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Books, Articles, and Items of Academic Interest

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Autumn, as Keats reminds us, is the season that sets "budding more, / And still more, later flowers for the bees." Summer hath o'er-brimm'd *Academic Questions* as well by giving us more and still more books on high'r education. Have a seat on the granary floor or by the cyder-press, and we will give you the latest squeezings.

Counsel of Complacency

Michael Roth, the president of Wesleyan University, joins the throng of those who rise to the defense of the essentials in *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters* (Yale University Press, 2014). This is a book meant to vindicate the nonutilitarian value of education, which in Roth's view is education "to teach students to liberate, animate, cooperate, and instigate." Roth is a historian and a humanist as well as president of one of the most politically correct colleges in America. Though he eschews college as mere vocational training, he upholds the ideal that a liberal education prepares one for the "working life" and for becoming an agent of social change.

A question always to be posed for books of this sort is, "Who is the intended audience?" It is hard to imagine that a hard-core supporter of the

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idea that college is basically a credentialing service for American capitalism will pick up *Beyond the University*, read it, and experience an epiphany. Rather, Roth would seem to be addressing members of the church of the liberal arts whose faith may need a little revival. Parents, students, and alumni have heard that online education and MOOCs are on the rise, that recent college graduates are burdened by student loan debt, that jobs requiring a B.A. are scarce, and that the liberal arts have lost their cachet in the marketplace. These threats to the mission of the liberal arts college require a response, and that is almost the entirety of Roth's project here.

While I am sympathetic with the principle of defending liberal education against a surfeit of superficial job-training in colleges and universities, I am also alert to the issue of how much special pleading for the status quo is worked into the defense. Surely some of the trouble faced by liberal arts colleges stems from their embrace of antiliberal ideologies and procedures, such as racial preferences, that cut against the very principles that are now seen as vulnerable.

Roth, indeed, seems pretty happy with the status quo, but there is nothing in the book that could be taken as a full-throated defense of the contemporary diversity doctrine, academic feminism, gender studies, anticolonialism, the narrowing of permitted speech on campus, the sustainability doctrine, other leftist sacred cows, or the wholesale politicization of the liberal arts. All of these are gently subsumed into the background as if all good readers could be trusted to recognize their wholesomeness and little more need be said.

Much of *Beyond the University* unrolls as a historical narrative. Adams and Jefferson segue to David Walker's 1829 *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*. Emerson receives extended treatment, as does DuBois and William James. The central chapter is titled "Pragmatism," and the book's introduction concludes with a hearty embrace of Rorty's idea that education should "incite doubt and stimulate imagination." So it might not be amiss to say that the presiding spirit of the book is pragmatism.

I should note that the National Association of Scholars and I come in for a sucker punch in "Controversies and Critics," a chapter in which Roth summarizes my argument to the effect that the overexpansion of the university at the expense of academic standards and a coherent

curriculum is a detriment to our society. Roth's reply? NAS seems "to be very comfortable with the kinds of inequality that were characteristic of [preindustrial] societies." This is, with thin disguise, to characterize the NAS as racist and most at home in a society based on slavery.

I'd like to say that Roth and the NAS share a fundamental agreement that the liberal arts are indispensable to making and maintaining a good society, but his malice toward those who dissent from the contemporary progressive view of higher education makes this difficult. *Beyond the University*, I'm afraid, ends up as a counsel of complacency for the leftist establishment in higher education—and nothing more.

