

THE ACADEMY: REFORM OR SECESSION?

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What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us.

–Alasdair MacIntyre

1

Several years ago when I was an impoverished doctoral candidate I accepted a one semester adjunct professorship at a public college, teaching Introductory Ethics in the Department of Philosophy. The combined SAT scores of students at this institution were reported to average about 1300. I have since learned that many schools' claims about their students' scores are simply lies, and that was very possibly the case here. But I planned my syllabus on the assumption that I would be teaching bright students.

I devoted the first half of the course to Aristotle's Ethics. I myself had tackled this work as a freshman, reading two books per class meeting and coming prepared to discuss them. My students, in contrast, were mostly upperclassmen, and I assigned them only one book per class. Furthermore, I prepared brief talks on each book, summarizing the argument, clarifying technical terms, and providing examples. Finally, I prepared questions on several topics from each reading to spark discussion.

What I experienced was eerie. The students appeared lively, or at least normal, outside the classroom and filing into it. But once class had begun, they fell totally silent, inert, almost catatonic. It was like trying to teach dancing to students who refused to get up from their seats. Without any contribution from the students themselves, it was extremely difficult for me to fill the allotted class time (which would have been ridiculously short for an adequate discussion of the readings). When I had reached my wit's end for the day, I would simply ask if there were any questions. For the first class or two there were not. When I finally saw a hand go up one day, I almost felt a sense of relief.

But the question, it turned out, was unrelated to anything I had been saying. The student wanted to know how his grade would be determined. When I was a student, I had never asked any professor this; I'm not sure I would have considered it my business. I did not say so to my own students, however. I explained straightforwardly that there would be a term paper, which would be

given equal weight with the final exam required by the institution; the result might be modified an increment (e.g., B to B+) based on classroom participation. I thought this a reasonably intelligible response.

At the next class meeting, when once more I had exhausted my material and failed to elicit any reaction from the students, I again asked for questions. A different hand went up, but the question was the same: How are the grades to be determined? I politely repeated my explanation. This had no effect; the following week, another student was asking about the grading policy. As I said, it was eerie. At the end of the semester, I glumly handed out the course evaluation forms. The students were all agreed on two points: 1) I was the worst professor they had ever had; and 2) I had refused to explain the course requirements to them. The first item did not surprise me, but the second left me baffled.

Despite this *débâcle*, I eventually obtained a more satisfying position at an academically serious private institution. One day I was chatting with an intelligent and mature young man, who explained to me why he had transferred from a land grant college. He said the professors at these institutions normally began each semester by writing three or four course requirements on the blackboard. These include things like "write a term paper of ten pages," or "do not miss more than one class," or "achieve a score of eighty or better on the [multiple choice] final exam." *The student who fulfills the requirements gets an "A."* By definition. That is what is meant by the word "requirement" at American colleges today. The young man who related this to me had enough sense to realize he was not being educated, and got out.

I finally understood what had happened to me at the previous institution.

Here is how the game works. Announcements for faculty positions usually call for "evidence of superior teaching ability." This bit of cant really means the professor must be able to produce positive course evaluations from previous students. The students in question are bored, spoiled, incurious teenagers. They are not aware that education would require an active contribution on their part; they imagine the college should literally "give" them an education – on a silver platter, as it were. How do you get positive evaluations from these kids? You keep them entertained. (One of my Introductory Ethics students complained that she had enrolled in the course "for fun.")

A deal has tacitly been struck between the two groups. The professors announce easily met requirements. The student who meets these gets an "A" for his transcript; in his mind, this is the *purpose* of the course. The professor then concentrates on keeping the students entertained. In return, he gets a good course evaluation ("proof of superior teaching skills"). It is an elaborate charade of education.

It is worth noting that typical requirements, besides not being very difficult, regard only the externalities of the course, so to speak – attendance, numerical scores, length of papers – rather than its ostensible subject matter. I would not

have satisfied the students' expectations if I had listed a requirement such as "be able to distinguish temperance from continence as defined by Aristotle." Requirements are content free.

Note also the assumption that professors "give" students their grades, like dog trainers handing out treats or punishments to animals that perform properly or otherwise. In a proper college, a professor *assigns* grades to students on the basis of observation. In the ideal case, the professor's personal contribution to the grading process should be zero; he attempts simply to register the student's actual performance, like an umpire calling a play. And the performance consists in mastering the subject matter of the course much more than in meeting any merely formal requirements.

2

My readers will easily agree that the educational establishment described above is bureaucratic and corrupt. But these terms are often tossed around casually, so let us pause for a moment to consider their precise meaning.

Social institutions are formed to enable men to pursue ends they cannot pursue alone: in the case of universities, the cultivation and dissemination of knowledge. There is, however, a crucial and ineliminable divergence between what furthers the purposes of an institution and what benefits it *as* an institution. Consider the matter of financing. Schools, like other social institutions, require a measure of material support for their very existence, and a somewhat greater measure for their flourishing. But as prosperity increases beyond some ill-defined point, a transformation is worked in the institution itself: Men are drawn to it as a source of economic support rather than as a setting in which to pursue the ends for which it was originally set up.

This divergence between immaterial goals and institutional or material interests is found in all social contexts. The ends of law, for example, are best served when laws are few, simple, and clear. But it is to the profit of lawyers that laws be many, complicated, and vague, for this results in a greater demand for the special skills they possess. So the law is gradually corrupted. Eventually the result is a nearly lawless society with a large, thriving class of lawyers. Or again, in primary and secondary education the most common recommendation of teachers unions is higher salaries (supposedly to attract superior candidates); in fact, the students might be better served by religious orders bound by vows of poverty which regard teaching as a sacred vocation rather than a paycheck.

