

# POINT OF VIEW

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## The Politicization of Liberal Education

*John Agresto*

Very often we hear protests against what is called the politicization of liberal education, but before we can discuss that issue intelligently we must answer a more fundamental question: whether or not all education is *intrinsically* political. To those, myself included, who object to using educational curricula to advance a certain political agenda, or who object to indoctrination in the classroom—whether it be indoctrination in feminism, pacifism, leftism, conservatism, or whatever—the response is always the same: all education is a type of indoctrination for all education is inherently political. The argument goes as follows: education fills the student with some set of values, either society's values or other values. What values get advanced is a function of what is taught, of whether, for example, we read my Shakespeare or your Alice Walker. Educational choices are therefore political acts both in denying the promotion of one set of views and in substituting one person's agenda for another's. We indoctrinate, according to this argument, both by what we teach and what we do not teach; but in any event we always indoctrinate.

There are, I think, three different responses to this argument, all of which have partisans, if not reason, on their side. The first accepts the political nature of education, the second dogmatically denies it. Both fail to recognize the awkward consequences their arguments entail. The third involves a *critical* acceptance of the politics inherent in education, but still insists on the possibility of an education that transcends its purely political roots.

The first position tries, mildly, to ask what all the commotion is about. It rather plausibly argues as follows: "While there may be some knowledge and some principles that are properly transcultural and transhistorical, most education grows out of a particular way of life, out of a particular culture. How a democratic man raises his children is, necessarily, different from the way in which aristocratic or oligarchic men raise their children. The education of a person in Renaissance Florence is, perforce, different from what a child will learn by growing up in New Jersey. Not only *is* this the way education works, we *want* it that way; we want our future adult citizens to know something about, and even to respect, the principles of our democratic way of life. If we didn't transmit our principles through education, we would be doing something stupid

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and suicidal." Such is the mild version of the first position, which, as far as it goes, seems incontrovertible. The problem is that it is easily and often radicalized, with indefensible results.

The radical version runs as follows: "Yes, education is the handmaiden of politics, as we have just seen. So what, in principle, is the argument against education in support of the new politics of the advanced professoriate? No doubt it *is* political to teach in class that, for example, the United States is committing genocide in Latin America, or that property is theft, but *all* teaching is political, as you've already admitted. Why, then, don't you mind when schools teach the ideals of Jeffersonian democracy, but object when I say that America is a corrupt society that should be overthrown? It's not that I'm more political than you—it's just that you don't share my politics." Once it is admitted that education is not "value neutral" but, rather, the supporter of particular beliefs or a particular way of life, it is also admitted that all education is political and serves political ends. Now it's only a question of *whose* political ends.

Consider, for example, the following: "[A]ll stances in scholarly research . . . imply a prior commitment to some basic belief system." Furthermore, "At its best, contemporary humanistic thinking does not peddle ideology, but rather, attempts to sensitize us to the presence of ideology in our work, and to its capacity to delude us into promoting as universal, values that in fact belong to one nation, one social class, one sect."<sup>1</sup> Thus spake the American Council of Learned Societies. But if all scholarship implies a prior "commitment" to a "basic belief system," what exactly is the objection to teachers who "peddle ideology"? Having radicalized the milder view that education is ultimately grounded in a given set of values, the council easily slides into the view that all knowing is "ideologized" and finally has nothing to say against indoctrination except that rabid ideologues might not be to their taste.

The second response to the claim that all education is political is the answer: "Don't be silly. If you think that when I teach calculus, or chemistry, or which way the Mississippi River flows, or when Eisenhower was elected president, or who wrote *Volpone*, I'm being 'political,' then you're just wrong." Indeed, common sense rebels at the broadness of the brush used by those who see education and indoctrination as necessarily intertwined. That a course in biology or mathematical logic could be "political" is implausible on its face, and this despite the fact that we talk about "Western" science or philosophy, as if these disciplines had their ground in a particular set of political regimes.