More $$$

Suzanne Mettler, a professor of "American Institutions" at Cornell, shares some of Roth's political concerns but none of his complacency. Her *Degrees of Inequality: How the Politics of Higher Education Sabotaged the American Dream* (Basic Books, 2014) is a passionate argument in favor of more federal and state spending on higher education to advance the cause of increasing the number of low-income students who receive college degrees. Mettler, however, does not only advocate spending more. She also wants to see structural reforms that will, among other things, eliminate the provisions that allow for-profit universities to take advantage of federal student aid while achieving dismally low graduation rates, high default rates, and poor job placement. The liberal arts play no role in Mettler's polemic, but her book does provide a finely detailed narrative of the political machinations down to the sub-subcommittee level of Congress as to how, exactly, educational pork is manufactured. Mettler believes, as her title suggests, that contemporary higher education is widening the gap between haves and have-nots in America, and calls us back to her reading of the nation's founding, in which education was conceived as a public good and not primarily an "investment" that yields benefits to the individual.

Supporting STEM

Michael S. Teitelbaum, a research associate at Harvard Law School who has published several books about fertility decline, is also interested in

promoting government spending on higher education to advance a public good. But in *Falling Behind? Boom, Bust, and the Global Race for Scientific Talent* (Princeton University Press, 2014), the good in question is not mass credentialing of the poor but "basic scientific research." Teitelbaum is, in a sense, still addressing a fertility problem: "market mechanisms…under-invest in public goods such as basic scientific research." That's for several reasons. Corporations cannot "capture" the "economic benefits" of such research, which tend to flow outward to everyone, everywhere. And basic research is "a very long-term proposition." This makes it something that requires public investment, but Teitelbaum sees great room for improvement in the way the United States goes about that. This is a book that deals with the labor market for scientists and engineers, and is concerned with higher education mainly as a crucial part of the infrastructure that produces Ph.D.'s, hires post-docs, creates career paths for research scientists, and provides much of the platform for basic research. Teitelbaum's deepest concern, signaled in the title, is that we hamper basic research by allowing a funding cycle of "boom and bust" that undermines the careers of scientists and compromises research agendas. "Equal attention should be paid to minimizing both under- and over-supply." That sentence is, alas, typical of Teitelbaum's desiccated style, but the book is rich in the history of how universities became the beneficiaries of an astonishing amount of federal funding, how this has played out at the level of interest group politics, and how "the U.S. academic system…recruits, finances, and produces newly minted scientists and engineers."

Educational Evolution

Melvyn L. Fein, professor of sociology at Kennesaw State University, has only a few paragraphs on the place of science in the curriculum; he sweeps away much of what preoccupies Mettler about inequality; and the "liberal arts" do not even make it into the index of *Redefining Higher Education: How Self-Direction Can Save Colleges* (Transaction, 2014). His book is hard to categorize, starting with his negations about his perspective: "I am not a liberal, but neither am I a traditional conservative." The best label for Fein might be "social evolutionist," though he doesn't exactly call himself that. He sees "social pressures" as

"often more decisive" in shaping "what is done" than the opinions of leaders or the actions of individuals, and he poses his book as an attempt to answer the question, "How is higher education evolving?"

His answer is that all civilizations use higher education "to prepare their young for leadership," but that the kinds of leaders that are needed change with the "size and technological sophistication" of the times. Ours is a "mass techno-commercial civilization" that requires both bureaucrats and "professionals," which Fein distinguishes as the enforcers of standardization versus the wielders of expert judgment, or as he often puts it, "self-motivated experts." *Redefining Higher Education* is an extended argument that most of what ails colleges and universities arises from an excess of the bureaucratic spirit and an insufficiency of the professional one. This translates, for example, into his call for a radical reduction in the number of college administrators and a liberation of faculty members ("self-direction") to make "bold decisions in an environment of uncertainty."

In view of the widespread politicization of higher education, the equally widespread deterioration of academic standards, and the increasing frequency with which faculty members exploit their authority for mischievous ends, Fein's call for American society to place even greater trust in the faculty as a whole to do the right thing doesn't sound like the kind of reform agenda that will be met with acclimation among fellow reformers. His recommendation, however, is not really to appoint a committee of foxes to oversee the chicken coop. Rather, he believes the "professionals" will rise to the ethics of their calling if given the room to do so.

