

Review Essay

The Spectre of Liberalism

Books discussed:

Michael Bérubé.

What's Liberal About the Liberal Arts: Classroom Politics and "Bias" in Higher Education.
New York: W. W. Norton, 2006.

Bruce L. R. Smith, Jeremy D. Mayer and A. Lee Fritschler.

Closed Minds? Politics and Ideology in American Universities.
Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008.

John K. Wilson.

Patriotic Correctness: Academic Freedom and Its Enemies
Boulder CO: Paradigm Press, 2008.

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A spectre is haunting America, the spectre of liberalism. This is odd, because conservatism, although difficult to define in any coherent and consistent manner, has been in the almost unbroken ascendancy for upwards of four decades. True, the major political party of the centre-left under President Clinton managed to break through the ramparts of self-described governmental conservatism but, when it did, its policies often eerily resembled those of its putative adversaries. So, Mr. Clinton initiated "workfare," initiated the unfortunate "don't ask, don't tell solution" to gay rights in the military, and failed miserably to introduce a serious medicare scheme. Progressive policies, which seemed within reach as recently as the 1960s, were wholly compromised in ways that conservative priorities were not under Nixon, Reagan and the elder and younger Bush.

Despite the apparent hegemony of right-wing thought in government, business and industry, however, and notwithstanding its broad support in opinion-leading institutions including both schools and the print and broadcast media, conservatives seem always to live on the edge of panic. They display little confidence in their own ideological triumphs, and display childishly contemptuous disdain for the mere term "liberal" when it drops sneeringly from their lips.

Influential politicians and pundits reveal a peculiar aspect of the domestic culture wars that are fought most furiously in the United States, but are not unknown elsewhere. This curious feature of contemporary political discourse can be summarized simply: liberalism is evidently despised by those whose wealth and power matter as well as by the many evangelical Christians on the religious right, and it is seen as a persistent threat to both the corporate and the populist sectors which have succeeded in governing democratic capitalist nations for a generation and more. Furthermore, among the most feared enemies of both the remorseless plutocratic and anti-intellectual quasi-theocratic conservatives are contemporary educators.

“Terrorists, racists and communists—you know them as The Professors.” This cry adorns the cover of David Horowitz’s book, *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America* (2006). Horowitz’s blacklist is symptomatic of the contemporary version of what historian Richard Hofstadter famously called the “paranoid style in American politics.” Horowitz is currently infamous for his work as a fierce opponent of academic freedom. A committed Marxist in the 1960s, he apparently had a political epiphany in the 1970s, and has been hunting down liberals and leftists ever since. In the past few years, he has devoted himself to exposing the liberal-left’s control over the hearts, minds and faculty clubs of American academia. His principal project has been to persuade state legislatures to pass his Orwellian Academic Bill of Rights into law. I have lost count of the number of states that have rejected this initiative, but at the end of 2006, the number stood at twenty-one. Things did not go much better in 2007 and 2008 for Horowitz and his chief ally Lynne Cheney, wife of outgoing US Vice-President Dick Cheney. Their efforts have been directed toward unleashing colleges and universities from the mind-control of anti-American teachers, whom they imagine to be using respected institutions of higher learning to brainwash impressionable young students, and to turn them into no less than treasonous advocates of the destruction of American values and, ultimately, of America itself.

Not all US jurisdictions have rejected the Academic Bill of Rights initiative. The reason is nicely expressed by US Rep. Dennis Baxley of Florida, who told the *University of Florida Alligator* in March 2005 that legislating the Academic Bill of Rights would provide a legal basis for students to sue their professors if they teach evolution and ignore creationism. Likewise, Holocaust denial would have to be given classroom time for open discussion and debate. As one critic caustically remarked, “should a professor refuse to turn his or her classroom into an open-ended intellectual food fight, the bill would give students legal standing to take the school to court over the refusal.”

Of course, the demand for equal treatment of astronomy and astrology is limited to public institutions. As the Florida bill stated: “the principles enumerated in this act fully apply only to public postsecondary institutions, and nothing in this act shall be construed as interfering with the right of a private postsecondary institution to restrict academic freedom on the basis of creed or belief ...” So, as another critic put it, “while you’ll need to give equal time (and funding) at your state school to creationists, flat-Earthers, Bible-literalists, Lynden Larouchites, mediums, psychics, Holocaust deniers and Moon-landing hoax conspirators, the good folks over at the Bible college won’t have to worry about learning about gravity; after all, it’s only a theory.”

