

# Ravin'

## MAGAZINE

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Suffolk University, Boston, Ma.

Oct. 72

In This Issue:

An Essay By

Dr. Gordon Brumm

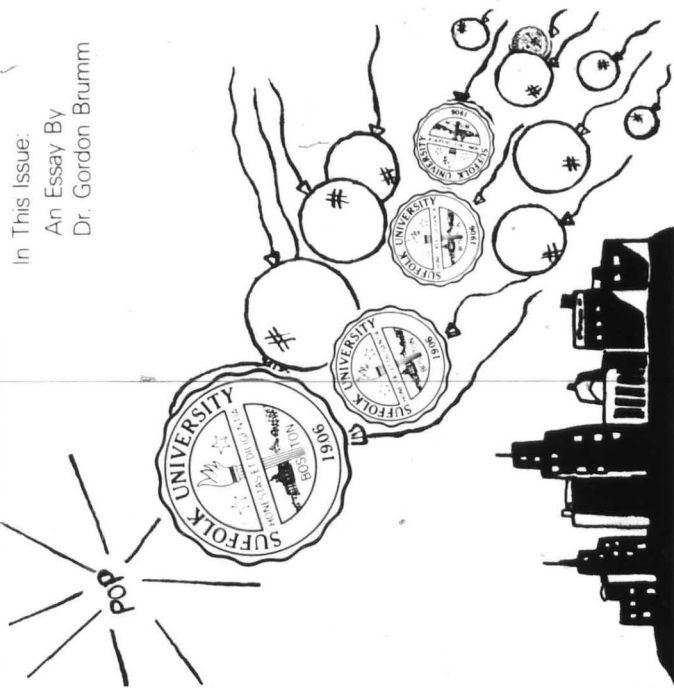


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## Editorial

# On Gordon Brumm

Dr. Gordon Brumm, a former professor of Philosophy, was released from his teaching position at Suffolk on April 13, 1970 as the result of a hearing by the Faculty Committee on Tenure, Promotion and Review. Quoting an article appearing in the SUFFOLK JOURNAL of May 20, 1970, "On November 21, 1969, Dr. Brumm was told by Dr. Grunewald (former dean of the colleges of arts and sciences) that his contract would not be renewed for the following year. Dr. Grunewald gave as the one and only reason, an extremely negative evaluation by Dr. Sahakian, Philosophy Department Chairman."

As Dr. Brumm was in his second year of teaching at Suffolk he had not received tenure so the University had no legal obligation to rehire him.

At the time he received his notice from Dean Grunewald, Brumm made an appeal to the Student Government Association for a student survey of his teaching. The results of the survey were as follows: 66 percent rated him "Superior"; 26 percent "competent"; 6 percent "fair"; and 1 percent "poor".

The Journal article also stated "In his statement to the faculty Committee, Brumm claimed chiefly that the evidence showed his teaching to be entirely adequate by any reasonable standard, and that in any event no serious attempt was made to evaluate his teaching; that events indicated the reason for non-rehiring came from outside the Department (Philosophy); and, that past actions by the Administration and/or the Chairman indicated pressure against his speaking out on political or semi-political issues; this main activities having been in connection with the Coalition for New Politics; this leading to the conclusion that the alleged academic reasons were actually only excuses, and the real reasons for the non-renewal were in violation of academic freedom."

With the publication of this article RAVIN' MAGAZINE makes no attempt to pass judgment on the results of the hearing. We are presenting Dr. Brumm's essay as a point for thought and discussion. We invite your comments.

## Suffolk; Education for Mediocrity

by Dr. Gordon Brumm

The best way to describe Suffolk is by way of its polar opposite, Harvard, that *ne plus ultra* of elite institutions, whose psychic and social distance is accentuated by its geographic proximity. In Harvard Yard, there are old but vital-looking buildings with high ceilings and wide corridors, separated by grassy tree-studded spaces; these combine to produce an atmosphere of openness and freedom and ease. The freshman dormitories, and the Houses which stretch from the Yard to the river, provide living facilities, adorned with plush lounges and common rooms, for all students who want to use them. Library resources are superabundant, and athletic facilities also. Scholarships are plentiful, and if a needy Harvard student cannot win one of these, at least he can be assured of being able to get by on a loan or a job which cuts minimally into his time. Harvard undergraduates run their own nationally-recognized daily newspaper, and on occasion Harvard students may journey to Washington with one of their professors to confer with a high government official. Everything about the college suggests power, capability, opportunity, confidence.