This pattern is, fundamentally, what we mean when we speak of bureaucracy: the triumph of institutions over the ends they were founded to serve. Universities were founded to promote knowledge, but over time have turned to promoting themselves, even at the expense of their students' education. The modern university raises funds for new buildings, touts its athletic teams, and offers a king's ransom to lure unqualified celebrities into visiting professorships;

meanwhile, education has been quietly replaced by what I described above: the exchange of easy requirements and entertainment for good course evaluations and docility.

A diploma today is thus a sign not of learning but of the student's ability to remain in a seated posture through the most vigorous years of early manhood. At the same time, college degrees, more than ever before, are required for access to desirable employment. We have instituted a selection process for social leadership that favors passivity and tractability; it is geared toward producing administrators and employees, not leaders, discoverers, or thinkers.

The best illustration of this is the professor himself, who entered the academy by default rather than deliberate choice (it was easier to continue in school as a graduate student than go out and get a job). The professors are timid conformists whose highest principle of action has always been that the way to get along is to go along. They may not know much, but they know how to acquire "proof of superior teaching abilities" from students similar to themselves.

3

Let us start from the beginning and consider what a genuine, uncorrupt school is supposed to be. The word itself is derived from the Greek *schole*, meaning leisure. This is liable to surprise men today, who are accustomed to speak of "schoolwork," and perhaps have memories of caffeine-fueled all-night term paper sessions. So we must clarify our terms. Work, in the sense relevant here, is activity valuable as a means to some end distinct from the activity itself. In a modern society this usually signifies providing a service or producing something with market value. Term-paper writing is not an industry and does not put food on the family table, so it does not fall under the definition. Leisure must be distinguished not only from work, however, but also from recreation and idleness. (It is characteristic of the modern age not to draw these latter distinctions.) Recreation is necessary to enable people to resume work; it is therefore in the service of work, an accidental consequence of the law of diminishing returns in regard to work. Idleness is any rest or activity valuable neither intrinsically nor as a means.

Leisure, in the proper sense, is *activity pursued for its own sake*. Watching television does not qualify. It is a measure of our civilization's decline that many confuse leisure with recreation, or even mere entertainment; in fact, worship may have been the original or primitive form of leisure.

Nothing but confusion can result from trying to understand leisure in economically rational terms, which are appropriate in relation to productive work. Imagine, e.g., interpreting a church or monastery as a "salvation factory" whose efficiency might be measured by comparing inputs and outputs. How would a manager determine its "bottom line," decide when to expand operations or when to scale them back? Even to speak in this way would indicate a failure to grasp the character of religious institutions.

Now, the origins of the university lie in the Christian Middle Ages, and its mission has traditionally been understood in terms of the sacredness of truth and the intrinsic value of knowledge. It never tried to justify itself in terms of economic value produced. "Academic leisure" was, indeed, once a rather common expression.¹ Now, such leisure does indeed require that the wolf be kept from the door, and "an empty belly does not like to study," as a German proverb has it. But one must distinguish a stipend which allows the scholar to fulfill his vocation from payment for services rendered (proper in the world of industry). One endows a school; one does not invest in it. There are many areas of higher learning with no obvious economic or professional purpose: philosophy and theology, philology and literature, pure science, history. These have never been the sole focus of the university, but have, by their very lack of economic utility, had a special role defining it as a distinct type of community.

From the beginning, certain practical fields such as law and medicine have also formed part of university studies. Over the centuries, others have been added: engineering, agricultural science, librarianship, computer science, etc. These were allowed a peripheral place in the university on the grounds that they do, after all, amount to bodies of knowledge, even though not usually cultivated for their own sake. Traditionally, they have carried lower status because of their practical bias.

There is some justification for this. Professional training can usually be arranged by the industries requiring it. In many cases, it still is. An obvious example is skilled but low prestige jobs such as electrician, plumber, and mechanic. But there is no obvious reason why an apprentice system could not be applied in fields such as nursing, business administration, or computer programming. Bill Gates, who dropped out of Harvard to start Microsoft, is perfectly capable of financing the training of his code writers without any help from the Harvard Department of Computer Science. To some extent, such a switch to training within industries is occurring for reasons of economic efficiency. This seems to me a positive development.

But the general trend of the past century at least has clearly been to reinterpret higher learning as an "investment in youth," i.e., as an economically rational undertaking. Universities have come to ape business enterprises. For example, economic rationality implies quantifiability. And we find, in fact, a strong tendency in the modern university to understand learning and scholarship in quantitative terms. The expectation for professors to be "productive" scholars – the "publish or perish" principle – reflects this mentality. In effect, the universities declared that their professors were required to publish *something*, and that whatever they came up with should be automatically decreed an explosion of new knowledge. A certain "one-upmanship" gradually takes hold: when everyone is required to produce a book for tenure, the desire to distinguish oneself prompts some to produce two books; eventually this becomes a requirement.

One of the most misguided criticisms of the academy today, common in the conservative press, is what might be called the “lazy professor argument.” It is said that professors only work nine hours a week, farming out their teaching responsibilities to graduate assistants, and that the way to fix universities is to have state legislators force the lazy bastards back into the classrooms to earn their keep.²

Bastards they may be, but not lazy. In fact, it takes enormous dedication and ingenuity, e.g., to extract any meaning from the writings of Jacques Derrida. The problem is not that professors are unwilling to make these strenuous efforts; the problem is that the activity itself is of no value. Instead of active leisure or economic productivity, what goes on in the contemporary university might best be described as a kind of hectic idleness. Untold man-hours have been given over to organizing conferences and publishing essay collections on “the social construction of whiteness” or “logocentrism and phallocracy.”

Taxpayers and parents who foot the bill for this nonsense are right to be suspicious of academic idleness. But they would do well to consider whether a feminist harpy, e.g., might not after all be less harmfully employed writing reams of turgid drivel no one will read than in poisoning the minds of the rising generation in a classroom, teaching young women to despise the fathers whose life’s savings are paying their tuition. In any case, what good would more teaching do for students who do not wish to learn? I could not confidently claim that the time I spent attempting to teach my ethics class was less wasted than if I had used it to write a scholarly article on Aristotle for an academic journal.

