

## The Longevity of Bad Ideas

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How long does it take for a bad idea to dissipate? Too long. In recent conversations with people who had visited Communist or formerly Communist countries I was startled to hear them rattle off “free education, free medical care, free housing, and a guaranteed job” as the plus side of socialism. After a century of Communist horrors, much of which had passed during their lifetime, they still did not understand that these things are purchased at the price of a people’s soul.

In Berlin recently, an excellent guide explained the stark restrictions on life in the eastern part of the city under the DDR, then brought our group to the bust of Karl Marx on Strausbergerplatz. He exhorted us not to lay such crimes at the feet of the esteemed political theorist. And an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, no less, showed the writer speculating about whether we should blame Marx for the atrocities committed in the numerous attempts to bring his vision to reality. Well, as Solzhenitsyn among others pointed out, if you eliminate private property, subject family to the state, and deny belief in God, does it really take a philosophical genius to see that you will produce horrors?

Some ideas are bad from the start. But some are good, so good they get taken to an extreme where they can, ironically, produce undesirable results. Such seem to be the ideas that help define America. One of the forms American exceptionalism can be said to take is that unlike other countries where participation and citizenship develop from a more organic conception of the nation, America is premised on ideas, a set of rational principles based on innate natural desires that all men can embrace.

As Allan Bloom explains it in the introduction to *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), “It is possible to become an American in a day.” By contrast,

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Bloom maintained, it is “impossible or it was until only yesterday, to become a Frenchman, for a Frenchman is a complex harmony, or dissonance, of historic echoes from birth on.”

What were the ideas that constitute this conception of citizenship? America’s “one story,” Bloom continues, is “the unbroken, ineluctable progress of freedom and equality . . . All significant political disputes have been about the meaning of freedom and equality, not about their rightness.” So self-evident and apodictical were these ideals that Bloom felt no need to go further. His “early experience of American simplicity had persuaded me that we were right,” he declares, “*that we could begin with nothing, that uncultivated nature sufficed.*” (Emphasis added)

As the years passed, Bloom began to realize something he hadn’t seen: The flourishing of this vision of starting with “nothing” but “uncultivated nature” actually depended on the education and intellectual foundation that most students had been bringing with them to college, a foundation based, however roughly, on the Bible and on some appreciation of the American Founding. He began to realize that this foundation had been diminishing more and more through the years of his teaching career, with the result that “Students now arrive at the university ignorant and cynical about our political heritage, lacking the wherewithal to be either inspired by it or seriously critical of it.”

Bloom stopped just short of drawing the logical conclusion, recognizing that America did not actually arise out of “nothing” but “uncultivated nature,” but that the founding principles of freedom and equality, though perhaps universal as aspirations, require a particular culture to support and transmit them in actuality.

Thus we have the irony that the belief in universal ideals without cultural support has led to their breakdown in today’s roiling “Identity Politics,” the special feature of this issue.

According to former Attorney General Edwin Meese writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, identity politics, although it wasn’t yet called that, began almost in a fit of absentmindedness. “Without much thought given to what they were doing,” he writes, “[policy makers] created and legitimized for civil society a new discourse of race, group difference and rights.” It “started roughly in 1966,” Meese explains,

when the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission began asking companies with more than 100 employees to collect information through the EEO-1 form on “Negro, American Indian, Oriental and Spanish-surnamed” employees. What began as an effort to track how policies affected people thought to be disadvantaged easily but tragically slid into government sanctioned promotion of

victimhood and racial preferences. The goal of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, to prohibit racial discrimination, was turned on its head.<sup>1</sup>

The country went from colorblindness to color consciousness practically overnight, it seemed, thanks to ongoing liberal activism, and by 1980, “the census began tabulating all residents into groups that correspond to a vague and unscientific color code: white, black, brown, yellow and red,” that is, “white, black, Hispanic, Asian, and American Indian and Alaska native.” The noble and self-evident principle of equality has been twisted to mean group equality, in outcome.

The first entry in our feature falls into our “Conversations” category. Canadian sociologist J. Scott Kenney found himself doing some Bloom-like rethinking in the library of his alma mater, where his academic journey had begun many years before. In that “historic school, I was introduced to the literary and philosophical classics of the western tradition, and, in an environment of open and free inquiry, schooled in critical analysis of the world around me.” What he learned back then has remained his “touchstone,” but, as he writes in this issue’s “Can We Talk? Life under Frankfurt Rules,”

today, the Western canon is increasingly being purged from universities by faculty in favor of a trendy identity-based curriculum . . . Perhaps most disturbingly, much of this is being done in the name of multivalent, quite liberal sounding terms like "tolerance," "equality," "fairness," and "justice" emergent from our own Enlightenment traditions.

Kenney’s effort is both to understand and oppose this destruction of the life of the mind happening under the cover of western values. To this end he fingers Marcuse as the evil godfather of identity politics. Marcuse’s twist on the traditional Enlightenment virtues turned liberal education upside down. His idea of “liberating tolerance,” for example, meant to allow so-called oppressed and victimized groups to speak while silencing any opposition from the so-called dominant groups. In his response to Kenney, Robert Paquette doubts whether today’s pleasure loving campus snowflakes could even manage to read the turgid Marcuse and proposes Joseph Schumpeter’s more objective observations instead; namely, the extent to which the reigning authority “absorbs the slogans of current radicalism and seems quite willing to undergo a process of conversion to a creed hostile to its very existence,” in Schumpeter’s words. In her response to Kenney, Elizabeth Corey suggests confronting ideological divides through

<sup>1</sup>Edwin Meese III and Mike Gonzalez, “Trump Can Help Overcome Identity Politics,” *Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 27, 2018.

mutual respect on a personal, face to face level. Kenney gets the last word and elaborates his ideas further.