He may be right, but Fein's prescription is bound to be a hard sell, especially since his book offers a whirl of what will seem to many readers to be contradictory advice. He insists, for example, that "college is not for everyone," but later writes of the need for "significant adjustments" to facilitate "social mobility." He favors "protecting the traditional academic disciplines" against "trendy and/or politically correct supplements," but stands fast against "bureaucratic correctives" to "classroom bias." He believes the current "core curriculum" at most colleges and universities is "not in need of major revision," but he also favors curbing "grade inflation" and "challenging" students' sense of "entitlement."

The apparent contradictions are perhaps resolvable with his "evolutionary perspective" and especially his view of how the motivations of the principal actors are shaped more by their esprit de corps than by top-down management.

Psychotic Bees

Readers drawn to Fein's optimism about the good sense of American scholars might find their good cheer put to the test by Piya Chatterjee and Sunaina Maira's edited volume, *The Imperial University: Academic Repression and Scholarly Dissent* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014). Chatterjee is professor of feminism, gender, and sexuality at Scripps College. Maira is a professor of Asian American studies at the University of California, Davis. Their joint introduction indicts American higher education as a handmaiden of "repression, militarism, and neoliberalism." Chatterjee begins with a diary-like evocation of January 19, 2012, a day when she is sitting in her women's studies office lamenting the "colorless and functional corporate office building" she inhabits, devoid of "collective social life," while only a few hundred yards away "noisy scenes of protest (including some Rabelaisian revelries with drumming and chants)" are taking place. The protest represents "the alliances forged among student, faculty, and labor unions." Her reverie, however, is interrupted by a police helicopter circling "an empty field" next to her building—a helicopter that resembles "a psychotic bee."

The seventeen other contributors seldom aim at such literary evocations of their revolutionary commitment, but they all stay closely on message. And that message is that the modern American university is an instrument of state-sponsored oppression. The writers repeatedly haul out instances that "demonstrate clearly the collusion between university and state authorities in defense of private capital" (Farah Godrej). Universities do all sorts of dastardly things. They "mine prisons as a source of data" (Julia C. Oparah). They allow U.S. intelligence agencies to "expose students to unrealistic scenarios." (Roberto J. González). They function as "a site of commonality for imperial cohesion" (Victoria Bascara).

More merriment of this sort appears throughout the book. I hesitate to say this is must reading for those who want to keep abreast of current

academic controversies, but it's actually a good idea for scholars and lay readers concerned with the trajectory of American higher education to work through a book like this every now and then. Nearly all the contributors to *The Imperial University* are academics; many of them are tenured at major colleges and universities, including Tufts, Scripps, Columbia, Stanford, Mills, Trinity, Rutgers, Virginia Tech, and five of the University of California campuses. All of which brings us back to Fein: How much confidence can we place in power of faculty self-direction when we are confronted with the hardened convictions of academics such as these who believe our colleges and universities—which are almost entirely satrapies of the political Left—are actually instruments of state oppression? Never mind the "right-wing hysteria and neo-conservative moral panics" promoted by the likes of Allan Bloom and Roger Kimball.

Obliterations

Fein's optimism is buffeted from another direction by William M. Bowen, Michael Schwartz, and Lisa Camp in *End of Academic Freedom: The Coming Obliteration of the Core Purpose of the University* (Information Age Publishing, 2014). Bowen is a professor of public administration and urban studies at Cleveland State, Schwartz is the former president of Cleveland State, and Camp is a dean in the engineering school at Case Western Reserve. I had an opportunity to read this book in manuscript but, I confess, was put off by a certain stiffness of expression. A sentence at random: "Successful use of the method of differentiation and coordination of the parts always begins with someone observing a process, whether it is an industrial production process or a knowledge process." Felicity of expression is not to be had in these pages, but Bowen, Schwartz, and Camp do have an important argument. They are worried that "autonomous scholarship" is in decline and that its fall bodes ill for "individual rights, honest inquiry, and the core American values of individual liberty, equality before the law, and human dignity." The threat they scan is the loss of intellectual diversity on campus largely as a result of the rise of illiberal ideologies.

