

The Ivory Battleground

A Survey of Recent Articles

The American university has become an ideological battlefield. While conservative critics lament assaults on the traditional canon and the "politicization" of the university, critics on the Left demand new courses designed to emphasize the historical achievements of women and minorities. Students, they complain, still overwhelmingly study the work of "white, European men."

Writing in the *Atlantic* (Sept. 1990), Caleb Nelson, of the *Public Interest*, cites the 1979 debut of Harvard's new core curriculum as a turning point in this debate. It was met with wild enthusiasm. "Not since 1945 had the academic world dared to devise a new formula for developing 'the educated man,'" declared the *Washington Post*. A former education editor of the *New York Times* hailed it recently as "the most exciting collection of academic offerings in all of American higher education." The Harvard core started a revolution, as other universities began copying it. Yet, writes Nelson, "the history of the core is a study in what's wrong with American universities."

The new program's focus on "shared relationships common to all people" represented a sharp departure from the goals of Harvard's influential 1945 "Redbook": "to create responsible democratic citizens, well versed in the heritage of the West and endowed with 'the common knowledge and the common values on which a free society depends.'" The idea of "general education" was abandoned, and courses in esoteric subjects, more congenial to professors' research interests, proliferated. Thus, the course "Epic and Novel" was replaced by "The Imagery of the Modern Metropolis: Pictorial and Literary Representations of New York and Berlin from 1880 to 1940"; "Principles of Physical Science" gave way to "Plants and Biological Principles in Human Affairs."

Harvard downplayed the teaching of Western culture, under the (laughable) assumption that many students had already

learned "the facts" in high school. The hard sciences were neglected. Considered more important were courses aimed at inculcating an "appreciation" of other cultures. As a result, Nelson says, such influential authors as Virgil, Milton, and Dostoevsky are absent from the core's literature courses. "The philosophy behind the core," Nelson concludes, "is that educated people are not those who have read many books and have learned many facts but rather those who could analyze facts if they should ever happen to encounter any."

But higher education's decline began a century ago, not in 1979, asserts Thomas Fleming, the editor of *Chronicles* (Sept. 1990). He says that the classical curriculum of ancient Greece—literature, the arts, mathematics, and public speaking, as well as contemporary "social mechanics"—remained largely intact for centuries. Even our American forebears, he writes, "saw themselves in the mirror of antiquity; it was not by some historical accident that Jefferson and Adams and Madison turned constantly to ancient examples in their deliberations on the best form of government."

By the early 20th century, however, educational reformers in American universities abandoned Latin and ancient Greek to make room for new general courses in the humanities and sciences. In the following decades, Fleming laments, "what had been a coherent curriculum, refined by experience and precedent, turned into a grab bag of electives, whose only shape was determined by a loose set of core requirements." Now, he says, New Left activists have entrenched themselves in university women's and ethnic studies departments, where they practice "critical theory" and clamor for "diversity" and "inclusion" of minorities. But Fleming doubts that they genuinely seek an appreciation of non-Western cultures. "That would require a serious study of difficult foreign languages, anthropology, and religion."

Encouraging Homelessness

"What Really Causes Family Homelessness?" by Randall K. Filer, in *NY* (Autumn 1990), 42 E. 71 St., New York, N.Y. 10021.

To many New Yorkers, daily encounters with homeless people sleeping in door-

ways, roaming Central Park, or panhandling suggest a problem of crisis propor-

Rather, he says, they merely vent "militant resentment" against Western culture.

One result, Edward Alexander, a professor of English at the University of Washington, says in *Commentary* (Nov. 1990) is an epidemic of "race fever" on campus. "Official committees on 'racism and cultural diversity,' departmental commissioners of moral sanitation, and freelance vigilantes are in a state of high alert for signs (real or alleged) of 'racism,'" he scolds. At the University of Wisconsin and other schools, new rules prohibit "discriminatory speech." As punishment for singing *We Shall Overcome* in what was deemed a sarcastic manner, one Southern Methodist University freshman recently was sentenced by the university to 30 hours of community service.

Citing Matthew Arnold, the great English critic of the 19th century, Alexander argues that the ideal of the university is "predicated on the assumption that values which originate in the self or the group or the nation can be extradited and made available to those who share with the originators nothing except the human status." To demand "representation," he insists, is fatuous; to teach Western civilization, is hardly to "oppress" students. It is ironic, he writes, that self-styled "progressive" professors call for a "celebration of diversity" while acting as thought police.

Conservative critics such as Alexander really don't mean that universities have been corrupted by politics, counters Louis Menand, of Queens College. They only mean, he writes in the *New Republic* (July 9&16, 1990), that "they have been corrupted by the wrong kind of politics."