A second consequence of the reinterpretation of the university as an economically rational enterprise has been the cult of the colossal. Modern industry has tended to promote such a mentality, partly to achieve economies of scale, but more important because it is in the interest of technocrats and administrators. (This is the “managerial revolution” that James Burnham wrote about.) Schools, however, do not benefit *as* schools from economies of scale; gargantuan campuses have little or no tendency to foster better scholars.

On the other hand, the farther educational institutions expand, the farther down the bell curve of intelligence they must reach for both students and professors. When a grapevine is excessively watered and fertilized, it does not produce more grapes in proportion; rather, it puts forth a profusion of leaves while the quantity of grapes is actually reduced. When schooling is maximized rather than optimized, the quality of the university’s products – both its graduates and its scholars – inevitably declines.

4

How did it come to this? Americans have a notoriously short historical memory. Most of the large popular literature denouncing present conditions on college campuses does not seek to trace problems farther back than the

student revolts of the 1960s; in my view, this historical shortsightedness leads to a mistaking of symptoms for causes.³

It is worth recalling that the twenty years following the Second World War saw enormous upheavals in the world of higher education. Great sums of tax money were made available for research. Far more men took advantage of the GI bill than its sponsors had foreseen. The Truman Commission Report, issued in 1947 when these changes were already underway, expressed well the new thinking: It called for a massive expansion of “access” to college, lavish financial aid programs for students, the institution of community colleges charging low tuition, and federal aid to the states for higher education. The country had embarked on a program of reckless expansion of its educational institutions.

The boosters of academic “growthmanship” (as it was sometimes called) failed to distinguish between education and schooling. Schooling can be measured: in years or courses or credit hours. Education, by contrast, is probably unquantifiable in principle; it refers to a qualitative change in persons. It is this confusion that leads to the notion of the student as a customer purchasing services from his institution. In fact, a student may buy schooling, such as place in a class, but his education is what he makes of the class. He is the product of his education, not its purchaser.

The same confusion is behind the emphasis on “access” as the central problem of educational policy. An IQ of 115 is often considered the minimum natural endowment for profitably receiving college instruction. But, of course, no such natural limit exists on physical access to campuses and classrooms. The many people in our society uneasy about recognizing different natural aptitudes for education (often because of its racial aspect) prefer to steer discussion toward the question of access to schools and classes.

In any case, the proponents of growthmanship wrote as if there could be no such thing as too much schooling: It encounters no law of diminishing returns. If a thing is good, they reasoned, more of it must be better; everyone must want it, and no one should be excluded from it. Taken to its logical limit, this view would imply the desirability of universal mandatory school attendance for life—the transformation of the nation into a single gigantic school with death the only form of graduation. One sometimes gets the feeling such a vision would not displease some members of the education lobby.

Of course, the grand design could not be carried out until great numbers of young men and women were persuaded to enter college. As Truman Commission Chairman George Zook winsomely phrased it: “We have a product to sell to the people.”⁴ Now, advanced learning is a special calling, and distasteful to many persons highly capable in other areas. How were “the people” sold on near universal college attendance? In two ways, chiefly: the fallacious college-as-investment argument (“graduates earn more”) and the financial sleight of hand known as the GI bill.

Let us consider the first. Before the Second World War, about ten percent of America's young men went to college to prepare for leadership roles in society. These men did go on, in most cases, to earn above average salaries. It does not follow that college attendance was the cause of their higher earnings: that is a textbook example of the post hoc fallacy. Rather, high intelligence and ambition are the cause of success in both college and later employment. An unintelligent, lazy person cannot expect to find a prestigious job with a great salary waiting for him simply by putting in four years at a college and obtaining a degree.

The GI bill was a subsidy, and had the results all subsidies have: to increase artificially the demand for the thing subsidized. The same goes for its many successors: Pell and FSEOG grants; Stafford, Perkins, and PLUS loans, etc. They encourage persons who set little store by education to remain in school far past the point of diminishing returns. Eventually we get the zombie students such as I met in my ethics class. Before the Second World War there may have been a few individual students like that, but hardly an entire class. A society with limited "access" to education may fall short of perfect fairness, but the students are likely to be more serious and devoted to learning.

That sort of devotion is priceless to a teacher, and cannot be subsidized. Teachers, as a practical matter, must pitch their instruction to the average student in their classroom: average as regards intelligence, preparation, and enthusiasm. For proper instruction to occur, therefore, this average must be sufficiently high. That means that some students must be excluded (some children left behind, as it were).

Now, exclusion from college, even in the form of dismissal of students who have already matriculated, is *not a punishment*. Confusion on this point seems to me a principal obstacle to sensible reform. No one, of course, enjoys being rejected by or expelled from a school. But, equally obviously, it is not the *purpose* of such exclusion to humiliate or harm the student. Under the principle of free association, a school has the right to terminate relations with a student, just as he is not obliged to attend the school. Morally, the school's agents have not merely the right but the duty to end the association if, after deliberation, they decide that the aims of schooling are not being met and cannot be met in the case of that particular student. Ideally, the young person would make this determination himself and withdraw voluntarily; but the young are usually the poorest judges in such matters.

I am convinced many students like those who stumbled into my ethics class would be far more productive and happier members of society working and raising families. Aristotle, pace Mortimer Adler, is not for everybody. We must bear in mind that only recently have more than a few of our young people gone to college at all.

One reason dismissal or denial of admission seems like punishment today is rampant credentialism in the workplace: the irrational overemphasis placed

by employers on formal credentials as opposed to informally demonstrated abilities. Undeniably, a college diploma is now demanded for many types of work which never required one in the past. Let us consider why this is and whether it is necessary or inevitable. Were more desirable employment available to the ordinary high school graduate it would lower the present artificially inflated demand for college admission.

