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Introduction: What was a liberal education?

by [Roger Kimball](#)

An introduction to our special issue on education.

The real difficulty in modern education lies in the fact that, despite all the fashionable talk about a new conservatism, even that minimum of conservation and the conserving attitude without which education is simply not possible is in our time extraordinarily hard to achieve.

—Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Education”

To be deceived about the truth of things and so to be in ignorance and error and to harbor untruth in the soul is a thing no one would consent to.

—Socrates, in *The Republic*

‘Everybody has won, and all must have prizes.’

—The Dodo, in *Alice in Wonderland*

When I ponder the recent itinerary of education in this country—not just college education, but the whole shebang—I often think of that old advertisement for a brand of cigarettes designed to appeal especially to women: “You’ve come a long way, baby!” How right they were. But a distance traveled is not necessarily progress logged. It was not *so* long ago that Cardinal Newman’s enumeration of the goals of a liberal arts education in *The Idea of a University* could have been taken as a motto by the American academic establishment. Newman spoke of “a cultivated intellect, a delicate taste, a candid, equitable, dispassionate mind, a noble and courteous bearing in the conduct of life” as being the chief “objects of a University” education. Quite normal in the 1850s. But today? Or consider the observation made by the philosopher John Searle in the 1990s that “the idea that the curriculum should be converted to any partisan purposes is a perversion of the ideal of the university. The objective of converting the curriculum into an instrument of social transformation (leftist, rightist, centrist, or whatever) is the very opposite of higher education.” Until the day before yesterday, Searle’s warning was regarded as common sense. Now it is uncommon, and highly provocative, wisdom.

I am not suggesting that in the past our educational institutions always lived up to the ideal that Newman enunciated, or that they always avoided the perversion against which Professor Searle warned. But they aspired to. Indeed, until at least the early 1960s there was robust agreement about the intellectual and moral *goals* of a liberal arts education even if those goals seemed difficult to achieve. There was, for example, a shared commitment to the ideal of disinterested scholarship devoted to the preservation and transmission of knowledge—which meant the preservation and transmission of a civilization—pursued in a community free from ideological intimidation. If we inevitably fell short of the ideal, the ideal nevertheless continued to command respect and to exert a guiding influence.

The essays that follow provide a series of pathologist’s reports on contemporary liberal arts education in an age when traditional ideas about the civilizing nature and goals of education no longer enjoy widespread allegiance. It would be difficult to overstate the resulting intellectual and moral carnage. Everything about Newman’s description—from its lucid diction and lofty tone to its praise of the dispassionate cultivation of the intellect—is an object of derision in the academy today. Likewise, Professor Searle’s insistence that the curriculum not be reduced to a tool for partisan propaganda, “leftist, rightist, centrist, or whatever,” is now widely derided as hopelessly naïve or insidiously reactionary.

The truth is that despite widespread concern about the fate of higher education, and despite many and various efforts to call attention to and remedy the situation, the situation is in many ways far graver today than it was in the 1970s and 1980s when exotic phenomena such as Afrocentrism, “Postcolonial Studies,” Queer Theory, Critical Legal Studies, and the attack on science by

so-called humanists were just beginning to gather steam. And despite the rise of alternative voices here and there, those dominating the discussion at most institutions are committed to discrediting the traditional humanistic ideals of liberal education by injecting politics into the heart of the educational enterprise.

Consider the phenomena of “multiculturalism” and political correctness. (I use scare quotes because what generally travels under the name of “multiculturalism” is really a form of monocultural animus directed against the dominant culture.) The multiculturalists claim to be fostering a progressive cultural cosmopolitanism distinguished by superior sensitivity to the downtrodden and dispossessed. In fact, they encourage an orgy of self-flagellating liberal guilt as impotent as it is insatiable. Hence the sensitivity of the multiculturalist is an index not of moral refinement but of moral vacuousness. Multiculturalism is a paralyzing intoxicant; its thrill centers around the emotion of superior virtue; its hangover subsists on a diet of ignorance and blighted good intentions. As the essay by Alan Charles Kors shows, the crucial thing to understand about multiculturalism is that, notwithstanding its emancipationist rhetoric, “multiculturalism” is not about recognizing genuine cultural diversity or encouraging pluralism. It is about undermining the priority of Western liberal values in our educational system and in society at large. In essence, as the political scientist Samuel Huntington has pointed out, multiculturalism is “anti-European civilization. . . . It is basically an anti-Western ideology.” The most ironic aspect of this whole spectacle is that what appears to its adherents as bravely anti-Western is in fact part of the West’s long tradition of self-scrutiny. Indeed, criticism of the West has been a prominent ingredient in the West’s self-understanding at least since Socrates invited his fellow Athenians to debate with him about the nature of the good life. No civilization in history has been as consistently self-critical as the West.

