

## About Consumerist Education

*Paul Gottfried*

The growing and increasingly crass commercialization of American higher education is an amply documented phenomenon, and one that receives continuing empirical and anecdotal verification. It is, furthermore, a problem that draws notice from across the political spectrum, from social democrat Russell Jacobi to neoconservatives and libertarians, to the few paleoconservatives who still struggle to get by in the academy. While the attribution of causes may vary from blaming corporate capitalism to lamenting the government's colonization of American schools, critics of consumer education seem agreed about particular aspects of the scandal. Universities are becoming theme parks that offer virtual learning or a marketable "college experience," consisting of pop therapy, the acquisition of souvenirs and college logos, and the chance for casual sex in a conveniently coed environment. Professors see themselves, or are urged by administrators to do so, as purveyors of customer service, while academic management routinely refers to students and their parents as consumers or customers. In a recent exuberant celebration of the American twentieth century, *It's Getting Better* (Washington, D.C.: Cato, 2000), Steven Moore and Julian Simon cite the widespread availability of college degrees as a hallmark of human advancement. While I shall grant to these euphoric authors the polio vaccine and cardio-vascular dilators, my reaction to their hymns to academic progress is "you must be kidding!" Moore and Simon might have saved themselves embarrassment by looking harder at what now passes for college education.

And, for those who haven't noticed, educational consumerism and its ramifications are no longer exclusively American. They have surfaced in other Western societies, with the growth in these places of consumer economies, government entitlements, and the attendant competition for student bodies among postsecondary schools. In Europe the percentage of secondary-school students going on to universities has doubled or tripled in the last twenty-five years, while the number of institutions set up to accommodate them has grown astride. The French have given up looking for new names for these *pâtés universitaires* and have taken to numbering them as extensions of older institutions: whence the designations of Lyons 1,2,3,4.

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Most past socialist or self-described Marxist regimes never built anything even vaguely resembling the educational theme parks we recognize as ours. Because education is made more or less available to citizens or subjects in a socialist country does not mean that all students should receive the same degrees or be allowed to spend the same time at the same educational level. Socialist countries in the past paid for schooling, but also expected students to operate in a tightly structured and painfully disciplined environment. Those who could not hack competitive exams often landed up in menial jobs, and in Communist countries, no less than in ancient Sparta, the individual's education was made to conform to what rulers understood as the social good. The once popular cartoon from the 1970s that depicts an American Maoist professor making his surprised classroom do morning calisthenics underlines this difference between revolutionary garrison socialism and American therapeutic consumer culture. The two are entirely distinct, and the belief expressed by some libertarians, that political collectivism suffices to explain American academic abuses, misses part of the picture.

What it leaves out is the therapeutic and consumerist sides of the American egalitarian faith. The purpose of my school and of other similar ones, I've been told, is to make student-customers "feel comfortable about who they are," though supposedly designated minorities have a greater right to feel good about themselves than do the rest of us. The reason some people do better in life than others, I've also heard said, is their access to income and, above all, to self-esteem, which insures lifetime success. Moreover, education is a human right, as Presidents Clinton and Bush and former Vice-President Gore have repeatedly reminded us and as most Americans polled seem to believe. It is also a right we can expect to have bestowed on us, along with degrees that, however devalued, are viewed as essential for individual dignity and which provide access to jobs. These miscellaneous jobs toward which we are supposed to steer kids carry with them inflated formal qualifications, a situation that results in having college degrees devalued even further. A vast literature, contributed to by Philip Rieff, James K. Nolan, Jonathan Imber, and myself, investigates these and other manifestations of a now general therapeutic culture. It is necessary to take into account this cultural and psychological condition for any comprehensive understanding of our present society and educational institutions.

These therapeutic attitudes may coexist with economic collectivism, and today's European socialist parties are active in promoting more accessible education, together with multiculturalism, for socialized citizens. The now ruling socialist coalition in Sweden is proposing that everyone in the country be allowed to enter any educational institution or vocational school, providing (for the moment) that the matriculator can do the assigned work. But such a policy, as noted by some European critics, is not an extension of what socialism used to be: e.g., the politics of workers' solidarity and the national-

ization of productive forces. A change on the left came along dramatically in the 1980s, when the membership of workers' movements fell precipitously and when European socialists began to imitate, in the words of an editorialist writing in the French journal *La Croix* (12 March 1987), "the American media-academic axis," by featuring sentimental egalitarianism without Marxist baggage.

Capitalism as an economic system does not explain by itself the educational problem being considered. It is possible, after all, to develop a free-market economy that provides multitudinous consumer choices, without giving rise to the beliefs that everyone is entitled to a college "experience" and, eventually, to a baccalaureate, and that these gifts are essential for self-esteem. In 1960 when I was in college, only about a quarter of today's percentage of college-bound high school graduates went on to a four-year postsecondary school. It was assumed at that time that not everyone was college material. Indeed some people were just more scholastically inclined than others, but those of a non-academic bent could lead productive lives without succumbing to low self-regard. If one asked me whether I would prefer spending the next six years of my already advanced life studying chemical engineering or working at something less lucrative that interested me more, certainly I would have no problem choosing the second. What is less comprehensible is that classes are now full of students who couldn't care less about academic learning but are kept in school through profit-accruing tricks, e.g., multiplying "hands-on" vocational curricula, making faculty salary depend on favorable student evaluations, or by having administrators browbeat anxious "learning-facilitators" into passing classroom mannequins. Such arrangements barely existed forty years ago; yet in 1960 the U.S. government was far smaller, the tax burden lower, and public regulation of the economy generally less pervasive. In spite of these signs of a relatively freer economy, our colleges had not yet become the consumerist smog zone they later would. Other factors would have to intervene before colleges became shameless big business, promoted ironically by the putative despisers of economic and other bourgeois freedoms. Driving the educational debasement associated with consumerism is a cult of self-esteem, and both an expanding government and a tasteless market have contributed to its flourishing.

