



The Idea of the University in Practice Karl Jaspers, Heinrich Blücher, and the Common Course at Bard College

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Abstract: It is generally accepted that Karl Jaspers' patently idealistic vision of the university would pose tremendous difficulties to anyone attempting to put such pedagogy into practice. Jaspers himself acknowledged that his ideal of a Socratic, interdisciplinary university would be impossible to realize fully in an actual institution. This was all the more true because of the intense pressure modern society placed on the university to produce technical knowledge and a body of skilled professionals. For that reason, scholars have seldom believed that Jaspers' work on the university had much practical influence, neither in Germany nor abroad. This essay examines one serious attempt to produce such a Socratic educational program influenced by Jaspers' philosophy, from 1953 to 1968 at Bard College in the State of New York. Heinrich Blücher, Hannah Arendt's husband and a professor of philosophy at Bard, created and directed the Common Course, an ambitious program aimed at introducing freshmen to the "philosophical attitude," as he put it, and to their "capacities for human freedom." By adapting and modifying Jaspers' philosophy, Blücher attempted to meet what he perceived to be a crisis of modern life and to provide his students and the university an alternative to Cold War technocracy. Jaspers himself followed Blücher's work closely, and Blücher's Common Course project sheds light on a seldom-acknowledged intellectual exchange in Jaspers' later career, as well as on the influence of his university idea on at least one American liberal-arts college.

Keywords: Jaspers, Karl; Blücher, Heinrich; university education; Bard College; Axial Age; philosophy in education.

Karl Jaspers made the reconceptualization of higher education one of the defining pillars of his career. The first book he published after World War II was a revision of his 1923 text *Die Idee der Universität*,¹ in which he described his vision of a reformed university system. The university, as Jaspers understood it, is essential to the future of a healthy and democratic society. He

was concerned that universities had lost much of their independence and had become too narrowly focused on pure instruction and technical training, eroding their unique status as a place devoted to free communication and the quest for truth. Despite the fact that Jaspers was among the most famous European philosophers of his day, his vision for the university has never been regarded as very influential on the development of higher education in the postwar period.² Jaspers' ideal—

¹ Karl Jaspers, *Die Idee der Universität*, New Edition, Berlin, DE: Springer Verlag, 1946. Slightly shortened translation into English by Harold A. T. Reiche and H. F. Vanderschmidt, *The Idea of the University*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1959. [Henceforth cited as *IU*]

² Although initially very active in the post-war reestablishment of Heidelberg University, Jaspers'

an education system designed for a small intellectual aristocracy, that would unite the sciences and operate without grades, course syllabi, or specific vocational training—bears little resemblance to what actually emerged in the Federal Republic, or anywhere else. Indeed, for many younger thinkers, Jaspers' program seemed to be out of touch with, and perhaps even hostile to, modernity.³ In discussions about Jaspers' work, his practical suggestions concerning pedagogy are hardly ever addressed, and it is indeed difficult to imagine a course of study built on their foundations.

And yet, on the other side of the Atlantic, in the postwar period, a man named Heinrich Blücher—known to most as the husband of Hannah Arendt, Jaspers' most famous student—made a serious attempt to create precisely this sort of program, one centered around a curriculum very similar to Jaspers' own prescriptions on university education and his writings on the history of philosophy. This program was the "Common Course" at Bard College that began in 1953 and continued under Blücher's direction until 1968. Blücher and Jaspers recognized the kinship between their goals, even though the two men met only a few times. Jaspers often expressed these feelings of intellectual companionship in his letters to Arendt, writing: "if only Heinrich and I could get together now and then! He is in the thick of bringing about [educational] reform on a practical level; my involvement is purely theoretical."⁴

Blücher's Common Course is both a significant example of the reception of Jaspers' idea of the university among the intellectuals of his day, and a window

into a hitherto largely overlooked aspect of Jaspers' relationship with Arendt, namely his substantial interest and engagement in the intellectual projects of her husband. By looking at Blücher's project one can fathom what kinds of compromises in Jaspers' program might be acceptable, while still retaining the core of his educational mission.

Blücher himself is a rather enigmatic figure. Born in 1899 in Berlin, he was drafted into the German army in 1917; although he later took courses at the University of Berlin, the Hochschule für Politik and the Berlin Academy of Fine Arts, he never received an academic degree. He claimed to have fought in the streets during the Spartacist uprising, and to have spent most of the 1920s as a newspaper reporter and a communist organizer before fleeing Germany in 1933 for Paris, where he met Arendt.⁵ Apart from a few book reviews, he published almost nothing in his entire life; nonetheless, scholars have attributed to him many of the key insights to be found in Arendt's work.⁶ Blücher's literary estate includes an extensive series of lecture plans as well as recordings and transcripts that were made by devoted students. Yet none of the several attempts to publish his writings posthumously have borne any fruit.⁷

⁵ A summary of Blücher's early life can be found in Arendt's biography by Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 2004, pp. 125-7. Much of Blücher's early biography is hazy, however, and his own account of that time is difficult to corroborate.

