



## Not Very Civic Education

**The Breakdown of Higher Education: How It Happened, the Damage It Does, and What Can Be Done**, John M. Ellis, Encounter, 2020, pp. 210, \$21.72 hardcover.

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Readers of this journal will not need to be told about the politicization of American colleges and universities by radical ideology. But John Ellis has written an unusually clear and eloquent overview that assembles the atrocities in one place, with explanations of the origins and recommended solutions. Written by an academic with over a half century experience, and following his own strictures by citing solid evidence, the case he presents cannot be denied or ignored.

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The first striking feature of this book is simply that its existence confirms its own argument, since such criticism cannot be expressed from within the universities themselves. All come from outside, sometimes by professors who have retired (like Ellis) or been rejected or ejected, because “career termination [awaits] those who challenge campus orthodoxy.” Ellis’s case is illustrated by the glaring incapacity of this institutional concentration of savants to critically evaluate, of all topics, itself. After all, this subject might have been appropriate for a scholar of politics or education (perhaps otherwise buried in pointless esoterica and the “impenetrable jargon” Ellis ridicules). Instead it is left to an emeritus professor of German literature, one relatively immune from punishment. As he writes: “Academic analysis is now not to be permitted in [and certainly not about] academia itself!”

His account of where this came from is especially helpful: essentially the combination of exploding enrollments, which lowered standards, and 1960s radicalization, which brought ideology. Ellis does not weigh the different strands of leftist ideology, but in my view the

threat from racial nationalists is now much less serious than today's cutting-edge trend of sexual radicalism—including patently fabricated quasi-criminal accusations against innocent people (documented by Stuart Taylor and KC Johnson, among others).

Ellis blames, foremost, ideologues among the professoriate, saying that “students were following, not leading,” though he concedes that current professors are 1960s-70s-era students. The result is universities populated by “people who don't really belong in academia but are now numerous enough there to control it.”

But the story he tells is one of cowardice as much as zeal, including “cowardly administrators” (especially presidents) and “completely useless” oversight bodies like faculty senates, boards of trustees, and accreditors. As Ellis recounts one horror story after another, he wonders about the “deafening silence” among moderate faculty as radicals push their way into power and “gang up on [dissenting] colleagues.” Many rightly fear for their jobs, but numbers could still provide protection if more showed backbone.

Opportunism is a less obvious factor, but outsiders can glimpse how academic dynamics encourage this degeneration with Ellis's observation that “[n]ew fads and fashions in criticism are a way in which people

who have no real originality of thought can find something new to say—or at least appear to do so.” This is not limited to leftists, but it does facilitate their “empowerment,” as “faculty who were not themselves politically motivated . . . jumped on the race-and-gender bandwagon as a career vehicle.”

Ellis concentrates on humanities and social sciences in the public universities, where the problem is most acute. Hard sciences are still less affected, but he insists that they are catching up. Likewise, private institutions *may* suffer less, though they too usually receive government money, which Ellis correctly sees as a major issue. (More on this below.)

Ellis does not examine professedly conservative and religious institutions, which still offer traditional liberal-arts curricula. Surely they provide refuge and offer resistance? Alas, “deafening silence” reigns here too, as these institutions succumb to pressure to compromise standards, accommodate ideology, and purge the un-PC. Despite stock professions of curricular “rigor” for students, they know that they lack the capability to prevail in a clash of ideas and shrink from confrontations with radicals.<sup>1</sup> Often inversely

<sup>1</sup>A generic failing of conservative politics. Since Ellis mentions the lessons to be learned from the execution of Charles I, I will point out that none of his supporters or allies risked their necks (or even their status) to save him from the scaffold.

politicized with boilerplate conservatism, the administrations are usually too intellectually feeble and morally diffident to venture beyond mantras about “truth, beauty, and goodness” and articulate the kind of principled defense that would effectively protect their own integrity and constituents. “These remaining islands of academic integrity will inevitably deteriorate over time,” Ellis writes about the sciences, but the prophecy is equally valid, and already validated, in private, conservative, and religious institutions.

And this points to a larger problem. Ellis sensibly insists that “making politics of any kind central to campus life must be damaging” and opposes professors who “politicize their classrooms in either direction.” He also observes that most academics are by nature absorbed in scholarship and disinclined to political activism: “the habits of mind of academic teachers are . . . the exact opposite of those of political activists.” By contrast, successful radicals possess quasi-Bolshevik organizational skills (plus ruthlessness), giving them influence far beyond their numbers.

