

Books, Articles, and Items of Academic Interest

Compiled, with Commentary, by Carol Iannone

The Great Tradition

Jacques Barzun rejoices the heart with two short essays that elegantly and succinctly define the elements of real education. “What Is a School: An Institution in Limbo” and “Trim the College: A Utopia,” collected in pamphlet form (Hudson Institute 2002) and available from the American Academy of Liberal Education.

Important Issues

Edward Alexander discusses disturbing efforts to boycott Israeli academics from certain professional activities, “The Academic Boycott of Israel: Back to 1933?” *Jerusalem Post* (3 January 2003). Another piece by Alexander in the same publication examines the arguments of three academics who have offered intellectual rationalizations for mass murder by suicide in the name of Islam (10 January 2003).

The American Jewish Committee reversed its long-standing opposition to affirmative action and filed a friend of the court brief in support of the University of Michigan. This action, writes author Charles Lane in the *Washington Post*, “demonstrates the degree to which many American Jews have gradually decided that admissions policies designed to boost minority enrollment do not threaten their own hard-won foothold in elite colleges and graduate schools.” According to Alan Dershowitz, interviewed for the article, Jews worried about the possibility of a new “Jewish quota” after *Bakke*. “We feared that our hard-earned right to be admitted on the merits would be taken away. The WASP quotient would be held constant, and the Jews and African Americans would be left to fight over the crumbs. What happened is that Jews have become the WASPs. They are among the dominant groups on campus, in terms of numbers.”

So it does not matter that the “right to be admitted on the merits” is being denied to many *other* white students? The position of the American Jewish Committee is based solely on ethnic-group self-interest and not principle? This is painful and distressing to contemplate if not downright contemptible. Fortunately, the article continues, “Abraham H. Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, said his organization is sticking to its

'principled position' that people should not be judged by skin color, and any use of race in admissions is unconstitutional." "Critics of Affirmative Temper Their Opposition: Jewish Group Supports University of Michigan in New Case" (22 December 2002).

Race Smarts

In a two-part article, "Quota 'Logic,'" Thomas Sowell eviscerates James McPherson's foolish breast-beating over having been the recipient of the "affirmative action" that favored "white males" of his generation. For such an eminent historian to disparage his own achievements in this way in order to relieve his misplaced guilt feelings and "sacrifice other people to his vision of undeserved good fortune," as Sowell puts it, is morally reprehensible. "This is classic academic self-indulgence in the name of noblesse oblige," Sowell wittily remarks. "Professor McPherson can get credit for noblesse and force someone else to pay the cost of oblige White guilt may be fashionable in some quarters, but the only people it helps are those whites who want to become saints on the cheap and those blacks who have learned to hustle guilty whites." Sowell advises anyone who wants to extend the same benefits to others that he has enjoyed to "become serious about developing the same abilities in others—that is, raising them up to the same standards, not bringing the standards down to them." At *townhall.com* (22 and 23 April 2003).

In a similar spirit, James H. McWhorter continues his stunning dissections of diversity ideology. In "The Campus Diversity Fraud," he insists that "black students will only reach their full potential if the affirmative-action safety net is withdrawn"; skewers the idea that diversity is promoting "interracial camaraderie" on campuses ("In truth, 'diverse' college campuses are among the most racially balkanized places in America"); and praises the new race-blind admissions systems in which "black students know that they are as qualified academically as other students on campus." *City Journal* (Winter 2002).

In "Who Should Get into College," *City Journal* (Spring 2003), McWhorter observes that at the schools where he has taught, the quota system was obvious. At Berkeley, he relates, an "older white professor, an avowed leftist, confided in me that since the early 1970s black students had done badly in his classes so often that he had found himself viewing any black student who appeared on the first day of class as a potential problem. A white remedial-composition tutor observed that he had worked with so many minority students hopelessly underprepared for Berkeley-level work that he had found himself questioning the wisdom of racial preferences, despite his leftist persuasion. Professors across the country have expressed similar views to me."

McWhorter regrets that even some conservatives are uncomfortable with colorblindness, citing the Bush administration's amicus brief in the Michigan case, "which though it views the Michigan admissions policy as an un-

constitutional quota system, still contemplates school officials 'taking race into account.'" But, McWhorter insists, "25 years of *Bakke* show that, in practice, even a hint that race can be 'a' factor in admissions will give college administrators, ever eager to Do the Right Thing, the go-ahead to continue fostering a second-tier class-within-a-class of . . . minorities on their campuses." Imagine what twenty-five years of *Grutter* will bring.

Jonathan Kay, "The Scandal of Diversity," *Commentary* (June 2003), illustrates the baneful results of affirmative action, when racial differences in performance emerged in the competition for law review and caused consternation, embarrassment, resentment, defensiveness, and self-censorship.

Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates (2003), is John U. Ogbu's meticulous and long-awaited study of the gap in racial achievement in the high schools of Shaker Heights, Ohio, as due to a culture of disdain for educational aspiration. An informative review by Peter Wood, "The Norm of Minimum Effort," can be found at *frontpagemagazine.com* (May 28, 2003).

Meanwhile, two articles in the *New York Times*, meant to offer support for affirmative action, inadvertently offer startling evidence against it. Jodi Wilgoren, "Where Race Matters," *New York Times, Education Life* supplement (13 April 2003), and Jeffrey Rosen, "How I Learned to Love Quotas," *New York Times Magazine* (1 June 2003).

Scientist Gets Humility

Michael Brooks, "The Impossible Puzzle," *New Scientist* (5 April 2003). Renowned physicist Stephen Hawking, who once suggested we might "know the mind of God," now has doubts about a "theory of everything," that is, what is now known as "string theory." Brooks reports Hawking's telling a California audience, "Up to now, most people have implicitly assumed that there is an ultimate theory that we will eventually discover. Indeed, I myself have suggested we might find it quite soon." But, Hawking continued diffidently, "[m]aybe it is not possible to formulate the theory of the Universe in a finite number of statements."

The Depredations of Theory

"The Latest Theory Is That Theory Doesn't Matter," *New York Times* (19 April 2003), Emily Eakin. Postmodernists reportedly lament that their theorizing has failed to exert an influence on society, notably, to prevent the recent war in Iraq. Cheer up, fellows. You have helped advance a culture of cynicism, relativism, and nihilism; torn down intellectual, educational, literary, and

artistic standards; and destroyed the college experience as an encounter with great books and great minds. Not bad for a few decades of work.

A dispiriting reminder that pornographic works are being taught in the American university appeared in a brief item in the *TLS* (25 April 2003). The item notes the publication of *Launching Fanny Hill*, a collection of essays on John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, and singles out "Teaching *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*," by Kirsten Saxton of Mills College, California. Saxton reports that some of her students are "appalled" and "embarrassed" at the sexual explicitness of this work, but evidently she is so far advanced into "cultural studies" and such questions as "What do you make of Fanny's response to the gay scene?" that she is beyond shame.

We learn that Cornel West makes a cameo appearance in the new, much-discussed film, *The Matrix Reloaded*, in which he utters the line, "Comprehension is not requisite for cooperation." This phrase is now appearing on T-shirts in Los Angeles, no doubt worn by the deluded graduates of the postmodern academy who evidently do not "comprehend" the sinister implications of that sentence. Even worse, perhaps they do.