⁶ Many of Arendt's and Blücher's contemporaries, including Jaspers himself, attest to his influence, particularly on Arendt's political philosophy. Lotte Kohler, Arendt's assistant and later literary executor, concluded that "in political matters he was first her teacher and later her advisor." Lotte Kohler, "Introduction," in *Within Four Walls: The Correspondence between Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher, 1936-1968*, transl. Peter Constantine, New York, NY: Harcourt 2000, pp. 9-27, here p. xx.

⁷ There have been at least two serious attempts to publish Blücher's work, one in the 1970s with Arendt's collaboration, and the second in the 1980s, to coincide with the start of work on the Blücher/Arendt correspondence. Although neither were ultimately successful, a selection of transcripts from both the Common Course and similar lectures Blücher gave at the New School in New York is at <http://www.bard.edu/bluecher/history.php>, while the remainder are included in the Blücher Archive at Bard College.

relocation to Basel in 1948 significantly limited his influence on the further development of educational policy in Germany. For a comprehensive account of Jaspers' activities at Heidelberg between 1945 and 1948, see Mark W. Clark, "A Prophet without Honour: Karl Jaspers in Germany, 1945-48," *Journal of Contemporary History* 37/2 (April 2002), 197-222.

³ Jürgen Habermas is perhaps the most important figure to have leveled this line of critique against Jaspers' philosophy of higher education. See, for instance, Jürgen Habermas, "The Idea of the University: Learning Processes," transl. John R. Blazek, *New German Critique* 41/Special Issue (Spring-Summer 1987), 3-22.

⁴ Letter of Karl Jaspers to Hannah Arendt, August 26, 1959 in Hannah Arendt, *Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers: Correspondence: 1926-1969*, transl. Roberto and Rita Kimber, Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace and Co. 1992, p. 377. [Henceforth cited as *AJC*]

The bulk of these lectures come from the Common Course he helped develop at Bard from 1953 to 1968. As Bard President James Case explained it, the course was meant to be an impromptu and interdisciplinary series of lectures exploring "a whole series of questions dealing with major issues in man's varied activities and interests – that is, his political, economic and social aims, and the institutions he had devised to further those aims."⁸ The questions addressed in Blücher's lectures were of a philosophical nature, in the sense of Jaspers' understanding of the role of philosophy in the classroom and the broader university. Jaspers articulated a belief that although philosophy could yield no objective truths or provide a concrete direction to research and scholarship, it was nevertheless indispensable to the other disciplines within the university because it furnished the motivation for research, as well as an understanding of the broader meaning and context of all forms of scientific activity (*IU* 25-6).

Jaspers believed, above all, that university education was not principally intended to impart factual information; this was the purpose of vocational schools. For him, the university offered a place of learning, free from the demands of pure utility in which an individual might find "fulfillment in truth" (*IU* 16). The university itself arose essentially from the human desire for truth, and as such, it was opposed to all forms of philosophical, political, or religious dogmatism. Education was intended to be, in Jaspers' terms, Socratic rather than Scholastic; students and teachers met as equal seekers of truth. Jaspers emphasized that total freedom of study, without regard for grades or course requirements, was the sole want needed for helping students understand the unity of the sciences and prevent the university from becoming "an intellectual department store" (*IU* 88). Nevertheless, despite its separation from instrumental concerns – and, in a sense, because of this – the university plays an important social function; it taught one to pose questions and introduced the methods by which answers could be sought. As Jaspers puts it, the university "prepares each individual to be a member of society" (*IU* 33).

Blücher's teaching was largely designed with this mission in mind. Although he disagreed with certain elements in Jaspers' description of philosophy, he

nevertheless affirmed that Jaspers' understanding of it was "valuable and valid in terms of education," and he conceived his own projects along similar lines.⁹ While Blücher often spoke in terms of the more comprehensive "creative powers of man," where Jaspers might use "philosophy" or "science," the principles are largely the same. The overall goal of Blücher's teaching, and the Common Course in particular, was to acquaint students with these creative powers, and with the philosophical attitude which accompanied them; this attitude was indispensable not only to students' future studies, but would help them "to major in life," as Blücher put it.¹⁰

The Common Course deviated in some practical respects from Jaspers' ideal model of higher education. Jaspers' writings on university education make clear the central importance of academic freedom (*Lernfreiheit*) for students, and his belief that the advantages of philosophically-minded scientific education would largely benefit only a minority of willing students, namely the very best. He was deeply suspicious of the normal university routines that are based on tests, grades, and syllabi, as he believed they distracted from achieving true academic excellence (*IU* 101-20). The mandate Blücher received from Bard College, however, was for a mandatory course for Freshmen.