What I do not see as a primarily academic problem, though it is compatible with consumerist education, is multicultural ideology. Though a disagreeable phenomenon, on which I am soon coming out with a disquieting book, it is far too widespread in contemporary Western societies to be treated as a professorial sideshow. It is an outgrowth of both academic and non-academic cultural forces, including liberal Christianity and the preoccupation with self-esteem, especially for designated victims. Moreover, public administration is now pushing multicultural education upon schools that receive government funding; and, as Lino Graglia notes in his studies on the legal and teaching

implications of affirmative action, it is hard to figure out where administrative control stops and obsessive academics have rushed in to take over. It may be anyone's guess in some situations whether government administrators or these academic ideologues are more responsible for the "reaching out" being performed on our campuses. To draw a deliberately offensive comparison, it may be like looking at the enactment of Nazi educational policies at German universities that had been divested of "non-Aryan elements." The political and academic authorities simply melted together in a seamless ideological solidarity.

There is also evidence, however, that colleges and universities have featured multicultural slogans and diversity policies in response to external conditions. Schools must deal with the Department of Education and the Justice Department, both of which force educational institutions to promote multicultural studies while recruiting "minorities" and creating for them "non-hostile environments." To the extent a school can be shown to be taking public money directly or indirectly, especially from the federal government, it must be in compliance with a multiplicity of minority guidelines. Whatever may be the private scruples of the educators involved, they will have to do what the state commands or face the draining consequences. Accrediting organizations back the same programs, and the Middle States agency with which I'm familiar seems perpetually dissatisfied with the progress in diversity shown by the institutions it evaluates. What is more, multicultural studies are extremely useful in running a diploma-mill that leaves customers unstressed. These types of studies should never be confused with traditional investigations of women's history or with any methodical and dispassionate examination of black societies in the U.S. or anywhere else. What we are talking about is the giving of sensitive opinions and the coddling of victims, activities that do not entail the painstaking accumulation of facts or the mastery of research skills but can be presented as academic work. Such "learning," together with endless internships, can be made to yield tuitions, along with self-esteem for the intellectually limited and emotionally insecure. Like the armies described by Napoleon, American universities travel on their stomachs. They therefore value diversity as a saleable product. And by being liberally sprinkled through core and liberal arts curricula, it can help remove the unpleasantness of real learning, for which many college-consumers have neither an aptitude nor taste.

A relevant question suggested by Anne Matthews in her extensive study of the endowment resources of major American universities, *Bright College Years*, concerns how much of this documented wealth is earmarked for minority victims. This question is very much to the point if one considers both the billions of dollars in which our leading universities are awash and their expressed concern about victimized minorities and the need to reach out to them. The presidents of several Ivy League institutions profusely praised the federal appellate court that upheld the minority quota system enforced at the

University of Michigan. Harvard's former president, Neil L. Rudenstine, was especially effusive about minority quotas being a moral statement. But oratory may be that and little else! Yale University can easily double the size of its freshmen class and award many more scholarships to poor minority members each year. Given the fact that it can educate its present first-year class by drawing on interest from its endowments without touching the endowments themselves, it seems that Yale or Harvard or Princeton or Penn can comfortably spend on outreach far more than it does. The 12 or 13 percent of admissions Ivy League institutions set aside for minorities is not a big deal. That is more than offset by the public funding these schools receive for operational and capital expenses.

Note that I am not a fan, if I might engage in meiosis, of diversity grandstanding—or of the pious lie that we have not found all the Einsteins in the inner cities by not “recruiting” sufficiently. I am seeking only to make the point that a glaring disproportion is in evidence between what academic administrators say about diversity and how much they really sacrifice for this principle. I mention affluent, elite schools not because of resentment that they've never asked me to work there, but because they best illustrate my argument. Institutions that have the means to represent multiculturalism as a living post-Christian faith are not living their witness as much as they would like us to believe. They behave more or less like other profit-driven enterprises that have to deal with the feds and cater to a late modern therapeutic sensibility. In this respect, academic hucksters are like other commercial adventurers. Their noisy support for affirmative action corresponds to what corporate heads now say on the subject. And the workforce in both cases goes along with the statements of corporate heads, though at least among college faculty, as shown in published surveys by the National Association of Scholars, a majority express very private reservations. And, unlike the corporate types I've known, an outspoken minority of justly disgruntled academics notices and raises hell about the controls being imposed. My wife asks me, “Why complain? Colleges are an American business.” My habitual response is “That's true, but I happen to be involved in this particular form of commerce.”