ibid., 268, 316.

University was both a study of the university's founding as well as a pointed, unapologetic critique of the 1960s university.

Veysey's first scholarly volume after *The Emergence of the American University* was *Law and Resistance: American Attitudes toward Authority* (1970). This book was ostensibly a collection of essays about the law of the "majority"—variously embodied by the state, jurisprudence, organized religions, and the police—and the resistance of "minorities," including libertarian anarchists, free-lovers, western outlaws, laissez-faire liberals, Black Power separatists, and student radicals. Yet, *Law and Resistance* was more than a mere chronicle of "bottom-up" challenges to the established order; Veysey's real interest lay in exposing what he viewed as the power of America's mainstream culture—committed to "planning, large-scale organization, a conventional work and family, and the rights of private property"—to neutralize minority cultures' pursuit of "decentralization, separatism, [and] spontaneous expressiveness."⁷ This culture clash was worth studying not because the victor was ever in doubt; the majority culture always came out on top, especially when cultural differences erupted into physical violence. Rather, Veysey hoped that by honestly assessing the historic accomplishments and failures of previous cultural outsiders, he could persuade his readers that the best hope for affecting a lasting societal transformation was for activists to approach their struggle with mainstream America as chiefly an intellectual fight. "Perhaps it is not yet too late," Veysey pleaded, "to arrive at one's convictions about the American future calmly and reflectively."⁸

Veysey's next edited volume was *The Perfectionists: Radical Social Thought in the North, 1815-1860* (1973), and on its face it appeared to be something of an intellectual retreat from the perils of the immediate world to those of a bygone era. Not so; the book was far more than a simple primer of key texts drawn from across the spectrum of northern antebellum radical thought. According to Veysey, the goal of the volume was threefold. First, to provide an in-depth study of a time-bound cohort of social reformers—from Dorothea Dix to Horace Greeley, from Ralph Waldo Emerson to William Lloyd Garrison—whom he believed all shared a commitment to the perfection of the temporal world in which they lived. Second, to demonstrate the existence "of a long-lived radical tradition" in American life dating back to the early nineteenth century and to highlight the struggles and accomplishments of what he believed represented the earliest evidence of an "internal-outsider" challenge to a corrupt majority culture that at its best tolerated, and at its

⁷Laurence R. Veysey, "Freedom and Disorder in American History: An Interpretation," in *Law and Resistance: American Attitudes Toward Authority*, ed. Laurence R. Veysey (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1970), 12-13.

⁸*Ibid.*, 36.

worst openly supported, the enslavement of its own people.⁹ Third, and most important, Veysey wanted to read the past into the present. He sought to mine lessons from antebellum radical reformers' experiences in order to provide intellectual succor to the floundering social movements of the waning Vietnam Era. To Veysey the message was clear: although he did not go so far as to advocate the use of violent force to "engender a general social reordering," the experiences of social radicals and the coming of the American Civil War at least suggested to him that "open separation" from the larger society might be necessary in order to create a "new culture . . . to replace the old order."¹⁰ In a dramatic departure from his earlier edited volume, by 1973 Veysey felt that a sweeping reinvention of American life would occur neither "calmly" nor "reflectively."

In that same year, Veysey published *The Communal Experience: Anarchist and Mystical Counter-Cultures in America*, which was to be the final book-length work of original scholarship in his career. In terms of argumentation and tone, *The Communal Experience* was guided by the same questions that had informed his immediately preceding works: Was there a long-standing tradition of counter-cultural resistance in the United States? To what extent did past separatist experiments affect, if they affected at all, the ebb and flow of the mainstream culture? Did the forces of bureaucracy inevitably push people living on the margins of society into the thick of quotidian existence? And what did the history of earlier counter-cultures portend for their latter-day revival? To answer these questions Veysey analyzed a sampling of twentieth-century minority communities, what he now referred to as "intentional communities"—self-consciously constructed separatist social orders. Veysey compared two modal types of intentional communities, anarchist and mystical. Based on Veysey's study, which included a summer spent living on a New Age commune in New Mexico, anarchist counter-cultures resulted in a "loose, voluntaristic, unstructured pattern of living," while mystical countercultures resulted in "a much more leader-oriented and well-defined plan of everyday existence."¹¹ Not surprisingly, Veysey found both types wholly unsatisfying: mystical communes hardened into authoritarian rule, while anarchist communes softened into sheer chaos. In short, neither counter-cultural type appeared capable of significantly transforming mainstream culture. "History," Veysey bleakly concluded, "teaches pessimism. . . ."¹² Yet, because cultural challengers resist the pull

⁹Laurence R. Veysey, ed., *The Perfectionists: Radical Social Thought in the North, 1815-1860* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1973), 2.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 13.

¹¹Laurence Veysey, *The Communal Experience: Anarchist and Mystical Counter-Cultures in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 12-13.

¹²*Ibid.*, 480.

of history—indeed, Veysey believed they were ignorant of it—he predicted that counter-cultural resistance would persist well beyond the 1970s despite the unlikelihood of such efforts to produce any noteworthy accomplishments.