Contrast this with Suffolk, surrounded by rotting townhouses, the metal-and-glass Donahue Building rising out of Beacon Hill with all the majesty of a suburban dental center; with no dormitories, with many of its students commuting from distant towns, or working at full-time jobs, or both, with a minimal library, with athletic facilities located down the subway line in Cambridge.

I do not mean to say that Harvard is without faults — after all, it was Harvard and not Suffolk students who struck in 1969. Indeed, Suffolk has some advantages over Harvard, such as small classes and a very non-restrictive admissions policy. But nothing could be more obvious than that a Harvard student is offered much more, in terms both of education and its psychological concomitants, than his Suffolk counterpart. One obvious reason is Suffolk's relative poverty. It lacks Harvard's endowment, and prides itself on its low tuition. It simply can't afford what Harvard can.

However, it is a facile misconception to think of Suffolk's poverty both as inevitable and as sufficient reason for the abysmal level of education found there. One version of the

misconception, sometimes endorsed by the administration, interprets Suffolk as a place of Horatio Alger opportunity, where those who are poor or otherwise disadvantaged may find success through (personal) struggle — an interpretation which immediately raises questions as to why the poor must struggle more than others, what the consequences of their having to struggle are, and whether they can go as far as their elite counterparts anyway. Such questions are circumvented by what is probably the more common view, that the gulf between the two schools is a morally innocuous, natural consequence of a sorting-out by ability which follows from society's quest for excellence. According to this interpretation, Suffolk is part of a system whereby the greatest rewards are given to those who can achieve most, with the school's administration and faculty struggling bravely to help their students achieve as much as possible. But the validity of such a view is far from self-evident. For — ignoring the problem of relative abilities — it could be argued, for example, that democracy and true equality demand the devoting of more resources to the less apt students in order to bring them up to level.

Moreover, the common view is profoundly misleading as to Suffolk's function. The gap between the two schools is not merely the result of circumstance. If it did not exist, it would have to be created, for the two schools are in a symbiotic relationship. They occupy two different positions on the same elitist status-ladder, and each serves to support the ladder in its own way: the two schools must be defined as superior and inferior to one another. Suffolk must be as it is, if Harvard is to be as it is, and vice versa, and the Suffolk administration and faculty collaborate in assigning their school a well-defined inferior role.

It is a role which Suffolk students are hardly happy with. To an extraordinary degree, I found the prevailing attitude to be one of hostility combined with subservience, set in an atmosphere of distaste, frustration, self-hate and psychological death — of persons acting against their wills and making other persons do the same.

In fairness, it should be said that apparently, some students, especially science students, are content with Suffolk. But surely not many. I never heard any student express real happiness with the place, and I heard many expressions of dissatisfaction bordering on disgust. A surprising number of students and recent graduates simply wanted to forget about the school, to have nothing to do with it beyond what was absolutely necessary. And of course there are a great many drop-outs — perhaps best exemplified by a very good student in one of my classes who said he could never stay in a place like this.

Different students are disaffected for different reasons. A glance at the faculty, and their courses, will help to explain

The faculty is probably more heterogeneous than at elite institutions. Roughly, it can be divided into five categories:

1) **Hard-Core Conservatives.** The most powerful group, by virtue of numbers, longevity and rapport with the administration. Strongly professionalistic, authoritarian, and extremely conservative educationally, stressing discipline and memorization in their courses. In most cases, politically conservative as well.

2) **Establishment Humanists.** Most of the other veterans fall into this group. Somewhat liberal politically, but careerist and educationally conservative, though tending to teach more openly, with more humanistic content, than their hard-core colleagues.

3) **Young Careerists.** Not yet established. More or less liberal educationally, but moderate to conservative politically. Bound to the status quo.

4) **Young Activists.** Radical or left-liberal, both educationally and politically. Relatively involved. There are few of these, and even fewer who stay on for any length of time.