So far so good, but Bowen, Schwartz, and Camp posit that the "core purpose" of the university is "knowledge formation," which is a more fraught thesis. Universities certainly engage in "knowledge formation,"

but whether this is their "core purpose" depends on what one makes of their half-dozen or so other self-evident purposes. Universities also transmit culture and civilization from generation to generation. They foster the ideal of "the pursuit of truth" for its own sake, as well as the techniques of "critical inquiry" that have pragmatic importance in our social world. They form the moral character of their students (for better or worse), who in turn are destined to replenish the leading positions in our strategic institutions. They form social communities that establish life-long networks among individuals—and serve as well, as we anthropologists put it, as "marriage markets." They credential graduates for both specialized and general managerial occupations. They operate as the social space in which individuals in late adolescence are indulged with a period of social liberty, during which they are expected to outgrow juvenile interests. They draw students into the broader world of social and political concerns. They serve as "advanced devolution" of capital (both financial and social) from parents to their children.

We may derogate some of these purposes as unworthy, accidental, and subsidiary, but they are all real and not so easy to set aside by the "assumption that reason is the founding principle of the university." The authors of *End of Academic Freedom* (the title inexplicably lacking the definite article) are on top of some of these points. They acknowledge, for example, that "vocational preparation and economic development" are "the top priorities and purposes of higher education." But by the end of that paragraph "top priority" is demoted to "an important part" that will never be "the whole." The authors work through many of the alternate purposes of higher education in this manner, often adding interesting insights on matters such as "identity formation" and risk, and the relation of college to consumerism.

Bowen, Schwartz, and Camp have one thesis that is strikingly the inverse of Fein's elevation of faculty autonomy and a perfection of Chatterjee and Maira's nightmare. They call for a more empowered chief executive of the university, who takes an active role in the "public trust" of using the "knowledge base" of the university for the "inalienable public interest." This means "an affirmative duty to protect, manage, and conserve it for the benefit of society," and treats that "knowledge base" as "an essential resource held by the state, as sovereign." This is, of course, a radical position in contemporary higher education—one that would find

few supporters among typical college faculty members. University leaders, in their vision, are charged with "heavily influencing, if not unilaterally determining, their own university's curricula, admissions standards, tuition and fees; setting their own performance measures; and controlling their own hiring and firing decisions."

That might sound to the uninformed outsider as just what university presidents would naturally do as CEOs, but it sketches a picture of an activist college president that is wildly out of keeping with contemporary norms. Few contemporary college presidents have much real influence over curricula, performance measures, and faculty hiring and firing—matters long dominated by the faculty. Bowen, Schwartz, and Camp are, in effect, calling for a counterrevolution in institutional governance—although college presidents do indeed enjoy near total domination in setting admissions standards, tuition, and fees.

John Silber

One university president who, in his time, exercised almost exactly that set of powers was the late John R. Silber, whose posthumous *Seeking the North Star: Selected Speeches* (David R. Godine, 2013) has been issued with a foreword by Tom Wolfe. Silber served as Boston University's president from 1971 to 1996, and then as its chancellor to 2003. He died in 2012. I worked in the Silber administration at Boston University from 1987 to his retirement as president in 1996, and then as the chief of staff to his chosen successor, Jon Westling, to 2002. I saw some of these speeches delivered in person and cannot read any of them without hearing his staccato enunciation and aggressive delivery, the note of defiance, and his commanding quotations from poems.