Anti-Americanism occupies such a prominent place on the agenda of the culture wars precisely because the traditional values of American identity—articulated by the Founders and grounded in a commitment to individual liberty and public virtue—are deeply at odds with the radical, de-civilizing tenets of the “multiculturalist” enterprise of political correctness. A profound ignorance of the milestones of American (or any other) culture is one predictable result. The statistics have become proverbial. Huntington quotes one poll from the 1990s showing that while 90 percent of Ivy League students could identify Rosa Parks, only 25 percent could identify the author of the words “government of the people, by the people, for the people.” (Yes, it’s the Gettysburg Address.) In a 1999 survey, 40 percent of seniors at fifty-five top colleges could not say within half a century when the Civil War was fought. Another study found that more high school students knew who Harriet Tubman was than knew that Washington commanded the American army in the Revolution or that Abraham Lincoln wrote the Emancipation Proclamation.

Political correctness also fosters an atmosphere of intimidation and encourages slavish moral and intellectual conformity, attacking the very basis for the free exchange of ideas. Even worse, it encourages a kind of intellectual sentimentality that makes it difficult to acknowledge certain unpalatable realities—the reality, for example, that not all cultures, or indeed all individuals, are equal in terms of potential or accomplishment. It insinuates that “lie in the soul” Socrates warned about in *The Republic*. The consequence, as Charles Murray sets out in his essay below, is a species of educational “romanticism” that may be motivated by good intentions but has disastrous results.

It almost goes without saying that the tenured or soon-to-be-tenured radicals now controlling nearly all of the most prestigious humanities departments in this country reply that their critics have overstated the case. Really, they say, there is nothing amiss, nothing has happened that need concern parents, trustees, alumni, government, or private funding sources. On the issue of enforcing politically correct behavior on campus, for example, they will assure you that the whole thing has been overblown by “conservative” journalists who do not sufficiently admire Edward Said and cannot appreciate that the free exchange of ideas must sometimes be curtailed for the higher virtue of protecting the feelings of designated victim groups. And the curriculum, they will say, has not been politicized, it has merely been democratized: opened up to reflect the differing needs and standards of groups and ideas hitherto insufficiently represented in the academy.

The aim of such objections is not to enlighten or persuade but to intimidate and pre-empt criticism. The truth is that what we are facing today is nothing less than the destruction of the fundamental premises that underlie our conception both of liberal education and of a liberal democratic polity. Respect for rationality and the rights of the individual; a commitment to the ideals of disinterested criticism and color-blind justice; advancement according to merit, not according to sex, race, or ethnic origin: these quintessentially Western ideas are bedrocks of our political as well as our educational system. And they are precisely the ideas that are now under attack by *bien pensants* academics intoxicated by the coercive possibilities generated by their self-inflating embrace of political correctness.

One of the most depressing features of the long-running epic saga called “educational reform” is how intractable the problems seem. A couple of years ago, I wrote an essay in these pages called “Retaking the University.” One thoughtful internet commentator responded with an alternative that I must have had somewhere in the back of my mind but had never articulated explicitly. This forthright chap began by recalling an article on military affairs that poked fun at yesterday’s conventional wisdom that high-tech gear would render tanks and old-fashioned armor obsolete. Whatever else the war in Iraq showed, he observed, such tried and true military hardware was anything but obsolete. The moral is: some armor is good, more armor is better. “It makes sense,” this fellow concluded, “to have some tanks handy.”

He then segued into my piece on the university, outlining some of the criticisms and recommendations I’d made. By and large, he agreed with the criticisms, but he found my recommendations much too tame. “Try as I might,” he wrote, “I just can’t see meaningful change of the academic monstrosity our universities have become issuing from faculties, parents, alumni, and trustees.” What was his alternative? In a word, “Tanks!” He called his plan Operation Academic Freedom. It has that virtue of forthright simplicity:

We round up every tank we can find that isn't actually being used in Iraq or Afghanistan. Next, we conduct a nationwide Internet poll to determine which institutions need to be retaken first. . . .

The actual battle plan is pretty simple. We drive our tanks up to the front doors of the universities and start shooting. Timing is important. We'll have to wait till 11A.M. or so, or else there won't be anyone in class. Ammunition is important. We'll need lots and lots of it. The firing plan is to keep blasting until there's nothing left but smoldering ruins. Then we go on to the next on the list. If the first target is Harvard, for example, we would move on from there to, say, Yale. So fuel will be important too. There's going to be some long distance driving involved between engagements.

Well, perhaps we can call that Plan B, a handy expedient if other proposals don't pan out. And there have, let's face it, been plenty of other proposals. The task of reforming higher education has become a vibrant cottage industry, with think tanks, conferences, special programs, institutes, and initiatives cropping up like mushrooms after a rain. I think, for example, of the Manhattan Institute's Center for the American University, The American Council of Trustees and Alumni, or Robert George's Madison Center at Princeton University, which has become a model for many seeking institutional reform.

Naturally, many of these initiatives tend to run into stiff resistance. In his melancholy essay below, Robert Paquette tells the sorry tale of attempting to start an Alexander Hamilton Center, dedicated to "excellence in scholarship through the study of freedom, democracy, and capitalism," at Hamilton College in upstate New York. An obstreperous and politicized faculty intimidated a pusillanimous administration and the center had to be started off campus without college affiliation.