The enduring threat of the ABOR and the anti-intellectual undercurrent of American politics are defining elements in the assault on liberalism as a political philosophy and liberal education as an ideal that has a noble and venerable history. The consequent efforts to inject theological and hyperpatriotic themes into postsecondary institutions is nothing if not innovative, and stands as a pertinent example of why innovations must be assessed critically, for change is not always for the best.

The conservative attack on liberalism in education is based on three claims, all related to the core concept of bias, and all concerned with the promotion of ideas of ethical relativism, secularism and multiculturalism. These liberal principles are said to undermine traditional American values, to promote decadence and moral decay, and to undermine patriotism especially in the context of the “war on terror.” Most demonizers of liberalism trace their analysis of this alleged political pathology to the 1960s, when children first disrespected their elders, began their counter-cultural

indulgence in sexual license and drug addiction, came under the influence of post-Elvis rock'n'roll and, for the first time in remembered history, precipitated a military defeat in Vietnam. Implicated as well, are the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement and the Anti-Poverty Movement which, the conservative critics insist, turned a strong nation built on virtues of individualism and self-reliance into a society of malcontents, aficionados of the "nanny state," and professional victims who use their status as oppressed, suppressed, repressed, depressed and generally marginalized groups to win "entitlements" from the pockets of hard-working taxpayers.

The evidence of the dominance of academic liberalism is presented in terms of the degree to which liberal professors outnumber conservatives, the content of the curriculum in which respect for the canons of high culture and the unique role of the United States as the beacon on the hill to which all right-thinking societies ought to pay homage and seek to emulate and, of course, the general decline in scholarly standards as affirmative action programs and a general sense of unearned privilege cause students to expect success even (or especially) when it is unearned.

The books here under review share a common cause. They seek to examine conservative claims not simply to refute them, but to offer a robust defence of the primary principles of liberal education insofar as they support and invigorate the culture that conservatives so passionately believe is under attack in a desperate global clash of cultures and associated domestic culture wars.

Michael Bérébe's book, *What's Liberal About the Liberal Arts* addresses the issue of political prejudice and academic independence in the United States. His purpose is to describe, analyze and comment upon the current state of teaching and learning in American institutions of higher education. His methods are informal, anecdotal and personal. His wish is to dispel many of the contemporary illusions and delusions about what happens in schools, colleges and universities, and to construct a judicious defence of liberal education at a time when its fundamental assumptions are being challenged from a host of perspectives including, on the putative left, the "politically correct" advocates of identity politics and, more powerfully, on the right by the corporate sector and the "religious right," which have sought quite successfully to impose their own ideological stamp on learning.

Bérébe steers a very even course. He presents a fine example of modesty, and allows the conversations between him and his students to speak eloquently for themselves. Bérébe, you see, is not like many academic writers who speak abstractly about the theory and methods of teaching and learning. Instead, he rehearses actual classroom events, giving voice to his own concerns and allowing students from all viewpoints to express their hopes, concerns and occasional frustrations. Rather than discussing what ought to be done and offering a trenchant critique of what is being done, he walks us through real-life classroom situations before offering general arguments in support of open-mindedness in combination with logical thinking and a respect for evidence rather than indulgence in hyperbole.

What's Liberal About the Liberal Arts? takes students and teachers seriously, not as exemplars of attitudes and ideologies, but as sincere and serious people grappling with real issues in real circumstances and in real time. We can easily relate to their genuine anxieties and sense the will of all concerned to respond reflexively to the opinions of others, and to question their own. Sometimes, as in the real life of teaching and learning, matters are not resolved and dogmatic

speakers retrench in the face of critical interrogation. Sometimes, there is dissatisfaction and even resentment. Some people, it seems, just do not want to be taught. Still, there is much to appreciate as we follow attentively the arrogance of a few and the honest self-doubt of others.

All the appropriate topics are addressed. The struggles of teachers who are trying to be “fair” and students who are seeking to articulate their own sometimes half-formed ideas are presented with sensitivity. We are encouraged to deal with a host of conflicts from “conservative complaints,” through the treatment of “race, class and gender,” to heady issues of “postmodernism” and the importance of understanding that the only cure for liberalism is (like democracy) more liberalism.