But academic virtues must not become excuses for inaction and silence. Scholars are still citizens, and they should be prepared to become articulate intellectuals. Their learning and accomplishments are

facilitated by generous grants of paid leisure at others’ expense, and they are obligated to call upon those endowments, as appropriate when the public demands it, to stand up and be heard. “The campus as an institution owes us thought and evidence on contentious questions of the day,” Ellis insists. But apathy, pedantry, and overspecialization are also debilitating academic traits. The imperative to engage oneself civically only to the extent necessary to *de*-politicize spheres that should remain apolitical was a paradox familiar to dissident intellectuals in Communist Eastern Europe, who called it “nonpolitical politics.” Striking the balance requires finesse and risk, but Ellis shows by this book that it can be done. If he sparks a robust discussion on the broader question of appropriate political engagement by scholars, it might invigorate academic integrity in more ways than one. Yet many academics simply avert their eyes and hold their tongues.

This encourages further extremism and exposes the few who do dissent to purges. To supplement Ellis a bit, tenure is now increasingly ineffective because institutions are devising innovative methods to break contracts and terminate dissenters, which they can now do without anyone knowing. Ideologically incorrect professors are summarily dismissed using

“non-disclosure agreements”: The institution continues their salary and benefits for a specified time, but only on condition that they remain silent about a dismissal that otherwise constitutes an embarrassing and indefensible violation of academic freedom. (This seems especially likely where the faculty member has a contract but not tenure.) If money fails to stop their protests, employment contracts now contain mandatory arbitration clauses, requiring that “employment disputes” be settled in secret by a private arbitration firm. The ejected professor is instantly cut off from both the institution’s internal grievance procedures and the courts, *and even public opinion*—forced to register objections in a secret proceeding of not colleagues but lawyers, without record and under threat of legal punishment for public disclosure. We cannot know how many are being dismissed, because secrecy is the whole point of these tools.

Ellis’s most plausible remedy is to leverage public funding to demand public scrutiny. Academia has already become a “laughingstock in the eyes of the public,” including students, prospective students, and parents (whose tuition increases at three times the inflation rate). His caution about “dangers in bringing governmental and public pressures

to bear on institutions of higher education” for fear of violating their “independence” is unnecessary. Institutions that accept public money must accept the accountability accompanying it, like everyone else. Ellis broaches “going so far as completely defunding some humanities and social sciences departments.” He seems to accept that reform would be contentious. Inviting politicians to de-politicize education (or anything) would entail obvious risks. Perhaps the safest way would be to start with an assumption of zero funding and require every program to justify why it should be publicly funded at all. Ellis regards diverting funds earmarked for education into political advocacy as “stealing” public property.

His remedy is all the more justifiable given that government money is already used as leverage for precisely the opposite purpose, to exacerbate the problem, with government officials arm-twisting universities into ideological conformity at its most dangerous: requiring implementation of quasi-criminal procedures. This makes Ellis’s proposal to mobilize oversight by the Department of Education less plausible. DOE is operated by the very functionaries whose counterparts in the universities receive the bulk of the blame assigned by Ellis. (His

indictment of the high-minded and self-aggrandizing “diversity” and “harassment” bureaucracies is especially powerful.) A gargantuan exercise of executive-legislative authority would be required to change its direction. The current Secretary is a conservative who has already encountered extreme obstruction trying to moderate only the most egregious abuses. (And something similar pertains to Department of Justice lawyers, whose marionettes staff the universities’ in-house law firms and vet major decisions involving harassment and discrimination, diversity, quotas, etc.)

In fact, how far all this is facilitated by the larger growth of government power (impersonal as well as ideological) is a question that might

bear further investigation. Ideologies like Marxism, feminism, racial nationalism, and environmentalism rationalize bureaucratic government, which has itself grown exponentially in the postwar years, and many universities have unnaturally cozy connections with the state and its largesse. Ellis approvingly quotes philosopher James Otteson that “we should have no academic departments or institutes whose primary purpose is to inform, affect, or advocate public policy.” This would put entire schools and huge numbers of my colleagues in high-growth fields like political science out of business (by no means all of them left-of-center). But if we are serious about recapturing ideals of higher education, we should not be afraid of any such discussions or ready to rule them off-limits.