The essential point has been pithily expressed by columnist Gary North: "The degree is a screening device, not a training device."⁵ In part, colleges screen for intelligence where businesses cannot, for fear of the racial parasitism racket. Recruiters specify "college graduates only" because, North writes,

if they didn't, the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission would take them to court for racial discrimination... There are state and Federal laws against businesses' use of employment tests that screen for brains if the tests screen out racial minorities. [T]hese tests do in fact screen out disproportionate numbers of certain politically protected racial minorities.... So, elite businesses that want to attract the best and the brightest hire from the elite universities... The schools administer the tests at their expense.... "Racial discrimination? Us? Perish the thought! We are ready to hire as many of Those People as Harvard or Yale or Princeton can produce."

As in all cases of political intervention, there are winners and losers; the gains for the less naturally gifted races come at the expense of those who have not completed college:

[B]usinesses that would otherwise promote from inside the company dare not do this. They therefore discriminate against non-graduates... A cost has been imposed by this government-regulated employment system on people without a college degree. They are not given a shot at entry-level management jobs.

This state of affairs should be explained to every young person entering college. The present undeniable economic value of a college degree is not natural or intrinsic, but a byproduct of unjust laws which violate traditional American liberties.

Credentialism, however, is by no means exclusively due to racial politics; another factor is that many industries (not to speak of government) are now as bureaucratic as universities themselves, and place a premium on the sort of mindless routinism typified by my ethics students. The modern corporate recruiter, explains North,

wants to hire someone who will not quit [a] crummy entry-level job... He looks for someone who has done boring grunt work without complaining... A college graduate has shown that he has been willing to suffer enormous boredom, broken only by weekend parties, for five or six years. (Very few students get through in four years...) Here is someone who... has put up with years of academic nonsense spouted by left-wing bureaucrats who could not hold a regular job in industry, let alone run a business. Here, in short, is a certified drudge.

The contemporary university, in other words, is the perfect screening program for reliable servants of the managerial regime, whether in its governmental or “private” branches. There might be better hope for internal reform if our universities were failing. The problem is that they are succeeding. The fit between them and the larger society they serve is perfect.

5

That is not to say that commendable efforts have been lacking. For the last twenty years, the main organization devoted to restoring sanity to the world of higher education has been the National Association of Scholars, based in Princeton, New Jersey. I was a member for several years, and unconditionally recommend membership to anyone still slogging it out in the trenches of the academic establishment. But it is not going to spearhead any general reform of that establishment.

The NAS has an aging membership, and is fighting a rearguard action. Not a few members would be naively overjoyed if the National Endowment for the Humanities threw them a few crumbs in the form of funding for some dinky great books program (which could be forced to include feminist, black power, or social justice components as soon as the political winds shift). This demonstrates an attitude of dependence. Tax funding itself is the deep and systemic problem; in comparison, *what* curriculum gets funded is a secondary matter.

Furthermore, a significant segment of the membership is preoccupied almost exclusively with the issue of racial preferences; were these abolished, they would declare victory and go home. The more serious problem of scale—the gargantuan size and scope of institutions—goes unmentioned, in some cases because academics do not sufficiently realize its importance. But also, I fear, because it is not in their economic interest to solve it: The hordes of unqualified students may not be satisfying to teach, but they do underwrite the professors’ salaries. Principle alone is rarely enough to inspire determined resistance without the aid of material interest.

One might also ask why anyone should *want* equal access, whether as student or professor, to the routine described above, viz., “meet three or four meaningless requirements and get an “A” for your transcript?” If this is the best that universities have to offer, by all means let serious students and scholars be excluded from it.

Reformers have undoubtedly slowed the process of educational decline; and no one who understands the power of their enemies will despise even this accomplishment. At one NAS conference a member stood up to challenge a panel on what, concretely, they had achieved; a panelist dryly responded: “In my department they call me ‘The Terminator.’” But all possible successes at the level of the individual department remain eddies in a mighty stream not flowing in our direction.

Serious reform would require that persons of sound principles gain authority within universities, but all avenues are strictly guarded to prevent this. Any scholar who sincerely attempts to transmit Western civilization will soon find himself unable to provide “proof of superior teaching abilities.” Under these conditions, he can neither lead successfully nor serve in good faith. There was, I came to realize, a certain appropriateness in my abject failure as a professor: My purposes were simply at odds with those of my institution.

6

If I had to sum up in a single phrase the greatest educational need of our time, I would say it is the *restoration of authority*. Let me explain what I intend by this much misused term.

Human behavior is not as fully determined by biological forces as that of social insects such as bees and ants. This is why local cultural differences exist among humans but not such insects. It also means, however, that human society needs some kind of organizing principle to avoid disintegration and aimlessness. Such principles fall into two broad categories: authority and power. The distinction may be illustrated with a simple example. A group of people lost in the woods follows the instructions of a guide who knows the area: The guide enjoys *authority* with them. Another group marches because one man is armed with a gun and threatens to shoot them if they do not go where he tells them: The armed man has *power* over them.

A free society is not “antiauthoritarian” it is marked precisely by a preponderance of authority over power. One measure of social decadence is the extent to which power usurps the place of authority and becomes the appeal of first resort.

At the heart of “political correctness” is a systematic confusion of authority with power. All the various schools of leftist thought amount to reinterpretations of traditional relations of authority as power relations. Thus, a man’s leadership of his family is said to be their enslavement to him; Europeans’ preeminence in nearly every field of endeavor during recent centuries is described as their oppression of everyone else; and so forth. The real motive of such tendentious “theorizing” is not to explain the workings of the world but to make a claim to power on behalf of those doing the misinterpreting – and at the expense of traditional bearers of authority. Typically, the theorists are status seekers unable to attain positions of authority they envy.