5) **Old Timers.** A decreasing number of veterans of Suffolk with insecure professional standing, who adhere to the status quo out of fear.

Almost without exception, faculty members in all these categories teach the traditional subject-matter of their disciplines, whether it be liberal arts, business or education. But they treat the subject matter in different ways. Some, mainly **Hard-Core Conservatives**, work like drillmasters, aiming to make their students absorb as many facts as possible.

Others, including some of the **Old Timers** and some of the **Liberal Humanists**, give courses which are factual but easy. And others, including many of the younger faculty and some of the **Old Humanists**, aim to instill the deeper understanding of method and content that is properly associated with college, though they usually do so, regrettably, within the traditional frameworks.

The student body is also heterogeneous. A certain number are of the sort typical of the more elite colleges — articulate, open, receptive, often politically liberal with a sprinkling of radicals or pseudo-radicals. Having come to Suffolk for a variety of reasons, they tend to despise the school because the drillmaster courses stifle and waste them, and the easy courses give them nothing, while even their better courses tend to be spoiled by the general disinterest of their fellow students. Furthermore, they feel that many of the faculty hold them in contempt just for being at Suffolk. The most complimentary remark I heard from such students was that Suffolk gave them a chance to be alone and read. To say this is to compare Suffolk with the Boston Public Library — except that the BPL has more books and doesn't charge \$1400 per year. It also doesn't give a degree.

And if the degree is important for the more

adept students at Suffolk, it is crucial for the mass of students who determine the predominant atmosphere of the school. These include some from middle-class backgrounds who are looking for an easy place, but to most, Suffolk appears to be the way of upward social mobility, a way out of the working class and into the world of the white collar. They represent Middle America. Politically, their attitude is on the whole conservative, the politics of those who find meaning in loyalty to authority, who have hopes for a better future, who don't want to rock the boat. Radical thought seems too expensive, for they are living on margin — a situation aggravated by their seeing Suffolk as their only chance at college education. They tend to despise the more difficult courses, both drillmaster and humanistic, for they are poorly prepared, especially for the creative and analytic thought which college should demand, and have little desire to pursue the subjects. They generate a pervasive aura of surly disinterest described by one student as "aggressive apathy."

#### Neo-Colonial Establishment

Suffolk might seem somewhat paradoxical when you first think about it. Why should students despise the institution so, when it offers them a chance to rise in the world? And why should it peddle the conventional and super-conventional kinds of education which are so ill-adapted to encouraging growth in students, or which are so hated by students, or both?

I found a valuable, albeit unexpected, key to the paradox in "La Hora de los Hornos," a film depicting neo-colonialism in Latin America with special attention to the cultural aspect. For Suffolk functions like a colonial or neo-colonial establishment. Look at the points of similarity.

"I was never  
called 'Doctor' so  
frequently in my life."

Corresponding to the imperialist nation are the elite institutions such as Harvard and the groups and classes they represent — the great world of corporations and professions, of managers and rulers.

Corresponding to the controlling elite of the colonial nation are the Suffolk faculty and administration.

The Suffolk students correspond to the colonial people.

Corresponding to the produce of the colonial country are the (educated) labor and the loyalty of Suffolk graduates.

The young instructors at Suffolk are like young officials sent out from the imperialist country (i.e., from graduate school at the elite institutions), and eager to return.

The curriculum — both liberal and professional — corresponds to the culture of the imperialist nation, essentially alien to the colonial people, and impressed on them by the elite. This serves as the pathway to success. Suffolk students, like the colonials, are assumed by everyone involved (including themselves) to be inherently inferior, but by absorbing the dominant culture (or by seeming to) they can hope to attain some measure of status and self-esteem as part of the dominant system.

