

# The New Criterion

## Features

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### Retaking the university: a battle plan

by [Roger Kimball](#)

*On some measures for restoring the American university to its founding principles.*

*After the Vietnam War, a lot of us didn't just crawl back into our literary cubicles; we stepped into academic positions. With the war over, our visibility was lost, and it seemed for a while—to the unobservant—that we had disappeared. Now we have tenure, and the work of reshaping the universities has begun in earnest.*

—Jay Parini, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*

*There is a tide in the affairs of men,  
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;  
Omitted, all the voyage of their life  
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.  
On such a full sea are we now afloat,  
And we must take the current when it serves,  
Or lose our ventures.*

—Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*

The old Marxist strategy of “increasing the contradictions”—a strategy according to which the worse things get, the better they really are—is a license for thuggery. It excuses all manner of bad behavior for the sake of a revolution that will (so it is said) finally transform society when all the old allegiances have finally collapsed. If one or two tottering institutions require a little push to finish them off, so be it. Shove hard: You cannot, as comrade Stalin remarked, make an omelette without breaking eggs.

As with anything to which the word “Marxist” applies, there are at least eighty-seven things wrong with this strategy. Morally, it is completely irresponsible. Intellectually, it depends upon a fabricated “contradiction” to confer the illusion of inevitability. In real life, the only thing inevitable is the certainty of surprise.

Nevertheless, as one looks around at academic life these days, it is easy to conclude that corruption yields not only decay but also opportunities. Think of the public convulsion that surrounded the episode of Ward Churchill’s invitation to speak at Hamilton College earlier this year. The spectacle of a highly paid academic with a fabricated background comparing the victims of 9/11 to a Nazi bureaucrat was too much. Churchill’s fellow academics endeavored—they are still endeavoring—to rally round. But the public wasn’t buying it. Such episodes, as Victor Davis Hanson noted in *National Review* recently, were like “a torn scab revealing a festering sore beneath.”

Ward Churchill’s plight gives us a glimpse into the strange world of the contemporary

postmodern university of tenured ideologues, where professed identity politics, ethnic or gender chauvinism, and a disbelief in empiricism allow a con man to bully his way to guaranteed lifetime employment, and a handsome salary, and the right to say anything at all, no matter how inflammatory.

Something similar happened—is still happening—at Harvard in the episode of Larry Summers and “Why-Aren’t-There-More-Women-in-the-Sciences?” Female biologists in Cambridge may oscillate between threatening to faint and demanding Summers’s head. But many outside academia were outraged not by Summers’s original comments but his cravenness in the face of the PC juggernaut that followed. It would be easy to multiply examples. Familiar outrages in academia are beginning, in some cases, to elicit unfamiliar responses. It is not a matter of things being better *because* they are worse, exactly: only a Marxist (or his older brother, a Hegelian) could believe that. But it may just be that things are so bad that, in society at large, exasperation will finally get the better of indifference.

In my book *Tenured Radicals*—first published in 1990 and updated in 1998—I noted,

With a few notable exceptions, our most prestigious liberal arts colleges and universities have installed the entire radical menu at the center of their humanities curriculum at both the undergraduate and the graduate levels. Every special interest—women’s studies, black studies, gay studies, and the like—and every modish interpretative gambit—deconstruction, post-structuralism, new historicism, and other postmodernist varieties of what the literary critic Frederick Crews aptly dubbed “Left Eclecticism”—has found a welcome roost in the academy, while the traditional curriculum and modes of intellectual inquiry are excoriated as sexist, racist, or just plain reactionary.

*Tenured Radicals* is a frankly polemical book. In some ways, however, it underestimates if not the severity then at least the depth of the problem. What happened to the universities was part—a large part—of that “long march through the institutions” that the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci recommended and whose American lineaments I chronicled in *The Long March: How the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s Changed America* (2000). “The Age of Aquarius,” I wrote in the Introduction to that book, “did not end when the last electric guitar was unplugged at Woodstock. It lives on in our values and habits, in our tastes, pleasures, and aspirations. It lives on especially in our educational and cultural institutions, and in the degraded pop culture that permeates our lives like a corrosive fog.”

Whether American culture has begun to recover from that assault has become a matter of debate. *That* the situation has become debatable may be an encouraging sign: even five years ago, few serious observers were registering signs of cultural health in American society. The terrorist attacks of September 11 changed that. The fires at the World Trade Center were not yet extinguished when some commentators proclaimed that the cultural revolution of the 1960s was, at long last, finally over. In his new book *South Park Conservatives: The Revolt Against Liberal Media Bias*, Brian C. Anderson of *City Journal* reinforced the optimism, citing the rise of conservative talk radio, the popularity of Fox News, the new visibility of conservative publishers, and the spread of interest in the internet with its many right-of-center populist weblogs. Taken together, these and kindred phenomena have helped to inspire the thought that, at last, there is beginning to be a widespread counter to the counter-culture.

