

ARTICLES

Pluralizing the Monoculture

Stephen H. Balch

The National Association of Scholars is now entering its twentieth year. Those 20 years have witnessed a host of changes, both within our organization and without. Needless to say, we're a good deal larger, having grown over ten-fold since our national launch. Equally important, a variety of allied organizations have sprung into existence, in each case with substantial help from us. There are now a half dozen of these, including the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, the American Academy for Liberal Education, and the newest, the Association for the Study of Free Institutions newly housed at the University of Nebraska. Other major organizations, like the indispensable Intercollegiate Studies Institute, that was already well established when we first appeared, have expanded their programming immensely and with great success. So I think we can say that there is now an extensive infrastructure for higher education reform, with multiple capacities and experienced leadership, that didn't exist when we made our debut.

On the other hand, all that we deplored about academic life in 1987 is still very much present in 2006. Indeed, a good deal of what was only a recognizable danger then has now institutionally hardened into business as usual. Most alarming is the extent to which the academy has come self-consciously to enfold an activist agenda of social change into the very core of its mission, expressed most conspicuously in its totemic devotion to "diversity"—taken by outsiders to mean openness and equal treatment—but understood by higher education's cognoscenti as esoteric shorthand for the rejection of many traditional Judeo-Christian, American, and liberal values. A variety of studies also strongly suggest that professorial opinion is more radicalized now than it was 20 years ago, especially in the fields that culturally count, and that there is, not surprisingly, systematic discrimination in hiring and promotion against scholars viewed in this radicalized climate as not being part of the program.

So, while, on the one hand, the problems of academe have become more pervasive and much more institutionally rooted, we are, on the other, better situated to identify and take advantage of promising lines of attack against them.

Some of these attack routes entail more effective means of intellectual contest, as when, for instance, the audiences for argument are expanded to include such off-campus university fiduciaries as trustees, legislators, donors, and, ultimately, the public at large. Since academe remains a highly insulated subculture whose values are, as yet, unrepresentative of the public-at-large, broadening the audience can yield very

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productive results when it comes to reigning in egregious abuses, as the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education has so impressively demonstrated in a multitude of cases involving free-speech rights and procedural fairness.

If there is one signal contribution the NAS has made to our movement, it lies in taking the strategy of reform beyond argument alone and into promotion of structural change, the major fruit being the multiplication of new academic programs exploring such generally slighted subjects as the study of the American Founding, free institutions, and Western civilization itself.

Academic life cannot simply be understood as pure intellectual process—however such a concept may flatter the academic ego. It was the triumph of the Western university, and of Western intellectual culture more generally, to have provided settings in which the powers of reason could be unleashed, but this triumph had as much to do with the creation of a favorable social matrix as it did with the exaltation of reason as a transcending ideal. The tasks of reason are rarely pursued in isolation. While discovery is often a matter of individual breakthrough, the development of research agendas, the division of research labor, the circulation of information, and the proffering of encouragement and constructive criticism occur in social settings and constitute systems of psychological bolstering as well as intellectual exchange. Man-the-scientist doesn't cease to be man-the-social-animal.

The Western university represented a breakthrough not just in its purposes, but because it existed in plurality, and offered competitive venues for the organization of scholarship, teaching, and research. Such structured, pluralistic competition was further buttressed by the cultural and political pluralism that marked the larger European, and later the American, scene.

This institutional pluralism has greatly diminished over the last four decades, as virtually every university of significance has signed onto more or less the same project of so-called progressive social change. The near unanimity with which this has happened is startling, and one gropes for an explanation. The secularization of elite culture surely has played a part by sapping the resistance of denominational institutions to these new trends. But the principal culprit, it seems to me, has been the political empowerment of the intellectual as a major adjunct of the modern activist and expansive state.

Once marginal to establishment politics, intellectuals—commonly academic intellectuals—not only now provide the visions that animate political debate, but play a major role in shaping and criticizing specific policies. They don't always do this directly. Their influence can be felt through the instruction of future leaders in other spheres. But, whether direct or indirect, the relationship between the state and academic intellectuals is now firmly established and robustly symbiotic. Practically speaking, it has enlisted the professoriate in all the causes that demand the exercise of governmental power for their completion—in its more moderate form by giving specific content to the activities of the welfare state, and in its more radical one, by creating the ideological agendas that allow advocacy groups to push the frontiers of public policy further outward.

The result has been a professoriate fattened, flattered, powerful, and liberal/left—but most importantly for our analytic purpose—imbued with a strong, often zealous sense of political mission. Couple this with a professoriate that has also succeeded in immunizing itself from lay oversight by means of an ideal of academic freedom—originally premised, ironically, on political neutrality—and further buttressed its position with such practices as tenure, and you have a recipe for the development of the ideological monoculture we now behold.

This monoculture is, to be sure, mainly a problem in the fields of humane learning—the humanities and social sciences—and for the extracurricular dimensions of university life. The natural and applied sciences, protected by the manifest power of their methods, remain less affected by it. But since it is in the domains of humane learning that the tunes are played to which the culture dances, the problem posed by the monoculture is serious enough.