All this may illuminate the features of the status-ladder occupied, at different levels, by both Suffolk and the elite institutions: Resources, abilities, and qualifications collect at the top (without, however, any attempt to promote a heightened sense of morality among those at the top), and this provides them a preponderance of ability to act and make changes. Meanwhile, everyone at Suffolk — students and faculty alike — assumes that life at the top is happier and more valuable. Individuals therefore tend to emulate the elite (as far as possible) by advancing through the system, which requires conforming to its dictates. Meritocracy functions as a system of control. (With regard to faculty, the attractiveness of the top serves to maintain the inequalities of the system, by drawing good instructors upward, away from Suffolk.) The criterion for membership in the highest levels consists largely of mastery of the traditional elite curriculum, and so it is this mastery (or the appearance of it) which individuals aim to achieve. There is little or no attempt to teach anything that might be of more value to the Suffolk than the traditional curriculum, by way of allowing Suffolk students to understand their own situation better, or to enhance their autonomy or their ability to effect change.

In this scheme, the "high culture", traditionally transmitted by liberal education, serves along with the business and professional curricula as an instrument of control. For regardless of its intrinsic value — and I don't deny that it can be a source of delight and enrichment and fulfillment — liberal education serves to promote solidarity of the controlling groups, and to identify those who are eligible to enter.

Suffolk does indeed show a slavish regard for the "high culture" and the "professionalism" tied to it. Many of the faculty have Ph.D.'s, and "credentials" are much stressed. (I was never called "Doctor" so frequently in my life.) The function of the faculty, then, is defined as inculcation of some form of the "high culture", to make the students eligible for advancement.

To this definition of their role, faculty members make three types of response. Some instructors

generally younger ones — give the kind of course associated with elite colleges, attempting to promote understanding, albeit of traditional academic material. Their efforts are hampered by heavy schedules and apathetic students, plus a lack of recognition for their educational efforts. Their attrition rate is high.

The other two types of course provide the form of liberal education without the substance. At one extreme is that group of instructors — mainly Hard-Core Conservatives — who give rigorous and sterile drills in memorization of facts (Some of these used class attendance in determining their grades, while they were still allowed to do so.) They aim to make their courses difficult, so as to determine which students are capable of succeeding in their fields.

At the other extreme is the third group of instructors, who present factual material in an easy and pleasant — and superficial — way. They work to provide an easy pathway into the dominant world, like unctuous operators in the colonial apparatus, forever offering to smooth one's way by means of their inside contacts.

The apologetic students, as I have mentioned, tend to despise the latter two types of course. The more typical Suffolk students — who are less able and/or less well prepared, and for whom the curriculum means little in terms of their experience — tend to despise the first two types in favor of the easy courses. They judge according to the values of the commercial world, the salesman's values. They are attracted to instructors who are "good guys", who can "sell" the material, and who will get them through as pleasantly as possible, without regard for the ultimate value of the merchandise.

But no matter how adroitly Suffolk students may clear the educational hurdles, all parties recognize that by and large they are there because they couldn't get into anything like an elite college and that even when they get their degrees their opportunities will be less than those of, say, Harvard graduates. In short Suffolk students are losers by the standards which Suffolk accepts. This produces a general atmosphere of depression and contempt. Careerist faculty members tend to despise the students for being losers and thus marking them; the faculty, as losers also, in much the same way as a British official who drew a post in an obscure colony would despise the natives, while students suffer from lack of confidence and from mutual contempt like colonialists under the sway of imperialist masters.

Added to this is an authoritarian manner of administration. Suffolk is run through a chain of command beginning with the 21-man Board of Trustees, composed almost exclusively of lawyers and business executives, the majority of whom are over 60 years of age, and running down through the President and Deans to the Department Chairmen. A great deal of informal

power supposedly resides with the veteran members of the faculty, who have been around Suffolk for up to 25 years. What was previously a genuinely repressive atmosphere, politically and socially, has now loosened somewhat (so that the literary magazine, for instance, need not fear censorship on grounds of obscenity), but the chain of command still resists any such challenge to its power as students organizing to make curricular demands (or requests) on a department chairman. And apparently there is still a feeling that one dare not take chances. Needless to say, democracy in the governance of the school is practically non-existent, and neither student initiatives nor student organization for change (except the harmless Student Government type) are encouraged. (One chairman dredged up the outside agitator theory, insisting that any efforts by students to organize themselves on behalf of reforms in his department could not possibly be "autonomous.")

"Students ran screaming out of Suffolk's doors — and headed straight for the beaches..."