Nevertheless, Blücher tried to frame the Common Course in Jaspersian terms as much as he could. He saw himself not so much as a teacher of objective facts but rather as a guide and fellow-explorer, much like Jaspers envisioned the role of a professor. The kind of orientation Blücher sought to inspire in his students (what Jaspers called the "scientific attitude") could not be taught directly; the task of becoming "free men and women" could only be conceived as a self-directed project that lasted a lifetime (*BA IC*). Blücher told incoming students: "Your teachers will start you on this task, show it to you as more experienced collaborators, join and help you in it because we ourselves are still in it" (*BA IC*). He explicitly likened his role to that of

⁹ Blücher's critiques of Jaspers' arguments are varied, but his principal objection was that Jaspers attempted to make philosophy a substitute for religion, and thus put "goodness first and truth second." Blücher, for his part, claimed, "[I] care[d] for freedom first...and this divide[d] me from Jaspers' approach." Heinrich Blücher, "Why and How We Study Philosophy" (Summer 1952), Bard College Blücher Archive, *Box 1*.

¹⁰ Heinrich Blücher, "Introduction to the Common Course" (1952), Bard College Blücher Archive, *Box 1*. [Henceforth cited as *BA IC*]

⁸ James Case, quoted in Reamer Kline, *Education for the Common Good: A History of Bard College—the First 100 Years (1860-1960)*, Annendale-on-Hudson, NY: Bard College 1982, p. 139.

Socrates and reminded his listeners that Socrates "never had students because he called them his companions," and enjoined them to view him in the same light.¹¹ Bard did require Blücher to submit grades, but he made every effort to lessen their importance in the eyes of his students; in case they ever felt unjustly graded, he counseled them to attribute it to his own ignorance, for he regarded himself as being still an ignorant man (*BA SS*).

What Blücher hoped to achieve with the Common Course was to clarify the relationship between the various manifestations of human knowledge and creativity—science, art, religion, ethics, politics, and others—and the faculty of "free philosophical reasoning" (*BA IC*). Philosophy, in Blücher's account, united and gave meaning to the other kinds of creative thinking and feeling. In particular, as in Jaspers' own university idea, philosophy elucidated and balanced the role of science. Both thinkers saw science, in a narrow sense, as reducible to a method, a rational and self-critical process; it could generate truths of universal validity, yet it did not elucidate the fuller extent of subjective human experience—what Jaspers termed "Being." Philosophy, by contrast, does not yield provable or universal truths, but it can awaken an awareness of Being. Philosophy limits the pretensions of science, and vice versa science, that of philosophy. Neither is complete without the other. Philosophy, Blücher felt, was necessary to understand and establish the limits of the creative faculties. In this respect, every human being needs philosophy, for only philosophy provides the framework with which Being can be understood. This was the formulation he suggested to Jaspers, who replied quite enthusiastically that he was "especially pleased that you [Blücher] could agree without any reservations on the distinction between science and philosophy."¹²

Blücher took pains to define his capacious vision of philosophy in opposition to bad or dogmatic philosophy—what he termed "metaphysics"—which he claimed, robbed philosophy of its creative power and emancipatory potential. He believed that Western philosophy since Plato came dangerously close to a specious belief in absolute truth that led either

to intellectual fanaticism or nihilism. Without the availability of a solid grounding for understanding Being, humans suffer a loss of individuality, the fatal result of which is the rise of totalitarian movements that offer a sense of refuge from aimlessness.¹³ Like Jaspers, Blücher was concerned regarding the future of mankind in what seemed to them like a new and dangerous technological era.

In order to restore philosophical education to its foundations and prepare his students for their future specialized studies, Blücher designed the Common Course centering on a period in the history of humanity in which human thought passed from one paradigm to another. Blücher believed that the present represented another such moment in which old convictions were crumbling and new ones must be found. Accordingly, he structured his course around a discussion of nine important persons in the history of philosophy—Lao-tzu, Buddha, Zarathustra, Abraham, Homer, Heraclitus, Solon, Socrates, and Jesus—all of whom had participated in the transition to the new philosophical epoch, in the hope that their example might help students with their own predicament. Arguably, the philosophical shift Blücher describes is nearly identical to Jaspers' theory of the Axial Age, and what is more, the figures he chooses are almost the same ones as Jaspers was simultaneously choosing them for consideration in the first part of his series, *The Great Philosophers*. Jaspers told Blücher, "The basic idea...seems similar for both of us," although, as already mentioned, not all the names of the persons were the same.¹⁴

For Blücher, this great transformation in thought was crucial, as it marked the end of the Mythical Age: "Mythology is the immediate reaction to man's fear when he is first confronted with Being. He uses magic to rid himself of reality altogether."¹⁵ Mythical thought turned reality into a shapeless mass, for myth makes no distinctions between subject and object, creator and created. Myth related everything to every other thing by means of metaphor, and thus it could comprehend and encompass everything, and thereby binding humanity in a speculative world that was infinity malleable yet

¹³ Heinrich Blücher, "Sources of Creative Power" (Lecture 3), Bard College Blücher Archive, *Box 2*.