Universities, insofar as they have not become corrupt, have their own characteristic form of authority based on the authority (or, indeed, sacredness) of truth. This is a natural consequence of the university’s mission, viz., the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge. The personal authority of professor and dean is supposed to be based on this rather than on *vox populi*. In other words, authority in the traditional university is wholly undemocratic. Scholars are supposed to have earned it through learning and study, which entitles

them to a measure of respect from their young charges (though occasionally incompetents may get in, or a particular student may know more than his teacher about something: No system is perfect). The professor has no duty to remain in the good graces of the callow and ignorant. He evaluates them, but they do not evaluate him – except in the sense that, if they are unhappy with his instruction, they are free to go elsewhere. Students have never, in other words, been in the professors' power; they are merely required to accept his authority *if* they wish to study with him.

Plato long ago grasped the connection between democracy and the erosion of authority in education:

As the teacher...is frightened of the pupils and fawns on them, so the students make light of their teachers...[T]he old come down to the level of the young; imitating the young, they are overflowing with facility and charm, and that's so they won't seem to be unpleasant or despotic.⁶

Democratic "student power" in the form of requiring "proof of superior teaching abilities" from scholars is one arm of a pincers movement – the other being power from above, or governmental control – in which traditional academic authority is being crushed. I believe this process is now so advanced as to be essentially irreversible.

7

So far I have said little about the best publicized outrages on college campuses: freshman girls taking courses in sadomasochism, professors declaring that the 9/11 victims deserved what they got, "Genocide", "Queer," and "White Privilege" Studies programs, etc. These achieve notoriety because they make good journalistic copy and are useful for fundraising purposes. In my view, they are merely symptomatic of deeper ills. "Political correctness" exists not because professors have spontaneously and inexplicably gone crazy, but because the modern university has an inherent tendency to produce it, or something similar.

The members of a university community are not bound by ties of blood, and often not even by common interests. But universities are, of course, places where ideas are discussed and held to be of great importance. Under such conditions, shared ideas often come to function as the primary social cement. Whether the ideas are true – whether they correspond to any objective reality – is less important than *that they are shared*. Conversely, only those who subscribe to the ideas can be full members of such a community. Dissent, however well grounded, comes to be met with social ostracism. The university, in other words, is a *société de pensée*, the sort of institution which French historian Augustin Cochin saw as the natural incubator for Jacobinism.⁷ Ostensibly dedicated to the disinterested pursuit of knowledge, it is easily perverted into a powerful social mechanism for the production and enforcement of conformity of thought.

The ideas in question need not be political. In the late Middle Ages a precondition for study at certain universities was a public declaration of fealty to the school's official position in the controversy concerning universals – an arcane philosophical topic of no direct social or political import. One's espousal of the realist or nominalist doctrine was a badge of membership in a kind of intellectual team or clan. The irrationality of such behavior in regard to what was supposedly a philosophical debate should be obvious.

Today, by contrast, students have little zeal for philosophical or theological hairsplitting. The ideas to which they rally are mainly political. I have no comprehensive explanation for this, but shall offer a few suggestions.

Lacking all sense of the divine, lacking awe or reverence for the natural world (often even curiosity about or familiarity with it), protected from natural want by the prosperity of an urban and technological civilization, many denizens of the modern university perceive almost no reality outside the social world. They transfer to this realm concerns and aspirations naturally spiritual.

Yet even their acquaintance with their society is highly limited. They are cloistered within an economically irrational institution whose existence does not depend on any ability to turn a profit. Thus they have the luxury of ignoring the realities of the market, which they come to view with uncomprehending hostility. By default, they interpret the social world solely in political terms. Spontaneous social order, including differences in wealth or status, they misconstrue as a product of political imposition ("oppression").

But even their political ideas have a special character. They are not political actors, and bear none of the practical statesman's responsibilities. Not suffering any consequences from incorrect ideas or poor decisions, getting no feedback, no "reality check" (to use the current phrase), their political notions gravitate naturally toward the utopian. They develop an all-consuming interest in verbal battles between the proponents of various abstract schemes, closing ranks only against their common enemy, the "conservatives," which in this hothouse atmosphere means anyone whose beliefs are constrained by objective realities.

As long as the modern university has the character it does, it is likely to go on producing the sort of people it has been producing. Attempting reform by attacking particular abuses will be about as effective as cutting off the Hydra's heads.

8

The most important educational "reform" today is, I believe, quietly going on in the minds of men. An unspoken assumption of most public controversy surrounding universities has hitherto been that the cause of education is identical to the battle over the educational institutions and structures we have inherited. Since reformers are reluctant to concede our universities to the

enemies of our civilization, they speak more optimistically of their achievements and prospects than is rationally warranted. But what if their underlying assumption is false?

As I pointed out earlier, institutions are always distinct from the pursuits they are established to promote, hence vulnerable to “mission drift” and bureaucratic corruption; in extreme cases, they may actually become hostile to their original and ostensible ends. A government may become the enemy of the nation it rules, or a school system may function to prevent education. When this happens, the institutions in question may simply be abandoned. In other words, men may stop thinking like “conservatives,” quietly cease trying to reform inherited institutions, and instead secede from them.

What I have in mind finds perhaps its most important precedent in another period when, as today, an elite without loyalties lived by plundering a populace it could no longer lead or defend: late imperial Rome. As philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre noted, “A crucial turning point...occurred when men and women of good will turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman *imperium* and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of that *imperium*.”⁸ Even as most eyes remained fixed on the desperate struggles of ambitious warlords for the glittering but ever diminishing prize of imperial power, a new civilization was quietly aborning amid the catacombs. Sociologically speaking, what the Christian Church offered men of the Roman decadence was an alternative system of status and authority. As we know, this system ended by long outlasting the official and public one of its time, and did so without having to rely on armed legions or the power of taxation. In retrospect it seems obvious the Church’s work was of greater importance than the sordid and brutal doings of the Praetorian Guard.

