

THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

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The Morally Perplexed Academy

A Survey of Recent Articles

For all its wealth and prosperity, the American university seems a bit troubled these days, not at all sure just what its true purpose is. “What’s the University for?” ask the editors of the *Hedgehog Review** (Fall 2000), in an issue devoted to that subject. “We continue to invoke the old, inspiring ideas concerning the purposes of higher education . . . but against the realities of the 21st century they have lost much of their ring,” the editors say.

The “culture wars” over the state of academe have been raging for years now, of course. While resistance to the conservative critique of “political correctness” seems to remain strong, some professors now question the typical liberal response—that, in effect, all is well in academe. If the once-cherished aims of liberal education—to produce enlightened individuals and good citizens—are now looked upon with skepticism, they ask, then what, if anything, is to replace them? There is worry, too, say the *Hedgehog Review* editors, that “the growing necessity of higher education for socioeconomic success” may be leading the university astray, prompting it to treat students as “consumers,” offering them “information and entertainment,” not “education or wisdom.”

The conservative critics of the university pledge allegiance to the older ideals of liberal education. In their view, vigorously expressed in Roger Kimball’s *Tenured Radicals* (1990), Dinesh D’Souza’s *Illiberal Education* (1991), and other well-known books, the university is suffering from a malady derived from the noxious New Left radicalism of the 1960s. Instead of disinterested research and the traditional liberal arts education, the academy, they charge, too often now provides slanted scholarship and ideological indoctrination.

“Conservative charges of anti-intellectualism have some merit,” concedes Jackson Lears, a historian at Rutgers University. Lazy professors with “some predictable thesis” now trick it out in “conceptual verbiage, the meat-grinder approach to theory,” invoking talismanic names such as Gramsci, Foucault, and Lacan. Meanwhile, academics of “vaguely postmodern leftist sentiment” celebrate “corporate-sponsored entertainment,” dismissing as “elitist” any intellectual or aesthetic judgment against it. That dismissal, says Lears, “is precisely the opposite of what liberal education is all about.”

But Lears defends “the postmodern challenge to positivist orthodoxy and the enactment of multiculturalism.” Both, he avers, “are rooted” in the liberal arts tradition. “Multi-

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culturalism at its best,” for instance, “is about expanding the kinds of evidence we typically look at in the classroom. . . . Who could object to that?”

As he sees it, both sides in the culture wars have ignored “the chief threat to intellectual freedom in the academy,” which comes from the university’s own administrators. “The main menace,” Lears says, “is market-driven managerial influence.” The increasing use of part-time and temporary faculty is symptomatic. In “a cultural climate that encourages professors to think like entrepreneurs,” the historian writes, universities must “refuse to tailor their research agendas to the needs of industry, and reassert the core value of the liberal arts tradition: the pursuit of truth for its own sake.”

The more typical liberal response to the conservative critique has been simply dismissive—and toothless, says Russell Jacoby, a leftist critic and author of *The Last Intellectuals* (1987). “In the liberal view, education has proceeded swimmingly; it has become more diverse, multicultural, and exciting, which only crabby conservatives fail to fathom.” Strangely, he notes, “liberals and leftists, once critics of the establishment, have become its defenders.”

Philosopher Richard Rorty, a professor emeritus at the University of Virginia and the author of *Philosophy and Social Hope* (2000) and other works, seems a case in point. “If I were writing a history of the American university,” he declares, “I would tell an upbeat story about the gradual replacement of the churches by the universities as the conscience of the nation.”

Rorty’s history is not very accurate, comments Julie A. Reuben, a professor of education at Harvard University and the author of *The Making of the Modern University* (1996). Historically, the university has *not* been the nation’s moral conscience, particularly if “promotion of progressive politics” is the criterion.

The men who created the modern research university in the late 19th century, she says, expected that the research “would solve moral problems—it would provide authoritative instruction on how to live and how to shape a more perfect society.” But

within a generation, it became clear that this would not be easy. Instead of developing a moral consensus, the biological and social sciences produced “seemingly endless disagreements about basic theories.” Many professors wanted to wash their hands of moral concerns.

Although hidden by the university’s “success . . . in producing knowledge and training skilled professionals,” this problem of morality “continues to plague American higher education,” Reuben believes. “Universities have been unable either to fully incorporate morality or to comfortably abandon a moral mission.”

In the mid-1960s, New Left activists forced that contradiction into the open, contending that the nature of the university’s intellectual life, with knowledge presented in disconnected bits by supposedly disinterested specialists, “discouraged students from asking important questions.” The university’s scholarship, they said, was not really neutral, but served the interests of the reviled establishment. In recent decades, postmodernist scholars have elaborated the rap against “claims of neutrality,” Reuben says, but nobody has come to grips with the need to transcend relativism and define the moral purpose of the university’s scholarship.

Universities today are lacking not in moral concern but in moral coherence, contends George Marsden, a historian at the University of Notre Dame. Long “essentially liberal Protestant institutions,” American universities became in the latter half of the past century more inclusive and tolerant. But this great accomplishment has come at the price of moral incoherence. The moral foundation has fragmented. The virtue of tolerance, for instance, “will not bear anything like the moral weight that is put on it in our public culture” today.

What is to be done? Marsden suggests that universities should become even *more* inclusive and diverse—that is, “more open to identifiably religious perspectives.” Adding more scholars from the Catholic, Orthodox Jewish, Muslim, Evangelical Protestant, and African-American Christian traditions would not solve the university’s moral problem, he says, but “it would do some good.”