These are heartening signs. Nevertheless, as it was with Mark Twain’s announced demise, I suspect that reports of the death of the counter-culture have been greatly exaggerated. *Something* changed on 9/11—of that I have no doubt—but it seems to me to have affected the assumptions of elite culture sporadically at best. Moreover, the institution that has proved the most resistant to change

was the one most publicly committed to “innovation”: the university.

It is a peculiar moment in academia. In many ways, things have never been worse. All those radical trends that got going in the 1960s and gained steam in the 1970s and 1980s are now so thoroughly entrenched that they are simply taken for granted. Consider, for example, the case of “transgender” students at Smith College. As the *Financial Times* reported last month, the whole issue of “transgender” is a growth industry at Smith—as indeed it is at many colleges and universities around the country. “Transgender”? The term, as the *FT* notes, “is a catch-all that includes a wide spectrum of people who don’t identify with their birth sex; from transsexuals, who use surgery to change their sex, to those who change their appearance cosmetically—cross-dressers, as they used to be known, though such a term is considered old-school today.” There aren’t—not yet, anyway—many university health services that will cover the cost of hormone therapy and surgery for those who wish to make the “transition” to another (I suppose I should say *the* other) sex, but the *FT* reports that the University of California is considering covering the procedures. (Arnold Schwarzenegger take note: a breast reduction alone can cost \$10,000.) The subject is particularly complicated—or, depending on how you look at it, particularly risible—at Smith, the elite, all-female college whose founder, Sophia Smith, wanted the college to be a place where women “could develop as fully as may be the powers of womanhood.”

“All-female”? There’s the rub. What does a progressive institution like Smith do when Barbara decides to become Bert? It’s a problem. I thought it was a joke when someone told me that Stanford had added “other” to the check boxes “male” and “female” on their application form. According to the *FT* many schools now eschew the old “binary way” of looking at sex and make do with the catch-all “gender,” a much more plastic term: “M,” “F,” “Neither,” “Both,” “Trans” (the preferred shorthand). Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, has experimented with a “gender blind” dormitory in which “transgender” students could live in a single room or with roommates who didn’t care if it was Robert or Roberta in the bunk above. Some Smithies complain that if people “want to be boys, they should go to a co-ed school.” But the Smith administration, being progressive, nervously embraces its two-dozen or so “transgender” students. The college, the *FT* observes, “has long been tolerant of sexual difference. Notably tolerant.”

No doubt. Still, the phenomenon of “transgender” raises all sorts of questions. Can the person who’s born Bob but decides that he really is (or would like to be) Roberta successfully apply to an all-female college? I believe the answer is “No.” But if gender, a.k.a. “sex,” is “socially-constructed,” as we are assured it is, then why not? There are also a host of pragmatic questions. How, for example, do you label the bathrooms? And for parents, there is the deeply pragmatic question of why they should spend approximately \$40,000 per year to finance such “experiments in living” (to borrow John Stuart Mill’s forward-looking expression)?

It might seem that in wandering into the issue of “transgender” we have arrived at some bizarre by-way of contemporary university life. This is only partly true. As Irving Kristol observed in his essay “Countercultures,”

“Sexual liberation” is always near the top of a countercultural agenda—though just what form the liberation takes can and does vary, sometimes quite wildly. Women’s liberation, likewise, is another consistent feature of all countercultural movements—liberation from husbands, liberation from children, liberation from family. Indeed, the real object of these various sexual heterodoxies is to disestablish the family as the central institution of human society, the citadel of orthodoxy.

Yesterday the slogan “free sex”; now, ironically, it is something closer to “free from sex.” The *FT* quotes Paisley Currah, an associate professor of political science at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York and a board member of the Transgender Law and Policy Institute: “Just as

Herbert Marcuse's theories were important on campus in his day, gender theory is important now." Ms.—or is it Mr.?—Paisley is quite right to conjure up Herbert Marcuse. The German-born radical, who died in 1979, was indeed an important Sixties guru. But he was more than that. In his "protests against the repressive order of procreative sexuality" and insistence that genuine liberation requires a return to a state of "primary narcissism," Marcuse sounds a very contemporary note. Such a "change in the value and scope of libidinal relations," he wrote in *Eros and Civilization*, "would lead to a disintegration of the institutions in which the private interpersonal relations have been organized, particularly the monogamic and patriarchal family." Marcuse would be as at home at Smith College in 2005 as he was at Brandeis in the 1960s.