Thus the colonial environment at Suffolk produces by and large a colonial population: students atomized and demoralized, lacking self-esteem, lacking the confidence or ability to work together, lacking the intellectual tools to gain more than a superficial understanding of their world. Despite an inner rage, they feel helpless and therefore apathetic. They simply want to get Suffolk over with, to do whatever is necessary to occupy the best possible slot the Man will allow them, meanwhile making things as pleasant for themselves as possible. (One can only speculate how much this contributes to racism and other attitudes of oppression towards those further down the latter, as exemplified so notoriously by poor Southern whites.)

In spite of all this, there were two notable student protests during my time at Suffolk. One was the campaign to abolish the no-cut rule. Certain faculty members had been downgrading students merely for cutting class, and a student group undertook to have this practice abolished by faculty rule. The issue was so close to student interests that the initiators were able to obtain widespread support in a petition drive, and the no-cut practice was so medieval that the faculty and administration could hardly refuse to accede. Even so, the rule abolishing the no-cut practice was adopted only on a trial basis.

The second notable protest was the Kent-Cambodia Strike. When the crisis broke, meetings led by students and several of the younger faculty evoked the largest political response Suffolk had ever seen, and the student body voted to strike. The faculty cooperated by allowing all students to postpone or escape their final examinations. But beyond the initial response, the Suffolk strike was deeply disappointing, for it ceased to be much of anything but a holiday after the first couple of days. Students ran screaming out of Suffolk's doors — and headed straight for the beaches, in most cases, much to the despair of the few activists who had organized anti-War projects. And so Kenthodia served very little purpose save allowing students to escape from school. It did not even serve to educate many of them out of their truly amazing ignorance about the War.

### Three Dimensions of Focus

In such an environment, a young instructor must be careful if he wishes to further his career. To accomplish this purpose, I would recommend: (1) Be charismatic but harmless. Give lectures that express current passions and fashionable opinions, but stop short of challenging students to either act or to think their way through to basic answers. (2) In conversation with administration and senior faculty members, explain student rebellions as caused by the rebels hating their fathers. Assert that all the student dissidents really want is power. (The more powerful the person you say this to, the better.) (3) Having acquired a certain amount of experience and some good recommendations, leave at the first opportunity and go to a more prestigious institution.

On the other hand, instructors at a place like Suffolk can be instrumental in instilling a questioning and critical attitude in their students. What is at issue is best summarized in terms of three sensibilities — three ways of looking at the world, three dimensions of focus for one's concern, three ways of construing what is important.

(1) *The sensibility of power and control.* Seeing the world as a more or less inescapable set of power relationships, with one's basic aim being to gain control over others as well as to gain control over oneself, as a condition of control over others. An extreme manifestation is what John Holt calls "contempt of persons." — "the need and ability to get a sense of identity and worth only by submitting oneself to the demands of a superior and oppressive force and acting as its agent in oppressing others."

This sensibility seems to prevail among most businessmen and most workers. Both tend to see the world as a pecking order and both aim to climb higher, except that one group is near the top and wants to keep what it has, while the other is near the bottom and wants to get more. Both

consider self-control to be both practically necessary and morally required. This similarity implies what should be quite evident from recent political history, viz., that both businessmen and workers generally interpret social phenomena in the same way (e.g., attitudes toward welfare recipients, or toward "losing" in Vietnam), and this in turn seems the only way to explain their similarity of political viewpoint despite difference in economic position. (Consider, by contrast, the relation between intellectuals and businessmen. By and large, their economic positions are closer than those of workers and businessmen; yet the political differences are much greater.)

Since the sensibility of power and control seems to prevail in the working-class environment, from which many Suffolk students come, and in the business environment, to which many of them aspire, their possessing it should not be surprising. They acquire this sensibility from previous schooling, from home, and from the workaday world; most have it when they enter Suffolk, and most have it when they leave. Memorization drills promote it, and the easy courses do nothing to discourage it, while the genuine, challenging courses often suffer from lack of relevance and can be avoided anyway.

(2) *The sensibility of freedom and feeling.* Seeing the world as a set of ways to express one's feelings and exercise freedom, one's goal being to escape inhibitions (thus foregoing control over others also) and to be free and expressive.

This sensibility is the moving force behind the soft revolution of recent times, and most of the recent radical attacks on schools and universities have appealed to it.

