

Ideas Both Good and Bad

Carol Iannone

Published online: 13 August 2010
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If it is true that nothing can stop an idea whose time has come, it is also true that nothing can stop the departure of an idea whose time has gone. We offer an assortment of interesting essays in this issue that examine both good and bad ideas in the firm expectation that intelligent analysis will help the good to flourish and the bad to fizzle out.

To begin with the good, can there be a professor—past, present, or future—who would not like to see a reduction in the number of academic papers published in his field? In “The Glut of Academic Publishing: A Call for a New Culture,” Stanley W. Trimble, Wayne W. Grody, Bill McKelvey, and Mohamed Gad-el-Hak describe the grim facts—how “too much material of too little substance” is being pumped into print (in their case in the social sciences), and how deceptive, negligible, poorly evaluated, and little read it is—and offer viable suggestions toward creating a more honest and responsible scholarly practice.

Happily, the privately run International Spy Museum that opened in Washington, D.C., in 2002 has turned out to be a fine idea according to Ronald Radosh, author of “Scoping out the International Spy Museum.” During his visit, Radosh observed groups of schoolchildren hovering around exhibits and actually learning something about American history. Although generally well disposed toward the museum’s offerings, Radosh did have a few criticisms of the section on the Cold War, so we asked the museum to respond and him to reply in turn.

Carol Iannone is editor-at-large of *Academic Questions* One Airport Place, Suite 7 & 8, Princeton, NJ 08540-1532; nas@nas.org.

Sometimes an idea starts out good and then turns bad, as Jackson Toby illustrates in “How Scholarships Morphed into Financial Aid,” a slightly revised chapter from his new book, *The Lowering of Higher Education in America: Why Financial Aid Should Be Based on Student Performance*. The G.I. Bill gave returning soldiers a chance at higher education after their service in World War II, and Toby ranks this effort generally as a great success. But the bill also laid the groundwork for extending financial aid for reasons other than merit, something that has expanded to the point where billions of taxpayer dollars now go to students who lack academic promise and are vastly underprepared for any kind of college work. Also in this issue, Robert Weissberg offers a favorable and flavorful review of Toby’s new book.

Alas, that marks our turn to our distinctively bad ideas, largely the oily detritus deposited on the beaches of scholarship and education from the gushing spill of the countercultural Left.

The fuss over teaching “Ebonics,” or African American dialect, has died down in public discussion. The idea behind it, however, that Standard English is a form of dominance and that students have a “right” to preserve their own subcultural lingos—“the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style,” in the clumsy prose of the original 1973 resolution—remains the official and proudly proclaimed position of the composition guilds. In “‘Students’ Right to Their Own Language’: A Counter-Argument,” Jeff Zorn utterly demolishes the premises of SRTOL brick by brick, and shows how it offers nothing but “underachievement and provincialism” to its hapless student-victims.

Yale University Press hit the news some time ago when it refused to print the cartoons portraying Mohammed that had aroused the violent anger of Muslims across Europe in 2005, and this in a book actually devoted to the cartoon controversy itself. John B. Parrott finds that this is scarcely YUP’s only intellectual lapse when he examines their trade publications in American government and history for 2009 in “Yale University Press: Disseminating *Lux et Veritas*?” Parrott finds that with very few exceptions, these books promulgate a simple-minded neo-Marxist progressivism that could never satisfy the expectations of a “reasonable reader.”

Have you ever noticed that people who insist that all cultures are equal are often very critical of their own, an indulgence they would not allow themselves if they were true to what they profess? For example, feminists might excuse and even defend cultures where the women are shrouded in

burkas and subject to genital mutilation, but call it sexual harassment if an American man tells a female co-worker that she looks nice. In “An Analysis of the Myth of Cultural Equivalence,” John Lange offers a penetrating and supremely logical evisceration of the idea of cultural equivalence and the hypocrisy of those who purvey it.

Related to cultural equivalence is another brainchild of the Left, the ubiquitous concept of “diversity”—as deployed nowadays quite possibly the worst idea in half a century. Surely the ugly fangs behind its smiley face were revealed with General George W. Casey’s remarks on the horrific shootings at Fort Hood, Texas, in November 2009. One civilian and twelve servicemen and women lost their lives to a jihadist Muslim soldier whose previous erratic behavior had been ignored by the brass out of deference to political correctness. Casey infamously and blandly observed that “as horrific as this tragedy was, if our diversity becomes a casualty, I think that’s *worse*” (emphasis added). When a four-star general in the United States Army can sacrifice the lives of his soldiers to the god of diversity, we know this is an idea that should be retired, along with the general himself.

The diversity that our author Nicholas J. Shudak explores in “Diversity in Teacher Education: A Double Helix” is not fatal, but it is pernicious. The teacher education literature that Shudak examines finds a problem in the increasing diversity of the school population, not with the students but with the teachers—they are still mainly white! Similar to the impulse behind “Students’ Right to Their Own Language,” the supposed solution here lies in reprogramming white teachers to affirm the values and learning styles of the cultures of the minorities they teach—this with an acknowledged lack of any proof of the efficacy of this approach in educational outcomes.

Russell K. Nieli’s “Competitive Colleges: Addressing Minority Performance Gaps” is a long review essay of *No Longer Separate, Not Yet Equal: Race and Class in Elite College Admission and Campus Life*, by Thomas Espenshade and Alexandria Walton Radford. Nieli, who has written extensively on affirmative action for our pages, finds much of the authors’ discussion commendable and informative, but uses the occasion to question the stringent social democratic ideal of enforced and engineered group parity and to contrast it with the better and freer ideals of classical liberalism.

Our second review essay is John M. Ellis’s pungent analysis of Louis Menand’s widely and respectfully praised *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University*. In “Cheerleading for a Crumbling

Academy,” Ellis exposes the book’s inadequacies and asks why Menand would write “about matters where he has so little to contribute, and where his one real attempt to take a position is so incompetent?” The answer, says Ellis, lies in the “enormous gulf” that “currently obtains between the academic humanities establishment and the general public.”

Our regular reviews in this issue are Robert Weissberg’s of Jackson Toby’s new book, mentioned above, and George W. Dent, Jr.’s, admiring evaluation of *Race, Wrongs, and Remedies: Group Justice in the 21st Century*, by Amy L. Wax. Dent approvingly notes how Wax demolishes the charges of racism as an explanation for black underperformance and how she points to a better direction, to which he adds a few suggestions of his own.

Lawrence Raab, Morris Professor of Rhetoric at Williams College, gives us—and the issue—a beautifully crafted “breather” in “Poem with Albatross”: “If you set your mind adrift, and let the wind / take it into deep water, and leave it / becalmed, something will come out / of that stillness.”

We close with a change of pace for our regular Books, Articles, and Items of Academic Interest column. We’re experimenting with farming out the feature to guest writers, and our first entry, “Days of Whine and Poses: Literary Types and Academic Conferences” by David Solway, takes it in an entirely different but wholly delightful direction.