Perhaps we shouldn't be so surprised that this problem has arisen. It is at least something of a conceit that academics differ from other people in being uncompromising searchers after the truth. There is an equally plausible construction that could be given much of intellectual history to the effect that academics are, in fact, more likely to be searchers after creeds. Creeds have many appealing advantages for intellectuals. They strengthen their intellectual authority, make their professional lives more predictable, and provide psychological security amidst the inevitable uncertainties that come with seeking to make sense of the world. But creeds also justify the exclusion from academic positions of those who disagree with them, or simply adhere to the ideal of the scholar distanced from political involvement.

The lesson for higher education reform, which I'm proud to say the NAS was the first to grasp, is that the restoration of academic pluralism requires the importation into academic governance of some of the same mechanisms that sustain pluralism in the doings of more ordinary mortals, that is to say, devices that disperse the exercise of academic power and provide multiple niches from within which rival intellectual groups can engage in organized, procedurally fair competition with one another.¹

In pursuing this goal, a key objective has been the development of career venues where traditional, non-orthodox scholars can continue to receive fair consideration for academic jobs, where similarly inclined doctoral students can simultaneously be groomed and mentored, and where academic dissidents can find decent peer support and some sense of sympathetic community. Not long ago, the American Council of Higher Education, the leading voice of American academe, acknowledged that “intellectual pluralism along with academic freedom” were the central principles of American higher education. At this stage of American academic history, with its credal outlook and entrenched intolerance, the surest path back toward the reinvigoration of intellectual pluralism is through the development of greater programmatic pluralism.

For more than a dozen years the NAS has been working quietly but doggedly to realize this objective. It's been a slow process, hardly blessed by the academic powers that be, but one now beginning to generate real momentum. In the last six years, new programs have been launched at institutions as different as Duke, Princeton, Colgate,

the University of Nebraska, the University of Alaska, Penn State, the University of Wisconsin, Villanova, and Wright Community College in Chicago. All of them incorporate a recognition of the need to build institutional niches in which scholars of diverse perspective can organize serious academic projects. The emergence of this kind of organizational thinking is the real intellectual diversity story on our campuses today.

These new programs are, of course, first and foremost, educational exercises. They bring to campuses speakers who would not otherwise be invited, hold conferences on subjects generally ignored, and pitch courses and sometimes programs of study that wouldn't be offered by anyone else. But each of them also represents a modest part of the academy's structure that's been transferred to heterodox hands. Within each program, the constituent processes of professional reproduction begin to serve pluralistic ends.

Some, for example the Political Theory Project at Brown, hire post-docs to teach for several semesters, thus burnishing their credentials for subsequent career moves. Princeton's James Madison Program bestows similar advantages on young scholars who are included among its yearly classes of visiting fellows. The newly born doctoral program in political science at Baylor is now providing future Ph.D.s with that fine grasp of the Western political tradition their peers so often lack. A few programs have even hired, or strongly influenced the hiring of, tenure-track faculty. Most aspire eventually to be able to participate in the hiring process on a significant basis. And as they do, the movement to reopen the campus marketplace of ideas will start cashing out in earnest.

To speed it along there must be a "cashing in," as well. Even where university administrations are willing to allow programs to be launched, they rarely endow them with abundant funds. So donors are wanted who recognize a splendid opportunity when they see it, and are willing to spend when and where necessary to capitalize on it. Donors are especially needed who understand themselves to be stewards of their civilization, and not just of their own alma mater. I know that academic architects exist and in some number. They'll build their programs, but will the donors come? Intense efforts are currently under way to bring them forward.

Taking the widest view of it possible, our movement stands poised to cross a major threshold. We recognize that to remain free and reasoned, the organization of academe must embody the same pluralistic features that generate productive competition elsewhere. In the fields of humane learning especially, its operation must take into account the realities of human nature no less present in academe than elsewhere, and make provision for mediating structures that prevent the imposition of intellectual conformity. These are structures we are now vigorously shaping, lighting the way toward a genuinely heterogeneous university in which power, checked, will give way to reason.

There are many fronts to the effort to put liberal education in the United States on new and stronger foundations. But all, I think, have this one common denominator: They understand that some significant reorganization of university governance and academic life, from the shape it has lately assumed, is an essential prerequisite of the

new dispensation. The creation of new programs, the dismantling of the infrastructures of identity politics and ethnic and gender preference are another, the development of new mechanisms for trustee and donor participation a third and fourth. Finally, there are potential benefits and risks of a more active fiduciary role for legislatures within a new constitution for American academe, one that conserves the best of its intellectual heritage, but also reflects an acute awareness of the shortcomings recent years have exposed.

Note

1. Those interested in a longer exposition of thoughts on this matter might want to look at my *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, "The Antidote to Academic Orthodoxy," <http://chronicle.com/free/v50/i33/33b00701.htm>.

for reasoned scholarship in a free society

The National Association of Scholars (NAS) is an organization of professors, graduate students, college administrators, independent scholars, and trustees committed to rational discourse as the foundation of academic life in a free and democratic society. The NAS works to enrich the substance and strengthen the integrity of scholarship and teaching, persuaded that only through an informed understanding of the Western intellectual heritage and the realities of the contemporary world, can citizen and scholar be equipped to sustain our civilization's achievements. In light of these objectives, the NAS is deeply concerned about the widening currency within the academy of perspectives that reflexively denigrate the values and institutions of our society. Because such tendencies are often dogmatic in character, and indifferent to both logic and evidence, they also tend to undermine the basis for coherent scholarly dialogue. Recognizing the significance of this problem, the NAS encourages a renewed assertiveness among academics who value reason and an open intellectual life.