Silber aspired to the *sprezzatura* of the Renaissance man, though surely not the status of the courtier for whom Castiglione invented that term for nonchalant ease at difficult tasks. Silber wanted to be not a courtier but a comprehensive scholar, whose readiness to defy contemporary norms about what a university president does and doesn't do would be legitimated by his sheer command of the intellectual terrain. There simply aren't many college presidents who would assume the ability, let alone the right to intervene in the curriculum, admissions standards, tuition and fees, faculty appointments, tenure decisions—not to mention the

proper shade of red paint on doors, the placement of petunias in parks, and the program notes for operas.

It is a performance probably not to be repeated, but those who caught a glimpse of it will enjoy the refresher course offered by reading these bracing speeches. Those who have only heard the rumor of an abrasive man who defied the hydra of political correctness might well be astonished by what they find here. The formidable man of principles is front and center, but the man of exuberant love of art, music, and literature is here, too, along with a wry humorist.

Silber was far from an easy man to work for, but he stands as my benchmark of what a college and university president might be if he has, in Tom Wolfe's phrase, "the right stuff."

Full Circle

I began with Michael Roth's *Beyond the University*, a standard-issue defense of the liberal arts, and I'll conclude with the equivalent of a twenty-one-gun salute to the same ideals. Actually, there are only seventeen guns in *Remaking College: Innovation and the Liberal Arts*, edited by Rebecca Chopp, Susan Frost, and Daniel H. Weiss (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014). Most of them are presidents or other high officials of prominent colleges, including the University of Denver (Chopp), Haverford (Weiss), Smith, Williams, Vassar, Lafayette, Bryn Mawr, Pomona, and Macalester. The book derives from a 2012 conference supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and is entirely what one would expect from the leaders of institutions who are a little worried about the decline in value of their currency. The word "remaking" in the title of the book needs to be taken with a grain of salt, and another granule should be swallowed with the word "innovation" in the subtitle. The task at hand for these stalwarts is to keep things as they are to the fullest extent possible: to keep the admissions system rigged for racial preferences, to keep the curriculum rigged for progressive attitudes, to keep financial aid rigged for the benefit of colleges rather than students, to thwart the rise of meaningful competition, and to cover all this in the rhetoric of "flourishing" and "resilience."

The contributors collectively sound like members of a trade association of the passenger railway industry during the construction of

the interstate highway system in 1950s proclaiming the wonderful adaptability of train transportation.

This is a book that argues for “the holistic educational formation for young adults” and the need for residential colleges that “serve the democratic good of associative living.” The substance of that “holistic educational formation” is really what is at issue. At one point in the not so distant past, most colleges would have said it involved formation of good character, as well as acquisition of a substantial body of important knowledge about their civilization and well-honed skills in speaking, writing, and critical analysis. But the college leaders assembled in *Remaking College* have drastically simplified this. As stated in the introduction: “The heart of this formation is to teach students how to think critically and creatively.” And “critical thinking” is “evolving” toward, it seems, “interdisciplinary courses, programs, centers, and even memorandums of understanding for faculty members.”

Which is to say that the term “critical thinking” has more or less devolved into a rubric for intellectual superficiality of the sort that elevates “building networks” over knowing anything in particular. This *nouveau* critical thinking is amply illustrated by the contributors. Chopp herself applauds “the eloquent apologias” that others have given the liberal arts, but airily insists that “we need to assert a more proactive claim about our special relevance for linking knowledge, community, and freedom in the future.” This just keeps getting richer and richer. The liberal arts are “an incubator for intellectual agility.” They create “bold cultural experiments.” They take us beyond “linear knowledge transfer” in a “porous network in which knowledge is fluid and collaborative.” The students do not merely learn, they engage in “knowledge design.” We no longer hone “the skill of critical thinking,” but are “expanding how we understand critical thinking.”

I trust this is enough to give the flavor of *Remaking College*. Reading it did convince me of one thing: the crisis in liberal arts education is much more profound than the rise of competition from online entities, the shift in student preferences toward vocational education, or the cost/debt spiral. The real crisis is in the stupefying inanity of the leaders of many of our “best” liberal arts colleges.