A second historical parallel, more modest, closer in time to us, and related specifically to education, is the Irish hedge school movement of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Then as now, social reformers looked to the government, their society’s apparatus of coercion, to “teach” the objects of their solicitude correct ways of thinking:

Amongst the ways to convert and civilise the Deluded People, the most necessary have always been thought to be that a sufficient number of English Protestant Schools be erected, wherein the Children of the Irish Natives should be instructed in the English Tongue and in the Fundamental Principles of the True Religion.⁹

The law decreed that “no person of the popish religion shall...teach school or instruct youth in learning within this realm.” Numerous Protestant schools were in fact founded.

Strange to say, however, the Irish populace preferred to go right on being deluded. Most declined to make use of Protestant schools, and set up miserable establishments from their own meager resources, sometimes literally beside hedges. The children were instructed in Irish history and legend, the Catholic

faith, and in many cases Latin and Greek. The Irish stubbornly refused to view those who hunted down their teachers with bloodhounds as benefactors. "A Commission of Inquiry reported in 1826 that of the 550,000 pupils enrolled in all schools in Ireland, 403,000 were in Hedge Schools."¹⁰ Irish novelist William Carleton remarked that the peasantry's "zeal for book learning increases in proportion as [opportunities of scholastic education] are rare and unattainable."¹¹

This last point may be particularly important for us to consider; it is no mere rhetorical flourish. T. S. Eliot also observed:

It is possible that the desire for education is greater where there are difficulties in the way of obtaining it – difficulties not insuperable but only to be surmounted at the cost of some sacrifice and privation. If this is so, we may conjecture that facility of education will lead to indifference to it; and that the universal imposition of education up to the years of maturity will lead to hostility towards it.¹²

It can hardly be doubted that this has actually happened now; my ethics students were living proof. It is actually an advantage to providers of alternative schooling that they must require their students to make a sacrifice of ease and convenience. They must also be prepared to exclude some who would be able to pay, because learning is not a business and students are not customers. This will also win for them some of the respect the established schools have been squandering. To repeat, dismissal is not a punishment.

Cultural secession means the formation of an alternate center of educational authority. Such a restoration of authority would attract not only the better students, but also some of the most dedicated scholars, for whom established institutions have little place, and often little tolerance. And the reform-minded themselves will fret less about Ivy League Marxist "theorists" with six figure salaries once they turn their backs on the Ivy League, roll up their sleeves, and start creating alternatives.

9

Do Americans still have enough spirit and initiative to secede from their decaying institutions of higher education? If so, what will the results look like?

In the first place, a natural pool of recruits already exists: the growing ranks of the homeschooled, sprouting like green plants through cracks in the asphalt of the contemporary governmental education establishment. The homeschooling movement, much like the Internet, took our masters by surprise, reaching critical mass before it occurred to them to "regulate" it. Many of these youngsters are coming of age and are prepared for advanced instruction of a sort that, unlike their primary schooling, cannot be well conducted in the home. It does not require an entrepreneurial genius to see the need for establishments to accommodate them, and at least one such school already exists: Patrick

Henry College in Purcellville, Virginia, eighty-five percent of whose students are from homeschooling families.¹³

Interestingly, most of these students major in government, and the college boasts of getting its graduates into the CIA and other agencies. Here are people who have gone to great trouble and expense to protect their children's upbringing from governmental influence, and when the kids finally reach adulthood, are delighted they are "patriotic" enough to devote their lives to serving that same government. It seems doubtful whether they can change the regime without being changed by it. In any case, there is plenty of room for other homeschool colleges with a different approach.

There is also the issue of accreditation to consider. Some states have laws against the operation of unaccredited schools (new schools must seek accreditation within a specified period of time). Accreditation agencies are vulnerable to the same corruption as universities themselves; they have been known, for example, to find fault with the absence of Women's Studies programs. Although nominally private, these agencies are usually described as "recognized" by the U. S. Department of Education. Who is accrediting the accreditors?

There are battles looming here, and eventually some school may simply have to declare that anyone attempting to foist official approval upon them will be tarred, feathered, and run off campus on a rail. If the government responds by shutting it down, traditionalists may indeed find themselves hiding in catacombs or behind hedges. One way or another, they must create their own system of authority and status separate from and in opposition to the inherited establishment.

We must bear in mind that the established academy has only as much power and prestige as the regime's subjects give it. It cannot survive without their money or children; they still largely have the power to deny it these things.

Many people once hoped political correctness would be quickly self-eliminating by turning the universities which nurtured it into public laughing stocks, resulting in a decline in applications. This has been frustratingly slow to occur. The reason, principally, is that the lure of the degree as an employment credential has proven too powerful. Few parents enroll their offspring *because* of "Rape Studies" curricula or speech codes, but many are willing to enroll them in spite of these. Parents continue to finance the outrages for fear that without a degree their children would be left paupers (and often end up paupers themselves as a result). Eventually the best and wisest parents must recognize that a secure and comfortable existence is not the most important thing they can wish for their children.

The postmodern hedge school should not try to establish a one-size-fits-all model. But certain traits will be generally desirable for it. In the first place,

it must be explicitly oppositional, which will attract stronger natures and produce a valuable esprit de corps. It must also be limited in its goals. Among the ailments of the established educational behemoths is what Robert Nisbet called the Faustian conception of the university: a desire to be all things to all men.¹⁴ An alternative system of education would first decide what the young most need to know and what abilities they must cultivate to continue the work of our civilization. Then it would determine how these ends can best be pursued given the forces in being (including the selective use of established institutions for its own purposes). One fortunate circumstance is that what most urgently needs doing does not require an enormous capital investment: no atom smashers, no viral research laboratories.