The chief issue is this: should our institutions of higher education be devoted primarily to the education of citizens—or should they be laboratories for social and political experimentation? Traditionally, a liberal arts education involved both character formation and learning. The goal was to produce men and women who (as Allan Bloom put it) had reflected thoughtfully on the question "What is man?" in relation to his highest aspirations as opposed to his low and common needs." Since the 1960s, however, colleges and universities have more and more been home to what Lionel Trilling called the "adversary culture of the intellectuals." The goal was less reflection than rejection. The English novelist Kingsley Amis once observed that much of what was wrong with the twentieth century could be summed up in the word "workshop." Nowadays, "workshop" has been largely replaced by the word "studies." Gender Studies, Ethnic Studies, Afro-American Studies, Women's Studies, Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Studies: these are not the names of academic disciplines but political grievances. They exist not to further liberal education but to nurture the feckless antinomianism that Jacques Barzun dubbed "directionless quibble."

Think back to Ward Churchill. He was invited to Hamilton College by "the Kirkland Project for the Study of Gender, Society and Culture," a left-wing, activist redoubt that for the decade of its existence has devoted its considerable resources to transforming a liberal arts education into an exercise in radical repudiation of American society, its manners, morals, and political filiations. It was the Kirkland Project, for example, that invited Susan Rosenberg, the convicted felon and former member of the Weather Underground, to be an "artist- and activist-in-residence" and teach a seminar on "Resistance Memoirs: Writing, Identity and Change." It was a satellite of the Kirkland Project that a couple of years ago invited Annie Sprinkle, the former prostitute and porn star, to preside over a workshop (but of course) designed to educate "students and faculty on how better to pleasure themselves."

Now the point about the Kirkland Project is not how extreme it is but how ordinary. (I use the term in its statistical, not its normative, sense.) There are hundreds, maybe thousands, of similar organizations at American colleges and universities. Their undeclared goal is to radicalize American society by betraying the intellectual and moral standards whose general observance they depend upon for their very existence. When challenged, proponents of such organizations will instantly retreat to the mantras of "free speech" and "academic freedom." But it has long been obvious that the academic notion of "free speech" is like the academic notion of "diversity": it means strict intellectual and moral conformity on any contentious issue: Free speech for me but not for thee. As the historian Robert Paquette—perhaps the only self-identified conservative at Hamilton College—observed, in all of its history the Kirkland Project has never invited anyone to Hamilton who was "libertarian, conservative or even centrist." In other words, "academic freedom" has mutated from being a protection into being a weapon.

John Silber, the former president of Boston University, summed up the fate of academic freedom in his essay "Poisoning the Wells of Academe." Originally, Silber observed, academic freedom

entailed an immunity for what is said and done by dedicated, thoughtful, conscientious scholars in pursuit of truth or the truest account. Now it came to entail, rather, an

immunity for whatever is said and done, responsibly or carelessly, within or without the walls of academia, by persons unconcerned for the truth; who, reckless, incompetent, frivolous or even malevolent, promulgate ideas for which they can claim no expertise, or even commit deeds for which they can claim no sanction of law.

This is what Silber referred to as “the absolute concept of academic freedom,” according to which “the academic can say whatever he pleases about whatever he pleases, whenever and wherever he pleases, and be fully immune from unpleasant consequences.” The case of Ward Churchill—and this is a bit of good news to emerge from this sorry scenario—suggests that that may be about to change.

The use and abuse of academic freedom to indemnify not the expression of unpopular opinions but political incitement of various kinds is one symptom of the degradation of American academic life. The new-found impatience with some extreme examples of that abuse is a heartening sign. Nevertheless, the whole issue of academic freedom is only part of a much larger phenomenon. Academics have an unspoken compact with society. As scholars, their charge is to pursue the truth in their chosen discipline; as teachers, their charge is to help preserve and transmit the truth by encouraging thoughtful study and candid discussion. The largely unspoken nature of this compact was part of its glory—it underscored the element of freedom that has always been a central ingredient in liberal education. To a large extent, that freedom has been violated. How has this happened?

