



Is “the Right-wing” Responsible for Neglect of the Liberal Arts?

Just hours before writing this, some colleagues of mine at a local community college in New Jersey where I teach philosophy were busy lamenting their students’ utter lack of interest in the liberal arts. Indeed, the phenomenon to which my colleagues refer is one of which educators everywhere are all too familiar.

My colleagues are correct to recognize it for the tragedy that it is. Even more tragic, though, is that their analysis of the problem is a function of the problem itself.

According to them, the reason why college students have zero interest in reading Shakespeare, Plato, or any of the classics of Western civilization is because of developments that transpired within American society during the last couple of decades. The name Bill Bennett — secretary of education under Ronald Reagan — was dropped during their conversation. One of the speakers also referred to a mutually antagonistic relationship between “free market capitalism” and liberal learning. “Right wing radio,” too, was identified as one of the culprits behind the state of neglect to which the liberal arts have been reduced.



Summed up, what my colleagues basically said is that roughly since the time of Reagan’s presidency, non-leftists have succeeded in affecting a radical paradigm shift in higher education. Thanks to right-wingers’ efforts, the contemporary university has transformed itself from a place of classical liberal learning to one that is now modeled on the pattern of a business. Courtesy of “the right wing,” with its commitment to “free market capitalism,” the university no longer exists to promote knowledge for its own sake. It now exists for the sake of promoting its students’ careers.

That the university is in a state of ill repair is undoubtedly true. And that there is a sense in which students are treated as customers is equally true.

But the proposition that it is those on the Right — Republicans! — who have managed to visit all of these changes upon, of all places, academia, and only within the last 20 to 30 years, is just laughable on its face.



Written by [Jack Kerwick, Ph.D.](#) on September 21, 2012

The university has been and remains a bastion of leftism. Any analysis of the state of education today that fails to mention this stone cold fact is fatally flawed. Any analysis that both fails to mention this and which lays the blame for all of the challenges facing higher education solely at the feet of those on the political Right is preposterous.

In reality, there are many things that account for the poverty of imagination from which far too many of our college students suffer.

First, it is true, I think, that what my colleagues call “free market capitalism” indeed has something to do with students’ anti-intellectualism. But this is just another way of saying that, from its inception, America herself may not have been the most hospitable clime within which to foster a love for the liberal arts.

“Free market capitalism,” mind you, is not an “ism” at all, for “free market capitalism,” strictly speaking, no more exists than does some thing called “the weather.” Rather, in America, where liberty has historically been prized above all other goods, what we have had is a set of institutional arrangements that diffuse power and authority widely. One way — the only way — to insure this is by seeing to it that every individual citizen has a right to private property.

“Capitalism” refers to nothing more or less than a situation comprised of countless people exercising their property rights.

That is, “free market capitalism” is nothing more or less than freedom.

Now, that being said, freedom — as Americans have traditionally conceived it — may very well inhibit students’ interest in the liberal arts. America, after all, is a relatively new country, a country that prided itself on parting ways from the ancient traditions of the mother continent of Europe. It is not by accident that as American freedom grew in favor so too did the notion of “practical knowledge” grow among Americans.

In glaring contrast, the classical ideal of liberal learning affirms knowledge for its own sake — not the sake of some material satisfaction regarding which knowledge is a mere means.

Second, the liberal arts presuppose a particular orientation toward time. More specifically, since they compose the inheritance that is our civilization, to study the liberal arts is, necessarily, to center our attention primarily upon the past. This doesn’t preclude present enjoyment, but it is utterly incompatible with the obsessive focus on the future that marks those “capitalists” who are beholden to the god of “practical knowledge.”

Ironically, though, the “capitalist’s” leftist critics, like my colleagues, are just as obsessed with the future as is the object of their critique.

Leftist professors tend to be activists. Not unlike “the capitalists” who they despise, their eyes are always looking off into the future, for it is in the future where the next utopia is to be found. And because this as-yet-unrealized promised land requires for its realization a particular set of political arrangements, what this means is that the leftist professor, in being an activist, can’t resist politicizing education.

But politics is as topical and transitory as any enterprise, and the political activist is as preoccupied with the next achievement as are consumers and entrepreneurs (i.e., “capitalists”).

When the activist turns toward the past and the present at all, it is for the purpose of conscripting them into the service of bringing to fruition the future of which he dreams.



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Whether, then, we are dealing with “free market capitalists” or leftist academics, it appears that the classical ideal of learning for its own sake — the principle of the liberal arts — is obsolete.

There is, though, another respect in which students’ disinterest in the liberal arts may just be one of the leftist academic’s chickens coming home to roost.

Both academic and popular leftists have labored inexhaustibly to convince the inhabitants of the Western world that their civilization is incorrigibly oppressive. And this is but another way of saying that the whites, the white men especially, with whom it had historically been identified, are evil.

But if Western civilization is the cesspool that leftists make it out to be and if whites are responsible for the lion’s share of wickedness in the world, then on what basis can we convince the young (or anyone else) that Western civilization is something to be learned and preserved? On what grounds can we hope to persuade them that some of the most wicked men in the world — such dead white males as Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Shakespeare, Canterbury, etc. — are fonts of wisdom and virtue?

In politicizing the study of the liberal arts by making it all about the study of racial, gender, and class oppression, the academic leftist has chopped off his proverbial nose to spite his face.

If we truly wish to understand the condition of the liberal arts today, we need to abandon the silly notion that the American Right or Republicans have anything to do with it.

This, in turn, means that we need to know a thing or two about the larger American culture, yes, but, even more importantly, the leftist ideologues who teach the liberal arts.



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