As I have written elsewhere, a return to sex-segregated instruction would be a first positive step. This is less to protect the young women from the men than to protect the young men from the women. Above all, decent young men should not have to deal with psychotic feminists who treat them as presumptive rapists.

Furthermore, an all-male environment is desirable as a way of protecting their hearts and allowing them to concentrate on their studies free from the distractions of *eros*. We are constantly hearing how bad the sexual situation on campuses is for women – and indeed it is. But the greater concern for women is partly due to our natural tendency to be more protective of them, and partly because women simply complain more about it than men. I imagine there are plenty of young men who believe they have found love at school, only to see their paragon of feminine purity ditch them in favor of drunken fornication with the varsity quarterback. The difference is that men to whom such things happen do not get together to cry on each other's shoulders or stage marches to protest their oppression. This does not mean they are strangers to pain. The erotic passions are probably the strongest of which the human heart is capable, and academic work is most productive when they are kept at a distance. And, frankly speaking, today's spoiled, self-absorbed Western women are seldom suitable helpmeets for men or fit mothers for their children anyway.

Third, the male brain is wired differently from the female, so that the coeducational classroom cannot be optimized for their manner of learning (men enjoy the cut and thrust of heated debate, but tend to be impatient about mastering details, for example; women are the opposite in both respects).

Men also shy away from candor in the discussion of, e.g., certain works of literature when women are present; a single-sex environment allows them greater latitude of expression.

Finally, and most significantly, men's colleges are desirable because it is they, and not women, who will have to be the leaders in reestablishing our country and civilization.

For the most part, I favor a traditional curriculum, but this will have to be tempered by certain practical considerations based upon our current situation.

Yes, students must have a good knowledge of Western traditions; but they also need a clear understanding of the realities they will face now that these traditions have been largely abandoned. We do students a disservice, for example, if we teach them *The Federalist Papers*, but do not give them the means to see that this work no longer reflects the American government under which they are actually living. This is where many otherwise sound private liberal arts colleges fall short. There is a measure of truth in the old radicals' complaint that the curriculum isn't "relevant."

Young men need guidance in negotiating the funhouse world of feminist multicultural corporations, where manly forthrightness is punished. They should understand that access to most remunerative employment is ultimately controlled by persons who view them as enemies and oppressors, but who still expect them to generate the wealth to fund various ideological projects contrary to their own interests. Under these circumstances, they must be both shrewd and diplomatic. Chesterfield's *Letters* might be more valuable to them than most college textbooks. Outward conformity does not always amount to cowardice. There is such a thing as choosing one's battles, and if the end aimed at is trivial, some risks may not be worth it. On the other hand, a civilization cannot be saved by men unwilling to make any sacrifices.

They also require guidance in personal finance if they are not to squander on consumerist trash whatever pittance the tax collector allows them to keep. They should be taught about sex differences, traditional marriage, and the present extreme danger they face of falling into the maw of the divorce industry. They should be equipped with a sufficient knowledge of "human population genetics" to see egalitarian racial propaganda for what it is. Much of this is admittedly mere instruction (the conveying of information) rather than education in the strict and proper sense (the forming of the mind itself), but so is a lot of the traditional college curriculum. Moreover, it need not take the form of graded classroom instruction (though the thought is intriguing: "Interacting with Multicultural Commissars 101, Prof. Devlin, three credit hours").

For more capital intensive fields, such as medicine and natural sciences, our young will have to work within the system for some time to come. The same applies to advanced and specialized study in the humane disciplines; a clean break with established institutions may not yet be possible or necessary.¹⁵ What is essential is that the students' alma mater or spiritual home remain elsewhere.

11

It remains to consider the other half of the human race.

I am continually amazed to see horror expressed over the circumstance that college aged men are having sexual relations with college aged women. "Surely we must punish the culprits who are turning our campuses into brothels and preying upon innocent womanhood, must we not? Our young

women themselves must practice chastity and devote their attention to their studies, must they not?"

Well, no. In the great majority of cases, young women should be renouncing not sexual relations with men (formerly known as "marriage"), but academic work. In its place, we should draw up our own "Women's Studies" curriculum, involving the analysis of such texts as Spock's *Baby and Child Care* and *The Joy of Cooking*. This is not a radical proposal. Even granting (only for the sake of argument) that women are "equal" to men in the professions, the survival of our people still depends on someone bearing and nurturing infants: It is hardly likely to be men. Women must do not what they are equal at, but what they are superior at. Many of the young women I have observed in a university setting are severely deluded about themselves and their prospects in life. They are "B" and "C" students who imagine that glamorous careers in law and medicine are theirs for the asking, and that they will be able to marry and raise children in their spare time whenever they choose to do so. Feminism and prosperity have set them up for enormous disappointments, and they desperately need proper guidance, preferably from a "predator" (i.e., husband).

Worst of all, there are the lesbian recruitment programs known as Women's Studies. These courses are not merely doctrinally unsound; they are notoriously easy, fostering an illusion of accomplishment without effort. Many veterans of the feminist classroom seriously imagine they are the intellectual equals of persons who have successfully majored in theoretical physics or ancient Greek. It is even possible that the credentialism I criticized above is itself partly a product of female influence. I have heard more than one man remark on women's seeming faith in the talismanic value of college degrees. Again, this is a confusion between schooling and education.

I am emphatically not recommending that women's education be limited to domestic skills. These are not the highest accomplishments women should aim at, but they *are* the first and most necessary, the essential basis for all that follows. Further enculturation is actually more important for them now than in the past, since so many will have to educate their own children at home. To this end, I would especially like to see their attention devoted to literature and the arts. In contrast, much of the coursework they are actually taking is either worthless or harmful.

All effective reform in the area of women's education, however, is conditional upon the overthrow of the current divorce regime. Most women pick up their notions of right and wrong by example, and as long as wives are rewarded for abandoning their husbands, many will assume there is nothing wrong with doing so. No self-respecting man can accept a system in which the woman he is working to support can simply *take* his money and children from him by force and walk out. And, indeed, men are not accepting it any longer. There is no point in bringing women up to be mothers if men refuse to become fathers.