However, this position, though common-sensical, has its limits, mostly because it focuses entirely on content and not at all on *selection*. Why biology and not Eastern herbalism? Why pick mathematical logic and not the study of the *Vedas*? And of course, the politics of selection becomes much clearer in the humanities and social sciences. What's so neutral about picking Shakespeare instead of native American oral literature? Hard-headedness simply doesn't respond to the argument at hand; we make choices, choices reflect values,

values stem from cultural, social, and political opinions. Ergo, teaching the times table is a political act. Common sense may rebel, but it has not yet provided a coherent response.

The third and perhaps most satisfying position would respond along these lines: “Yes, all education does involve a kind of acculturation, and acculturation is a kind of politicization, in the sense of being an introduction to the principles, mores, ideas, and foundations of a particular society. But to equate teaching logic or science or even political theory, on the one hand, and ideological indoctrination on the other is madness. Is there not a difference, as even Marx observed, between trying to understand the world and trying to change it? Or, to put it differently, is there not a difference between a teacher trying to possess a student’s mind and having a student possess his mind for himself?”

I think this is where we must begin, and I do it with much trepidation. Yes, education *is* political in the sense that it grows out of the culture of a people, which culture is shaped in greatest measure by a nation’s political principles. But there *must* be a way of distinguishing between the liberation of the mind through liberal education and the attempt to capture and coerce the mind through indoctrination. If we can’t do that we should give up the defense of liberal education as impossible and try something more useful and lucrative.

Perhaps we can proceed this way: The proponents of old-fashioned liberal education have long argued that reading texts “nonpolitically”—by that I mean looking for transtemporal and universal truths or principles—is the one good road to wisdom. The argument rests on the fact that some questions, and some answers, transcend the particular political situation in which each person is placed. It rests on the view that universals are possible. What, for example, does Shakespeare teach about love, or envy, or loyalty, or art? Yet the radical politicization of liberal education perforce denies the existence of universal truths, universal insights, or transtemporal wisdom: “Once you have subtracted from the accidents of class, race, gender and political circumstance,” Mr. Stanley Fish of Duke University writes, “what is it that you have left?”<sup>2</sup> Well, if you have nothing left—if *everything* is culture, race, class, and gender bound—then there is no possibility of liberal education. You cannot be liberated. At best you might substitute one unfounded prejudice for another, but even then you probably only made the switch because of the dictates of class, race, gender, or politics. You can’t have made the choice rationally, since that’s just a prejudice.

Of course, it’s conceivable that people who say that all education is the propagandizing of mere values are trying to deceive us, for why would they spend their lives pushing their values if they did not think them true? But we should refuse to take the low road and accuse them of trying to deceive us. We should give them the benefit of the doubt and assume they are only deceiving themselves.

But, more. Sometimes the partisans of the politicization of the curriculum admit to the fact that not only is all education political, but, moreover, that all

politics is struggle. All politics is a matter of getting your way over others. Thus feminist readings of literary texts are sometimes portrayed as scholarly breakthroughs, imaginative and inventive, and sometimes candidly portrayed as vehicles for the elimination of "male hegemony," and as a weapon in the global fight. Or as Jonathan Culler of Cornell once put it, we cannot have a "canon" of literary texts since the concept supports "the fundamental misogyny of the Reagan Administration" and would "eliminate courses in women's writing."<sup>3</sup> "Hey! Hey! Ho! Ho! Western Culture's got to go!" is equally a curricular slogan and a slogan for struggle in the streets.

Sometimes the arguments for curricular change in the direction of open proselytizing are so shabby as to merit giggles as well as tears. When Stanford, for example, said it would further liberate students' minds by giving them books by contemporary ideologists, women, and people of color to cover contemporary issues, they did virtually nothing to shake the prejudices of their students or, especially, their teachers. Rather, they did everything to ratify opinions current in the winds. That this affirmative action program for already rife contemporary opinion could be described by columnist Ellen Goodman as "Opening Up Civilization's Inner Circle," shows how easily some people get fooled.<sup>4</sup> If they really wanted to transcend contemporary opinions and liberate the mind they would surely read Homer and Dante and Augustine rather than Frantz Fanon. But then again, Homer and Dante and Augustine might not support the various orthodoxies many in the professoriate would like to see promoted. Or, to put it differently, truly to open up your mind, you have to read books that *disagree* with today's unexamined prejudices in such areas as equality, liberty, democracy, and rights.