And what is Bérébe’s definition of liberalism? It is far from the diagnosis of the radical and the religious right which sees open-mindedness as evidence of softness at best and corrosion at worst. He embraces such obvious beliefs as equal opportunity, individual initiative and responsibility, and appropriate reward for good effort. He also acknowledges the public sphere, and regards a liberal society as one which respects both the individual person and the community, and which understands that neither can flourish without the other. As a result, he argues for the notion of mutual responsibility and reciprocity, urging us to believe, for example, that paying taxes is not merely the price of living in a civilized society, but is also the price of living in a free society. The cutthroat competition that divides us up into categories of winners and losers is not especially civilized, and it is certainly not free.

Bérébe is also unapologetic for holding socially progressive ideals, preferring the pragmatism and tolerance of liberal culture to the “deliberate malice” of conservatives, who privilege property over civil rights and condemn same-sex relationships while displaying indifference toward the atrocities committed in the name of freedom by those who have carried out American policies on torture in Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib. No fan of either religious or secular authoritarianism, he presents a cogent argument to the effect that the *real* American values of personal liberty and collective prosperity are enhanced and not undermined by his particular brand of liberalism. There is, of course, nothing new to this. His homilies in support of human dignity have all been heard before. Bérébe, however, brings them down to Earth and to the special climate of the classroom, chalk dust and all.

Allocating a fair amount of space to dialogue and discussion is dangerous. Often, the words of others borrowed from an uncertain context ring false. Usually, they are nowhere near as profound as they may have seemed at the time and in the place where they were earnestly uttered. Bérébe, however, is able to recreate settings and reproduce dialogues with skill and grace, making us hear the wisdom that sometimes emerges and the conflicted voices that more often prevail.

No one should expect to read Bérébe’s book with the intention of acquiring new and penetrating philosophical justifications and explications of long-standing liberal thought. Such expectations are better served by refamiliarization with Milton’s *Areopagitica*, Mill’s *On Liberty* and the musings of C. S. Pierce, William James and John Dewey. They should not be surprised, however, if old saws and antique arguments are given new life by a genuine teacher with authentic feelings and a sound commitment to what are, after all, the highest aspirations of American society, democracy and education.

Closed Minds? approaches the same issues from a very different perspective. Smith, Mayer and Fritschler present a much more formal and tightly argued study that is cast in the traditional mode of academic work. It is meticulously researched and its results are presented in a calm, professional manner as befits a production of the highly regarded Brookings Institution. As “think tanks” go, Brookings is not only an almost ancient facility (it was started in 1916), but it is also one of the least explicitly ideological. Today, of course, most of the well-financed “independent” research organizations tilt decidedly to the right on the political spectrum. In fact, organizations such as the American Enterprise Institute, the Cato Institute, Empower America, the Fordham Foundation, the Heritage Foundation, the Hudson Institute, and the Manhattan Institute, together with conservative religious organizations such as the Christian Coalition, the Discovery Institute and the Eagle Forum have succeeded in framing political debate in the United States. They have forged a bizarre alliance among anti-intellectual and anti-science fundamentalists and pro-market, anti-union, tax reduction advocates whose principal enthusiasm for government spending seems to be on military armaments, prisons and tax breaks for the rich and infamous. As a result, even when they are unable to persuade citizens of the veracity of their opinions, they ensure that their opinions and the language in which they are couched are the subjects people talk about in words and phrases of their choice.

Brookings, on the other hand, maintains a reputation for being pragmatic, even-handed and politically independent (although its predominantly right-wing competitors relentlessly try to brand it leftist, perhaps because its books, articles, reports, policy papers and commentaries were deemed instrumental in providing the research base for the creation of the Congressional Budget Office, the Marshall Plan and no less a subversive structure than the United Nations.

The purpose of *Closed Minds?* is to present an impartial assessment of the right’s accusations that liberal dogmatists are using their power to indoctrinate postsecondary students, to deny access to faculty positions to conservative scholars and systematically to undermine well-established interpretations of American history and life in the United States today. Smith, Mayer and Fritschler have done a commendable job. Using a variety of widely accepted social research techniques from opinion surveys to in-depth interviews, they have given a comprehensive description, analysis and assessment of the influence of liberalism throughout the American college and university communities.