This brief survey of Veysey's larger body of scholarship—centered upon his career-long fascination with the “price of structure” in American society and institutions—raises fresh questions about *The Emergence of the American University*. For starters, when looked at in this larger context, it is difficult to catalogue *Emergence* as simply a book on and about the founding and maturation of the modern university in the several decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century. Although Veysey insisted that the structural transformation of the American university was complete by 1910, when considered within a more capacious scholarly context *Emergence* appears less amenable to arbitrary chronological boundaries. Just as he did in his subsequent scholarship, Veysey read the present into the past, and the past into the present, while writing *Emergence*. How do we know this? One need only consider the two underlying assumptions that guided Veysey's argument about the administrative reconstruction of the modern university to tell: that the young institution was “undeniably successful” and stable as early as 1890; and that the bureaucratization process unfolded in “silence” and with a “lack of self-consciousness” among its chief architects.¹³

Based on purely bureaucratic measures, by the early 1960s the rise of the American university read like a Horatio Alger story. With evermore students seeking access, and with evermore federal support to help them do so, by the 1960s the university had certainly emerged as a key gateway to full citizenship and its attendant economic and social benefits. Yet the institution's trajectory across the first half of the twentieth century, as Veysey certainly knew, was anything but preordained. World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II pushed American higher education to its breaking point. Of course, the university recovered and thrived in spite of these cataclysmic challenges thanks to widespread public demand and increasingly bountiful federal support for student aid and applied research. When considered in this way, however, it is difficult to argue that the American university was a stable institution by 1890. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century—during economic booms, busts, and world wars—the coming of the university's “golden age” could scarcely have been predicted until well after World War II.

Why did Veysey's story elide the historical complexity and ambiguity of the American university? Three reasons immediately come to mind. The first one is quite prosaic: a lack of room. At over 500 pages, including reference materials and index, *The Emergence of the American University* was

¹³Veysey, *Emergence of the American University*, 268, 332, 341.

already a behemoth work. A second reason has to do with Veysey's choice of research methodology in the second half of his book. Eschewing the historical-archival method of his book's first half, Veysey employed "an informal version of structural-functional analysis"—then intellectually fashionable among organizational sociologists—to understand the bureaucratization of the American university.¹⁴ According to Veysey, the advantage of such an approach was that it permitted investigators to glimpse the hidden, emotive side of the university-building project. That is, Veysey insisted that archival evidence, such as administrative correspondences and records, could not alone explain the structural transformation of the university because "non-volitional behavior" and "deep-seated impulse" also contributed to the bureaucratic development of the institution.¹⁵

In retrospect, however, the results of Veysey's sociological approach were uneven. On the one hand, Veysey's use of structural-functional analysis permitted him to make broad-gauge generalizations about the development and long range influence of a modal type of bureaucratic institution across the course of the twentieth century. On the other hand, Veysey's foray into sociological methods certainly flattened out what should have been a story of conflict and compromise, structural innovation and decay, trial and error. Veysey's sociological approach was not unsophisticated. Nor was bureaucracy, as a category of analysis, incapable of carrying the heuristic weight he placed upon it. Yet Veysey's depiction of the bureaucratization of the university did unfold with an air of inevitability, and for this Veysey's deployment of structural-functionalist analysis must at least bear some of the blame. He claimed that scant evidence existed linking academic executives with specific administrative transformations and suggested that a structural-functionalist approach provided access to the behind-closed-doors' decision-making of the nascent university. This is all well and good. Still, given Veysey's focus on the "intentionality" of social communities in his subsequent scholarship—on the role of individual reformers and counter-cultural innovators in designing communities both large and small—it is striking that he failed to find much conscious intention among the academic leaders of the early university. Which begs the question: Did Veysey bother to look? This is not to suggest that we should doubt *what* Veysey said happened—after all, an immense organizational scholarship has firmly established that the bureaucratization of American life occurred in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century. But, we should question *how* he said it occurred.¹⁶

¹⁴Ibid., viii.

¹⁵Ibid., ix.

¹⁶For a sampling of the organizational literature, of which *Emergence of the American University* is a part, see, e.g., Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York, Hill

A final reason why Veysey brushed over the complexity of the bureaucratization process was that he knew where he wanted *The Emergence of the American University* to end and was in a rush to get there. Veysey's penchant for "presentism," used to maximal effect in his latter work, was already on full display in his first book. To be sure, Veysey's concluding sketch of the early 1960s university as an "agency of social control" was deliberate. Veysey undoubtedly linked the brewing student distemper of the early 1960s campus to the colossus of bureaucracy that he believed had overtaken both the modern university and modern life. In these ways, Veysey intended *The Emergence of the American University* to speak directly to the structural defects of the university in which he worked and lived and that in the hopeful days of the early 1960s still seemed possible to repair.

That neither a complete overhaul of the American university nor society occurred in the wake of the 1960s student revolts undoubtedly drove Veysey into deep despair. Thus one can only imagine the mixture of emotions running through his chest in late 1964, only months removed from the publication of his first book, as he listened to the words of a fiery, young student activist perched atop the steps of Sproul Hall at the University of California, Berkeley, where Veysey had completed his dissertation two years earlier. "There is a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart," intoned Mario Savio, leader of the burgeoning Free Speech Movement, "that you can't take part; you can't even passively take part, and you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it stop.¹⁷ To an extent that was indeed prophetic, *The Emergence of the American University* both explained from whence "the machine" came, and why no one person, or group of people, or movement was likely "to make it stop" anytime soon.

& Wang, 1967); Louis Galambos, "The Emerging Organizational Synthesis in Modern American History," *Business History Review*, 44 (Autumn 1970): 279-290; and Brian Balogh, "Reorganizing the Organizational Synthesis: Federal-Professional Relations in Modern America," *Studies in American Political Development*, 5 (Spring 1991): 119-172.

¹⁷Quotation from Mario Savio's "Sproul Hall Speech," December 2, 1964, available online at <<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/saviotranscript.html>> (February 5, 2005).