¹⁴ Letter of Karl Jaspers to Heinrich Blücher, July 21, 1952 (*AJC 186*).

¹⁵ Heinrich Blücher, "Talk on the Common Course" (1952), Bard College Blücher Archive, *Box 1*. [Henceforth cited as *BA CT*]

¹¹ Heinrich Blücher, "Senior Symposium" (October 1968), Bard College Blücher Archive, *Box 1*. [Henceforth cited as *BA SS*].

¹² Letter of Karl Jaspers to Heinrich Blücher, October 28, 1959 (*AJC 382*).

infinitely static. According to Blücher, the deceptive metaphors of myth obscured the truth of Being and trapped the human mind "in an unreal fictional world" (*BA CT*). He believed the great flaw of myth was not in itself creative; it had no capacity to change the world.

By treating myth, Blücher was drawing out an element of Jaspers' Axial theory that is not fully explored in the latter's own writings. Jaspers believed that the period preceding the Axial Age was "the Mythical Age," an era of "tranquility and self-evidence" in which mankind understood existence in terms of mythical images.¹⁶ The Axial Age, in contrast, represented the triumph of "rationality and rationally clarified experience...(*logos* against *mythos*)" (*OGH* 3). Humans gained awareness of their own subjectivity and achieved a new level of historical consciousness and self-reflection, which Jaspers characterized as the recognition of "Being as a whole" (*OGH* 2).

It is hard to tell exactly which elements of Blücher's philosophy result from the influence of Jaspers' work, and which are remarkably similar, yet independent insights. Blücher appears to have concluded independently from Jaspers that the trends of development in Indian and Chinese philosophy paralleled those of European philosophy.¹⁷ The simultaneous turn of these two men towards Chinese and Indian philosophy during an almost hopeless period in European history is perhaps unsurprising. Just as China had become "almost a second homeland" for Jaspers during the war by offering help in "reflecting on the very basic elements of human life," it had fulfilled

much the same role for Blücher in that dark period.¹⁸

Again and again, there are strange and compelling parallels in the intellectual projects of Blücher and Jaspers. The former is clearly a disciple of the latter, who recognized in him a kindred spirit when it came to the importance of a specific type of education, and particularly with regard to the pedagogical centrality of philosophy. When Blücher was considering retirement, Jaspers wrote to Arendt, "his teaching must not stop. He is irreplaceable."¹⁹

Blücher's colleagues at Bard College believed so too. Impressive to everyone whom he had met, he became a fixture of this institution, overseeing the Common Course for fifteen years. Visiting faculty, including Saul Bellow, hailed him as being a genius. He exercised tremendous influence on his students, as it is attested by their repeated attempts to publish his course lectures posthumously. All this strongly suggests that although Jaspers' program for education has often been discounted as hopelessly impractical, it may not, after all, be impossible to implement it. Blücher was able to successfully run the Common Course for fifteen years, which proves, *a fortiori*, that approaching Jaspers' texts as valuable tools for pedagogical method, as they were intended to be, is hardly a fool's errand. That is no small revelation, especially in current times, when the concerns shared by Jaspers and Blücher about the problems inherent in technical education that is divorced from philosophical awareness of human existence and the limits of science seem increasingly relevant. Academic disciplines that do not belong to the heavily endorsed fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) face declining enrollments, budget cuts, and in some cases even their elimination from the curriculum altogether. In Jaspers' and Blücher's common projects one finds a spirited defense of the value of a philosophically-inclined education that is decisive in upholding the university as a place for free inquiry and for inspiring a life of the mind.

¹⁶ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, transl. Michael Bullock, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1953, p. 2. [Henceforth cited as *OGH*]

¹⁷ In one of his first lectures, Blücher claimed to have discovered the Asian thinkers as early as 1943. Heinrich Blücher, "Sources of Creative Power" (Lecture 10), Bard College Blücher Archive, Box 2. In a letter to Arendt, he remarked, "I realized well before Jaspers that Lao-tzu and the Indians were in the same pot with Plato." Letter of Heinrich Blücher to Hannah Arendt, July 29, 1948 in *Within Four Walls: The Correspondence between Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher, 1936-1968*, transl. Peter Constantine, New York, NY: Harcourt 2000, p. 94.

¹⁸ Letter of Karl Jaspers to Hannah Arendt, January 1, 1947 (*AJC* 72).

¹⁹ Letter of Karl Jaspers to Hannah Arendt, March 24, 1967 (*AJC* 669).