I will anticipate an objection to the foregoing proposals. A standard response of the “tenured radicals” to critics of university politicization runs like this: “You really just don’t like *our* politics; your opposition to us is itself merely a covert form of reactionary politics; hence, you are just as political as we are, the only difference being that we admit it while you are hypocrites.” Perhaps even some who sympathize with the aims I have in view might be suspicious of combining their pursuit with the educational process.

My response is twofold. In the first place, it is a matter of circumstance whether something is “political.” Homosexuality, e.g., was until fairly recently a matter of interest chiefly to psychiatrists; a campaign had to be waged to turn it into a political issue. Similarly, during most of human history, there was nothing political about sex differences. Only when a movement attacking the commonsense view emerged and gained power did these differences become a political matter. Today it will be, in a sense, “political” for us to teach the young about them. But that is only because the enemies of our civilization have worked long and hard to create a legal system based upon the denial of these long known realities. It is not our fault that others have elevated wishful thinking into a moral principle. (The case with teaching about racial differences is analogous.)

In the second place, I have never actually held the view that education should be “apolitical.” Higher education has long served partly to prepare leaders and citizens. Plato and Aristotle, among others, considered education one of the principal concerns of the statesman. Medieval universities were established partly to train public servants in canon law.

The essential point, as I see it, is that education not be reduced to the inculcation of preformulated beliefs and attitudes upon the young with the aim of fitting them into a political scheme. This is what our opponents are doing. They work from the premise that reality follows belief rather than vice versa. So, e.g., if impressionable youth is hermetically sealed away in a social-engineering laboratory and taught the doctrine of equality long enough, the result must be actual equality: Thinking will make it so. The indoctrinators consider the ends they aim at so important that the manner in which students’ beliefs and attitudes are shaped is comparatively trivial; demonization of those who disagree as “haters” is just as good as the presenting of information and reasoning. In effect, they are trying to make students into instruments of their own political will rather than treating them as independent rational creatures.

An objectionable response to this is conceivable – a program of counter-indoctrination, as it were. One might inculcate Russell Kirk’s six canons of conservative thought on students, grade them on their agreement, and bully dissenters into silence by calling them “commie pinkos.” That is not what I am advocating. Our sons and daughters are more than foot soldiers in a political

battle, even though the battle in question be for our survival. I merely favor directing them to the best information available upon subjects they will be frequently lied to about.

In any case, the doctrines of the egalitarians and multiculturalists are so flimsy that a relatively small amount of information is enough to enable most students to see through them. How much time can it possibly take away from traditional subject matter to show the young that race and sex are *not* “social constructs?” The project of our opponents, on the other hand, requires tireless and unceasing indoctrination, because its teachings are continually contradicted by observation.

Learning should seek reality, and action (including political action) be based on it. This is the education of free and rational human beings. It is not unconcerned with politics, but it leaves the future open rather than trying to draft students for the task of realizing somebody’s vision of “social justice.” It lays greater stress on cultivating students’ ability to form considered judgments than on transmitting particular correct judgments. Even under the strategy of cultural secession, one of the goals of education would remain the preparation of leaders, though this would not primarily mean holders of public office in the present regime.

It is important to grasp these distinctions, because there is nothing that would give the enemies of our civilization greater joy than for its defenders to believe education must be apolitical. This would be like a country responding to military invasion by adopting the teachings of pacifism.

Even in a society much poorer than ours, however, life is never exhausted in acquiring the means of living. Nor, even today, should it be wholly absorbed by the political struggle for a more humane regime for our people. The contemplation of truth, and right activity in accordance with truth—these are the timeless aims of education, and must never be lost sight of, whatever particular economic or political situation we are faced with.

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ENDNOTES

1. See, e.g., the essay “Academic Leisure,” included as chapter eight in Irving Babbitt’s *Literature and the American College* (Washington, DC: National Humanities Institute, 1986).
2. Charles Sykes’s *Profscam* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1988) is a good example of this tendency. The “nine hours” refers to classroom time, usually the least laborious part of a professor’s duties.

3. An outstanding analysis of the relevant historical background can be found in Robert Nisbet, *The Degradation of the Academic Dogma: The University in America 1945–1970* (New York: Basic Books, 1971).
4. Quoted on the cover of *Time* magazine, September 18, 1933, i.e., before the commission was formed, but already expressing the thinking behind it.
5. North, Gary, "Why the Job Market Is Slanted in Favor of College Graduates," September 3, 2004, <http://www.lewrockwell.com/north/north303.html>
6. *Republic* 563a-b, Bloom translation.
7. I follow the discussion of Cochin in François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 164–204. See also Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 129–132. Cochin will be of interest to all who, like the late Samuel Francis, want to understand the effectiveness of political ideas sociologically.
8. MacIntyre, Alasdair, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 263.
9. From an official petition to the king dated 1825, i.e., not as the Penal Laws were first being enacted, but after they had already been in effect for over a century! For the social reformer there are only tomorrows.
10. Walsh, John, "Hedge Schools," http://www.irish-society.org/Hedgemaster%20Archives/hedge_schools.htm.
11. Carleton, William, *Traits and Stories of Irish Peasantry*, 1830; quoted from <http://mockingbird.creighton.edu/english/micsun/IrishResources/carleton.htm>.
12. Eliot, T. S., *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949), 102–3.
13. Rosin, Hanna, "God and Country: a College That Trains Young Christians to Be Politicians," *New Yorker*, June 27, 2005, http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/articles/050627fa_fact
14. Nisbet, op. cit., 229.
15. The guerrilla student operating behind enemy lines can find invaluable guidance through the Intercollegiate Studies Institute of Wilmington, Delaware: <http://www.isi.org>