“Conversations” is followed by several articles directly addressing the inadequacies of identity politics. Anthony Esolen’s evocative “Shedding Humanity, Shredding the Humanities,” exhorts students to “leave the cell” of identity politics, which spells doom to individual intellectual and emotional growth. “People who want to introduce you to Socrates, Milton, and Bach are not your enemies,” he gently counsels. In a different vein, Nicholas Capaldi, “The Pathology of Identity Politics,” provocatively suggests that identitarianism arises precisely from resistance to the individualism and individuation demanded by modernity. George R. La Noue’s “Diversity and Exclusion” exposes how narrow are the concerns and aims of “diversity” and how much of the intellect it excludes.

We finish up the special feature with two articles of a more directly practical bent. David Rozado and Stephen Atkins present an interesting piece of original research, “Why Are Nondiscrimination Statements Not Diverse.” Most universities produce three official statements regarding their institutions’ express purposes and positions: mission statements, diversity statements, and nondiscrimination statements. The authors’ systematic study of the statements of fifty elite universities finds that while their mission and diversity statements do claim to protect viewpoint diversity, their nondiscrimination statements in the main do not. The authors suggest that the simple step of adding viewpoint diversity to nondiscrimination statements could go a good way toward improving the one-eyed, one-sided campus atmosphere of today. Ben Foster, “Disconnect: Kentucky and the Political Ideology of Its Public Universities,” adds another piece of documentation to the growing literature on the political bias of the university toward the Democratic Party. Foster considers the effects of this one-sidedness, what Esolen might call this Cyclopean view. Largely Republican oriented Kentuckians would not agree with university support for illegal alien students, for example, nor to dedicating university resources to them. (Foster also contributed “Affirmative Action at the University of Louisville: A Case Study” to *AQ* Spring 2016.)

Well, life must go on, even under the shadow of identity politics, and our regular articles address other subjects. A recent piece at the Martin Center website suggests that the Americans with Disabilities Act, passed in 1990, is another good idea that has gone to extremes, with consequences for higher education. “When the ADA was enacted,” writes author Garland Tucker, “a well-meaning Congress thought they were addressing legitimate grievances of certifiably disabled citizens,” and removing unnecessary barriers that might keep them from getting

jobs they could perform. Ironically, however, employment for disabled persons has actually gone down since the Act, while disability claims have tripled. “This legislation appears to have harmed the work prospects for the legitimately disabled,” Tucker observes, “while simultaneously creating a gigantic new class of disabled applicants claiming government support or special treatment, many at our most prestigious universities.” Moreover, businesses and schools have to grapple with the hundreds of regulations that attend the Act, and universities find it difficult to resist disability claims from students, even when the accommodations demanded would seriously compromise academic standards.

In our article on this subject, “Disabling Academic Standards: Learning Disabilities and Time and a Half Testing,” Joshua F. Drake reports that an estimated 20 percent of college students are now labeled learning disabled and thus entitled to various and sundry accommodations in their academic career. Drake details some of the more egregious lengths to which these accommodations have gone and makes an argument especially against one of them: Namely, allowing extra time for students designated disabled to complete examinations.

Mark Bauerlein, “Argument by Epithet,” details the new level of mindless ad hominem attacks on Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, which reveal the utter derangement of the Left over the very existence of the Trump Administration. Bauerlein contrasts the treatment of DeVos with that of William Bennett, Secretary of Education under Ronald Reagan. While Bennett was also widely disdained by the professors, he was at least allowed the dignity of his educational philosophy, albeit judged “obsolete” by them. By contrast, DeVos’s considered views on education are not even given a hearing, and she is repudiated simply on the basis of being conservative, that is, immoral, to the core of her being.

Mark Zunac, “Paul Loeb’s Campus Takeover,” recounts the career of leftwing activist Paul Rogat Loeb and his radicalizing influence on American college campuses. Loeb’s career spans the arc from opposition to the war in Vietnam to today’s agitation for “social justice,” and his efforts exemplify Bauerlein’s point that not only has the personal become political, the political is all there is. In “Measuring Sexual Assault on Campus: The Clery Report Challenge,” Dan Subotnik reports very good news regarding the infrequency of campus sexual assault, very far from the one in four, one in five statistics bandied about by the Obama Administration. The Clery Reports, which are produced by the campuses themselves, report three incidents of assault per 10,000 women annually.

Craig Evan Klafter, “International Student Recruitment Abuses,” introduces a new topic to our pages. Formerly head of the American University in Myanmar, Klafter argues that this recruitment means big dollars for universities in the U.S.,

but the students are often underprepared for academic work here, and the degrees they are granted are not universally recognized.

Eric Schmaltz reviews *Burnt by the Sun: The Koreans of the Russian Far East*, by Jon K. Chang, and offers a glimpse inside present day scholarship on the Soviet Union. Christopher Kendall, Chief Development Officer for the National Association of Scholars, considers Patrick Deneen's much discussed *Why Liberalism Failed*. Allen Mendenhall is not convinced by Amy Chua's *Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations*, in which she admits that identity politics is breaking down American cohesiveness, but insists we have to keep trying to be the universal nation anyway. Gene Dattel, author of the recent book, *Reckoning with Race: America's Failure*, reviews Thomas Sowell's latest, *Discrimination and Disparities*. We finish up with an especially detailed Books, Articles, and Items of Academic Interest from Peter Wood.