Academic life, like the rest of social life, unfolds within a frame of rules and permissions. At one end, there are things that one must (or must not) do; at the other end, there is rule of whim. The middle range, in which behavior is neither explicitly governed by rules but is not entirely free, is that realm governed by what the British jurist John Fletcher Moulton, writing in the early 1920s, called “Obedience to the Unenforceable.” It is a realm in which not law, not caprice, but virtues such as duty, fairness, judgment, and taste hold sway. In a word, it is the “domain of Manners,” which “covers all cases of right doing where there is no one to make you do it but yourself.” A good index of the health of any social institution is its allegiance to the strictures that define this middle realm. “In the changes that are taking place in the world around us,” Moulton wrote, “one of those which is fraught with grave peril is the discredit into which this idea of the middle land is falling.” One example was the abuse of free speech in political debate: “We have unrestricted freedom of debate,” say the radicals: “We will use it so as to destroy debate.”

The repudiation of obedience to the unenforceable is at the center of what makes academic life (and not only academic life) today so noxious. The contraction of the “domain of Manners” creates a vacuum that is filled on one side by increasing regulation—speech codes, rules for all aspects of social life, efforts to determine by legislation (from the right as well as from the left) what should follow freely from responsible behavior—and on the other side by increased license. More and more, it seems, academia (like other aspects of elite cultural life) has reneged on its compact with society. What, as Lenin memorably asked, is to be done?

As with any disease, the malady besetting academia requires two stages of therapy: first accurate diagnosis, then effective treatment. In some ways, the diagnostic stage is the most difficult, because it is the hardest to sustain. One corollary of society’s natural obedience to the unenforceable is the tendency to assume that those institutions in which we have invested great trust are inherently trustworthy. “Academic institutions are expensive, socially respected bodies whose imprimatur is a powerful door-opener and tool of accreditation, ergo they *must* be doing a good job.” Some such sentiment is the prevailing one, so when someone like Ward Churchill comes along to remove the scab, the shock is great—and unwelcome. One of the chief tasks for critics of what has happened to academic life in this country is to show the extent to which Ward Churchill, the Kirkland Project, the transgender follies at Smith College and elsewhere, and similar deformations are not exceptions but the predictable result of institutions that have gradually abandoned their commitment to education

for the sake of radical posturing. The prime difficulty facing the aspirant diagnostician is not the elusiveness of symptoms—they are florid and ubiquitous—but the patience required to set forth chapter and verse repeatedly and in language that effectively conveys the depredations on view.

The bright side of the Ward Churchill affair was the fact that public scrutiny brought dramatic, if local, changes. The melancholy side of the affair lay in the fact that the scrutiny had to be enormous and unremitting and that, as the media's attention wandered so did the public's interest. If real change is going to come to academic culture, criticism must be ceaseless, pointed, and deep. It is not enough to expose Ward Churchill. The academic culture that breeds and rewards such figures—and their name is legion—must be exposed for what it is: a thoroughly politicized rejection of the principles that inform liberal learning.

In one sense, the diagnosis of the calamity that has befallen academic culture is inseparable from the task of treatment. Which is to say that the job of criticism is never finished. Basic questions, the answers to which one could once have assumed were taken for granted, must be asked anew. To whom is the faculty accountable? To the extent that it holds itself accountable to its pedagogic duties, it is accountable to itself. To the extent that it repudiates those duties, it is accountable to the society in which it functions and from which it enjoys its freedoms, privileges, and perquisites. Faculties often take it amiss when critics appeal over their heads to alumni, trustees, or parents. But ultimately teachers still stand *in loco parentis*, if not on everyday moral issues then at least with respect to the content of the education they provide. Many parents are alarmed, rightly so, at the spectacle of their children going off to college one year and coming back the next having jettisoned every moral, religious, social, and political scruple that they had been brought up to believe. Why should parents fund the moral de-civilization of their children at the hands of tenured antinomians? Why should alumni generously support an alma mater whose political and educational principles nourish a world view that is not simply different from but diametrically opposed to the one they endorse? Why should trustees preside over an institution whose faculty systematically repudiates the pedagogical mission they, as trustees, have committed themselves to uphold? These are questions that should be asked early and asked often.

It is time to revisit several large issues. The issue of tenure, for example. An arrangement that was intended to protect academic freedom and intellectual diversity has mutated into a means of enforcing conformity and excluding the heterodox. For those few conservatives who have managed to obtain tenure, it doubtless functions to protect them. But for the faculty in general it seems to have become a prescription for political correctness and lassitude.

The American academy is not entirely bereft of positive examples. Robert George's Madison Center at Princeton, for example, or Hadley Arkes's Colloquium on the American Founding at Amherst College provide real alternatives to the politically correct establishment that dominates most campuses. Such initiatives are still rare and tend to be beleaguered. They deserve to be emulated elsewhere. The sea is far from full, but the current still can serve. The tide, ebbing for decades, has begun to flow. It is time to seize the initiative lest we miss the moment and lose our ventures.

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