(3) *The sensibility of reason and criticism.* The readiness to reason out questions of individual life and society, to criticize the status quo on the basis of one's conclusions, and to act accordingly.

The problem is how to bring Middle American students out of their subservience to the status ladder, out of their belief that their only happiness lies in conforming to the system, in a belief that the system is something which can be changed and which should be challenged. These students need to gain a new identity, independent of that defined by the ratings of the system — an identity based on ability to think for themselves, to understand, to act as individuals, and to combine with others in acting. Nor is there any use in flattering such students that they are as "good" as elite students, by conventional standards; it is these standards themselves they must reject, as well as the whole colonialist, status-ladder, power-and-control scheme which engenders the standards.

This purpose is obviously antithetical to an authoritarian, drillmaster education. It is also ill-served by an education which merely attempts to promote freedom and self-expression by way of being easy, pleasant, or an



arena for rapping (regardless of the desirability of freedom and self-expression as ingredients of the good life). Such an education can only prepare the student to escape and evade, not to challenge. It tends to produce an intellectual and moral lumpenproletariat taking their cue from a refined demagoguery — a mass of people who react to particular shocks or alarms as a matter of emotional reflex, without understanding what they are doing and without any lasting commitment, as exemplified all too well in the Kent-bodia Strike.

The identity which needs to be discarded is one based on the sensibility of power and control. The identity which needs to be gained is one based on the sensibility of reason and criticism. The education required is one which converts the student from the one to the other. The immediate purpose is to teach the student to reason, and to apply his reasoning to situations in which he can act.

What would such an education be like? This is hard to say, except that it would be quite different from most or all of what is now found at a college like Suffolk, in fact probably unlike anything most academics have ever seen. It would have to be like the usual elite education in challenging the student to be critical and intellectually independent, but on the other hand it would have to be a *people's education*, basing itself on concrete problems of concern to the students, and thus de-emphasizing traditional material. Dealing with concrete problems, it would break down traditional dividing-lines between disciplines. Student activity and initiative would be stressed. Grades would not be used as instruments of terror.

Such an education is possible at a college such as Suffolk, but to bring it about on a significant scale would be no easy thing. In the first place, its exact form and content would have to be worked out experimentally in practice. Second, many faculty members would oppose it, not to mention administrators, because it would stir up the students, or because it would challenge accepted standards of professional competence. Perhaps some teachers could be won over by arguments based on their alleged professional goals (growth, self-development, autonomy etc. of all students), but this is not likely in many cases. Third, many of the students would not

themselves be ready for such an education (though this would not prevent its being useful). Their attitudes remind me of an occasion when I was in graduate school, and went to the Dean's office with some problem. His secretary made a special effort to take care of my request, and then charmingly said, "You see how important you are!" I thought she was putting me on, and I turned off. For the bureaucracy had never considered me important before, and so I couldn't believe it considered me important then. Likewise many students, accustomed to a system which makes senseless demands on them, may construe new methods as just another demand, only more difficult because it requires active instead of passive participation, and questions established presuppositions. They will be aggravated, just as we are told the prisoners released from the Bastille were aggravated by the sunlight after years of darkness.

And if this kind of education is to be brought about in any significant degree at a school like Suffolk, there must be increasing numbers of highly committed faculty members.

There must be a well-knit group of instructors who stay in the institutions for as long as they can, working to make it the kind of place it ought to be, in recognition of its political and social importance. One of the major obstacles to this needed development is the tendency among radicals or left-liberals at Suffolk — and I am sure at other schools — to accept the terms of the conventional elitist status ladder scheme just as readily as their most conservative or a political colleagues, leaving Suffolk after a short while or else withdrawing into private and purely professional concerns. To do this leaves the field to the establishment, even if every departing worthwhile instructor is replaced, for it means that the number of these instructors remains small, and practically none of them stays long enough to gain influence. One cannot judge whether those who leave do so because other schools are more pleasant, or more helpful to their careers, or because they believe they can be more effective elsewhere, but in any case I suggest they can be most effective right at a school like Suffolk, acting not as colonial administrators but as true educators and friends, recognizing that this is one of the most important of educational-political arenas.