The results are not surprising to anyone familiar with the United States and its educational institutions. They do, however, severely undercut most conservative complaints. Their results include the unavoidable fact that a preponderance of professors in the liberal arts—primarily the humanities and social sciences—are liberal in their political, social and professional preoccupations, though they are quick to remind us that university programs in business, engineering and the higher professions are weighted the other way. Nonetheless, the idea that practitioners in the fields of history and philosophy, language and literature and in the disciplines of anthropology, political science and sociology tend toward the left side of the political spectrum should surprise no one. What these researchers disclose, however, is that the scales are not unduly tipped and that assertions by Horowitz and his ilk that some 90% of academics are liberal-leftists (or, in a pinch, “loonie” liberal-leftists) is shown to be a fraud.

As well, *Closed Minds?* points out that, although universities and colleges may constitute an oasis of liberalism in a vast cultural desert of corporate conservatism, tail-gate parties, fast food

outlets and putting greens, it is disingenuous to insist that serious conservative scholars are shut out of senior academic postings because of an implicit hiring ban on right-wing academics by the “lefty” majority. In fact, many of the most intelligent and articulate conservative thinkers choose to try their luck with the aforementioned think tanks, with large corporations and with lobbying firms which can furnish them with direct access to the rich and powerful, and which pay far more handsomely than the educational institutions in which they are supposedly unwelcome.

A more serious charge, as far as the integrity of the educational community is concerned, is the allegation that ideologically blinkered liberal teachers discriminate against sincere conservative students by denying them free speech in the classroom, and by awarding them artificially low grades on their assignments should they choose to present arguments at odds with their professors. There is, it turns out, no reliable evidence of either sort of academic miscreancy. In fact, although it is plain that courses explicitly dealing with issues such as class, race and gender normally highlight patterns of discrimination and oppression that conservatives prefer to deny, it is clear that there are plenty of courses in colleges and universities which display a predominantly right-wing “bias” as well. In a sort of intellectual “buyer-beware” caveat, it might be said that conservative students should be savvy enough to appreciate that a course in Women’s Studies at Berkeley is apt to have a feminist bent, whereas liberal students should be aware that their neo-Marxist proclivities are not likely to be reinforced in a course in “Money and Banking” in the Economics Department at the University of Chicago.

As far as the in-class behaviour of professors is concerned, it is enlightening and somewhat reassuring to learn that students of all political stripes are generally pleased with their educational experiences, especially when confronted with teachers who are passionate about their subjects, and who provide precisely the kind of thought-provoking education that universities were long intended to offer. Outright discrimination is rare and, as long as politically engaged teachers on both the left and the right are open to rational yet vigorous debate with students and colleagues, and are judicious in their evaluation of student performance, there is not only “no harm, no foul,” but a genuine appreciation of the opportunity to gain exposure to alternative viewpoints. It is, after all, an essential part of growing up.

Smith, Mayer and Fritschler conclude their study with a somewhat unexpected critique of their own. The real problem of political “bias” in schools, they say, is not the existence of rigid ideologues in the classroom, but the general absence of political ideas at all. They are seriously worried that the right-wing assault on imagined injustices has left many university and college administrations cringing in fear that a reputation as a radical institution may harm the cash flow.

Postsecondary education is in a precarious financial situation. Limited public funds are made all the more uncertain by dominantly conservative state legislatures. Federal funds are unreliable as long as the White House is held by Republicans (as it has been in twenty-eight of the past forty years). Increasingly important, however, is the relationship between higher education and private corporations. “Partnerships” between universities and business enterprises help sustain educational budgets, and no responsible administrator wants to gnaw at the hand that feeds the institution. According to *Closed Minds?* the pertinent result is that a chill has descended on the campus.

Yes, there are plenty of academic niches where notions of postcolonialism, postcapitalism and postmodernism are in play. Yes, there are scattered cadres of radical feminists and neo-Marxists who are permitted to ply their trade and preach to their handful of dogmatic apprentices. In the main, however, their conclusion is that universities have been intimidated, and now shun disruption with a kind of delicate campus truce. Extreme opinion on both the left and the right has not been thoroughly purged, but neither is there much support for civic education in the intellectually dead centre of postsecondary studies. Where once a conscious attempt was made to connect students with the central social and political issues of the day, Smith, Mayer and Fritschler find a desire to flee from controversy and thus abandon, under the cover of a phony “objectivity,” the responsibility to educate students in the duties of active citizenship.