"The notion that the function of a liberal arts education ought to be to teach and affirm the values of bourgeois liberal democracy" is ridiculous, he says. If university courses should strive to cover the breadth of human thought and teach students to think critically, as Nelson, Fleming, and Alexander suggest, then they must include much

that is unsympathetic to the democratic tradition. In fact, Menand argues, Matthew Arnold, whom Alexander holds up as a model, valued the disinterested study of liberal arts not because it promoted democratic ideals but precisely because "he thought it might operate as a countervailing force *against* the tendencies of democratic society" to place the marketplace over culture.

Fleming argues that requiring students to read the ancient Greek and Latin texts—in the original—would be a good first step toward curriculum reform. Nelson would settle for a core curriculum that doesn't "sacrifice content in order to preserve consensus." Alexander favors a revival of Arnold's principles. But Menand believes that such solutions miss the point. Yes, the university is ailing, he says, but faculty radicalism isn't to blame. The modern research university, born a century ago, has *always* been mediocre. It rests on the belief that "knowledge develops by the accumulation of research findings, brick piled onto brick, until the arch of knowledge about a field stands clearly defined."

Today, Menand continues, "vast quantities of bricks are produced . . . but they are simply thrown onto the heap. No one expects a wall to rise up." Narrow specialists rule. It is a situation that breeds cynicism and intellectual conformity. Menand cheers the insurgent critics—feminists, deconstructionists, and others—who have temporarily upset things, but laments that most have already "set up for business peddling pieties of their own."

There is a sense, however, in which Menand and his more conservative antagonists agree. Their common enemies, after all, are the narrow specialists who have seized control of the curriculum and the classroom. As long as the curriculum is sliced into esoteric bits and students are funneled into narrow academic channels, they seem to agree, it will be hard for universities to produce much more than the proverbial herd of independent minds.



tions. And it is, says Filer, an economist at Hunter College, but not of the kind or for the reasons most people think.

According to a 1984 survey, there are about 1.4 homeless single adults per 1,000

residents in New York—one third the rate of 20 other large American cities. Curiously, though, New York has more than double the rate of family homelessness than these cities.

Neither of the two explanations commonly given for this anomaly—a shortage of affordable housing and more “at risk” families—adequately accounts for the problem. Between 1983 and 1987, the city’s welfare housing allowance rose by 25 percent and the supply of cheap apartments was as great as in other cities, yet the number of homeless families rose steadily. New York families are more vulnerable, Filer concedes. But while there are 30 to 50 percent more poor, female-headed families in New York than in other large cities, the city’s family homeless rate is 250 percent higher.

Filer suggests a third, perverse possibility: New York’s generous homeless and housing policies *encourage* families to become homeless.

Since 1984, becoming homeless has been a good way for a family to jump to the top of the monumental waiting list for public housing. Moreover, Filer writes, becoming homeless increases income, especially “if the family is able to secure place-

ment in a hotel room rather than a city shelter.” In 1987, a poor family of four in its own home typically received \$326 in welfare each month, a housing allowance of \$270, and \$62 in food stamps. If the same family became homeless and was assigned to a hotel room, Filer points out, it would receive additional transportation and restaurant allowances worth more than \$362 a month. (Overall, the city spends \$25,000 annually on each sheltered homeless person; Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, and Philadelphia spend an average of \$5,500.) Not surprisingly, in 1985 more than half of New York’s homeless families said that they would accept only an apartment or hotel room as shelter.

Filer argues that contrary to popular wisdom, providing more housing will only increase the number of homeless families. Since 1987, he notes, family homelessness has been dropping steadily in New York. Not coincidentally, the city began cutting back the number of hotel rooms available for homeless families four years ago.

PRESS & TELEVISION

*Biting the Hand
That Feeds*

“Sex, Lies & Advertising” by Gloria Steinem, in *Ms.* (July–Aug. 1990), One Times Square, New York, N.Y. 10036.

“If *Time* and *Newsweek* had to lavish praise on cars in general and credit General Motors in particular to get GM ads, there would be a scandal—maybe a criminal investigation. When women’s magazines from *Seventeen* to *Lear’s* praise beauty products in general and credit Revlon in particular to get ads, it’s just business as usual.”

So writes Gloria Steinem, founding editor of *Ms.*, in the premier issue of the feminist magazine’s latest incarnation in a new, no-ads format.

When she started *Ms.* in 1972, Steinem was appalled to discover that many advertisers would buy space only on the condition that the magazine run “complementary” articles alongside their products and mention their products by name in ar-

ticles. Pillsbury, Kraft, and other food manufacturers refused to advertise with *Ms.* because the magazine didn’t print recipes. Cosmetic companies such as L’Oreal and Estee Lauder demanded that the magazine run a “beauty tips” column to put readers in the right “frame of mind” to buy their products. (Steinem says that a cover story on Soviet women undid years of negotiating to get Revlon cosmetic ads: The Soviet women on the cover weren’t wearing makeup.) Other large companies, such as Procter & Gamble, wouldn’t place ads in any women’s magazine that included articles on gun control or abortion, among other hot topics.

Many women’s magazines are nothing more than “giant ads,” Steinem laments. Of 326 pages in the May 1990 edition of