I applaud all of these initiatives. But I wonder what lasting effect they will have on the intellectual and moral life of the university. They are important in any event because, even if they remain relegated to the sidelines of academic life, they demonstrate that real alternatives to reflexive academic left-wingery are possible. I suspect, however, that they will remain minority enterprises, a handful of gadflies buzzing about the left-lunging behemoth that is contemporary academia. Why? There are several reasons.

One reason is that the left-wing monoculture is simply too deeply entrenched for these initiatives, laudable and necessary though they are, to make much difference. For the last few years, I have heard several commentators from sundry ideological points of view predict that the reign of political correctness and programmatic leftism on campus had peaked and was now about to recede. I wish I could share that optimism. I see no evidence of it. Sure, students are quiescent. But indifference is not instauration, and besides faculties nearly everywhere form a self-perpetuating closed shop.

Something similar can be said about the fashion of "theory"—all that anemic sex-in-the-head politicized gibberish dressed up in reader-proof "philosophical" prose. It is true that names like Derrida or Foucault no longer produce the frisson of excitement they once did. That is not because their "ideas" are widely disputed but rather because they are by now completely absorbed into the tissues of academic life. (The same thing happened with Freud a couple decades ago.)

A few years ago, *The American Enterprise* magazine created a small stir when it published "The Shame of America's One-Party Campuses," providing some statistical evidence to bolster what everyone already knew: that American colleges and universities were overwhelmingly left-wing. You know the story: out of 30 English professors at college X, 29 are left-leaning Democrats and one is an Independent while in the economics department of college Y, 33 profs are left-leaning Democrats and 1 is, or at least occasionally talks to, a Republican. Well, that's all old hat now. A few months ago, the *Yale Daily News* ran a story revealing that faculty and staff at Yale this election cycle have contributed 45 times more to Democratic candidates than to Republications. "Most people in my department," said the one doctor known to have contributed to Guiliani's presidential campaign, "are slightly to the left of Joseph Stalin."

The key issue, I hasten to add, is not partisan politics but rather the subordinating of intellectual life generally to non-intellectual, i.e., political imperatives. "The greatest danger," the philosopher Leszek Kolakowski wrote in "What are Universities For?,"

is the invasion of an intellectual fashion which wants to abolish cognitive criteria of knowledge and truth itself. . . . The humanities and social sciences have always succumbed to various fashions, and this seems inevitable. But this is probably the first time that we are dealing with a fashion, or rather fashions, according to which there are no generally valid intellectual criteria.

Indeed, it is this failure—the colonization of intellectual life by politics—that stands behind and fuels the degradation of liberal education. The issue is not so much—or not only—the presence of bad politics as the absence of non-politics in the intellectual life of the university.

I used to think that appealing over the heads of the faculty to trustees, parents, alumni, and other concerned groups could make a difference. I have become increasingly less sanguine about that strategy. For one thing, it is extremely difficult to generate a sense of emergency such that those groups will actually take action, let alone maintain the sense of emergency such that an outburst of indignation will develop into a call for action.

What's more, those groups are increasingly impotent. Time was when a prospective hiccup in the annual fund would send shivers down the spine of an anxious college president. These days, many colleges and universities are so rich that they can afford to cock a snook at parents and alumni. Forget about Harvard and its \$30 billion, or Princeton, or Yale, or Stanford, or the other super-rich

schools. Even many small colleges are sitting on huge fortunes.

Consider tiny Hamilton College again. When Hamilton tried to hire Susan Rosenberg, the former Weather Underground member whose 58-year sentence was commuted by Bill Clinton on his last day in office, I reported the fact in *The Wall Street Journal*. The story appeared on the day that Hamilton kicked off a capital campaign in New York. My article was highly critical, and it generated a lot of comment. Donations to Hamilton, I am told, simply dried up. But so what? The college sits on an endowment of some \$700 million. That is more than half a billion dollars. So what if the Annual Fund is down a few million this year? Big deal. They can afford to hunker down and wait out the outcry.

Some observers believe that the university can not really be reformed until the current generation—the Sixties generation—retires. That's another couple of decades, minimum. And don't forget about the self-replicating engine that is tenure in which like begets like. Deep and lasting change in the university depends on deep and lasting change in the culture at large. Effecting *that* change is a tall order. Criticism, satire, and ridicule all have an important role to play, but the point is that such criticism, to be successful, depends upon possessing an alternative vision of the good.

Do we possess that alternative vision? I believe we do. We all know, well enough, what a good liberal education looks like, just as we all know, well enough, what makes for a healthy society. It really isn't that complicated. It doesn't take a lot of money or sophistication. What it does require is patience, candidness, and courage, moral virtues that are in short supply wherever political correctness reigns triumphant. In large part, those who want to retake the university must devote themselves to a waiting game, capitalizing in the meanwhile on whatever opportunities present themselves. That is Plan A. Of course, it may fail; there are no guarantees. But in that case we can always avail ourselves of the more dramatic Plan B outlined above.

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