In *Patriotic Correctness*, John Wilson takes the argument a step further. Wilson, more a political activist than an academic (though he did study law under Barack Obama), is the author of such books as *Newt Gingrich: Capitol Crimes and Misdemeanors*, *The Myth of Political Correctness: The Conservative Attack on Higher Education*, and most recently *Barack Obama: This Improbable Quest*. He blogs at <obamapolitics.com> and <collegefreedom.org>. His politics are open books.

In this volume, he had produced a crisply written and somewhat tougher exposure of the conservative critique than are available in the somewhat more gracious Brookings document. At the same time, his narrative comes to many of the same conclusions as *Patriotic Correctness*; it differs mainly in its identification of what it considers to be the gravest threat to academic freedom in America. It focuses on the likes of David Horowitz.

John K. Wilson’s historical perspective is rather limited. Rather than delve deeply into the historical record to learn that some antique golden age in which scholars freely debated in their highly fortified ivory towers never really existed, and that academics have always been at the mercy of political power, he begins almost as though the world began on the 11th of September, 2001.

It would, however, be churlish to chide him for concentrating on current events. Under the cover of rhetoric about the clash of civilizations, the past partial decade has unleashed a special, if not unique, combination of conservative critics who are eager to smite the enemy within. Whether boosters of the “national security state” or purveyors of “that old time religion,” there are plenty of people afoot who resent the emergence of attitudes and actions that they believe are corrosive of traditional American values and institutions. They are especially upset about once closeted minorities—whether racial, ethnic, religious or gendered—which, they sincerely believe, have adopted not merely an un-American, but an anti-American stance. From their perspective, unalloyed enthusiasm for Darwin can easily turn into unqualified support for al-Qaeda and those who, in the words of the second President Bush, “hate our freedom.”

But make no mistake. *Patriotic Correctness* is not a common screed. Wilson has plenty of support for his position. He is able to document the systematic attack on dissenters through mechanisms as despicable as paying students up to \$100 for video and audio evidence of their liberal teachers making leftist remarks in the classroom. His 1,233 footnotes in only 214 pages of text give plenty of evidence for where the problem lies.

Whereas *Closed Minds?* largely limits itself to the controversy within the groves of academe, Wilson goes farther afield. His worry is not so much the decline of vital debate on campus, but the degree to which the campus has been encircled and brought under siege by dominant external institutions. Whether in terms of the influence of the corporate sector or the military on research agendas, the pervasive growth of private sector diploma mills, the internal war against faculty unions and the market mentality that drives the downward intellectual spiral toward what he calls “Wal-Mart University,” Wilson urges a forceful response in defence of liberal philosophy and liberal pedagogy. He acknowledges the work in defence of freedom on campus that has been undertaken by organizations from the American Association of University Professors which still imposes the mainly symbolic sanction of “censure” against universities that deny academic freedom to their faculty and the American Civil Liberties Association which occasionally takes legal action in defence of ill-served teachers. He fears, however, that this is insufficient and argues instead for a new initiative which he tentatively calls the Institute for College Freedom. As he envisions it, ICE would “engage in five main projects: research, education, policy advocacy, defense of individual rights, and global advocacy for academic freedom.” People may be forgiven if, at first, they wonder if the quarrel between advocates of the Academic Bill of Rights and the proposed Institute for College Freedom isn’t an arcane matter of egg-head semantics; after reading either volume, there will be no doubt that the former is intended to put scholars in straightjackets and impose absurd restrictions on teaching and learning, while the latter is true to the finest ideals that have helped sustain authentic education in the best of the Western tradition.

Both *Closed Minds?* and *Patriotic Correctness* are pretty much on the same page, but differences in their respective styles more than any mild disagreement about their specific content will shape their appeal to different segments of the educational community. Whether disappointed by “risk-averse” administrators or outraged by all-out political attacks, both books illustrate the nature and degree of conservative distortions of liberal education and its purported dangers for a republic ostensibly founded primarily upon liberal ideals of freedom of thought and speech. Though entirely focused on American experience, the lessons are plain for others whose leaders are in thrall to what is contemporarily called conservatism. Each or both, however, should be read in concert with Michael Bérubé’s more personal account of how the larger issues boil down when made the stuff and substance of life in a college classroom where teachers and students get on with the business of learning.

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