Such are the sins committed under the banner "All Education is Political." Understood in those terms, liberal education is impossible.

Where, however, do *we* begin, especially since we have partly admitted the truth that education and politics are not unconnected? First, I think we have to say that, on one level, acculturation is a necessary and legitimate part of education. Many, I think, would find it sad for indigenous cultures to reject their past and refuse to pass their traditions on to their children. I think we are skeptical of the worth of willful cultural suicide. In the same way we should be skeptical of the attempts made in our own midst to denigrate the study of this culture or of Western civilization. "Know thyself," to cite an impeccably Western authority, applies universally—to Japanese and Papuans and Nigerians as well as to Americans. If our students leave school with the most cutting of advanced opinions and do not know the foundations of this civilization and its work in its breadth and depth and detail, they have been cheated.

That said, we must admit that mere acculturation or knowing our own, proper as it is, does not rise to the level of "liberal education." It is, however, the firmest ground upon which liberal education can, later, start. What are we liberated from if not, in part, from the possibly wrong but formative opinions

of our parents, professors, and priests. If students don't know who Plato was or who wrote *King Lear*, or what the Gettysburg Address is telling us, we will have no reason to respect their more progressive thoughts. The vaunted pluralism of American society changes this not one whit: it seems clearly more necessary for recent Asian immigrants to know who Martin Luther King was than for American blacks to know the cultural contradictions of Cambodian society. Acculturation is the way in which we take marginal groups and strangers and make them fellow citizens and friends.

Nonetheless, on the highest level, liberal education has to deny the argument that all education is political. It has to maintain the possibility of the liberation from the political opinions and prejudices of our friends and fellow citizens. Liberal education rises and falls on the possibility of transtemporal, transhistorical, transcultural truth. It lives on the prospect that there can be knowledge over opinion. Some of those who wish to indoctrinate rather than educate *do* recognize this. If American capitalism is *true*, or if Marxism is *true*, or if any other "ism" is true (and it may be, of course) then liberal education *could* be a study of the truths of that ideology. That would, indeed, be liberation of a sort. But liberal education has to be forgiven if it begins with skepticism of this matter, if it says, let us read as widely as possible among those who might be the best authors and most powerful minds, let us learn something about the heavens and the rocks and the atoms and human nature and human conventions. Let us have the tools to judge for ourselves the truth of opinions others offer us.

There are, then, two hallmarks of a truly liberal education: first, it concerns itself with the greatest of human issues, issues such as the nature of love, hate, knowing, truth, loyalty, justice, God, beauty, number, meaning, and death. That is, it concerns itself with objects of the mind and heart that *can* be transpolitical. And second, it gives us a variety of the strongest, best, and most penetrating arguments and views of these topics. It has no hesitation in reading the best books and taking them seriously, even when they batter and shake our deepest sensibilities. To do anything less is to do the opposite of liberation—it is to say we professors do not wish to liberate our students' minds, but only to possess them. Or, worse, that we are afraid to liberate our own minds from the numbing or giddy joys of ideology.

## Notes

1. George Levine et. al, eds., *Speaking for the Humanities*, Occasional Paper, no. 7 (New York: American Council of Learned Societies, 1989), 11.
2. Stanley Fish, quoted in Elizabeth Greene, "Under Siege, Advocates of a More Diverse Curriculum Prepare for Continued Struggle in the Coming Year," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 28 September 1988.
3. Jonathan Culler, "What Are Things Coming To?" *Association of Departments of English Bulletin* (Spring 1985): 10.
4. Ellen Goodman, "Opening Up Civilization's Inner Circle," *Washington Post*, 26 April 1988.