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A Time to Build: From Family and Community to Congress and the Campus, How Recommitting to Our Institutions Can Revive the American Dream, Yuval Levin, Basic, 2020, pp. 256, $20.99 hardcover.

Where Does the University Go from Here?

Daniel Asia

Yuval Levin is already somewhat of a superstar at the tender age of forty-three. His most recent book, *A Time to Build*, is about how Americans need to re-commit to our institutions if we are to revive the American dream. He covers the major institutions of our culture including Congress, the courts, and the presidency. He also looks at our business culture, journalism, the platforms of social media, and higher education.

Levin describes our current situation accurately. Some things are very wrong in American culture, but it's hard to figure out exactly what. There is a great deal of resentment and disagreement pervading our society, and a sense of hopelessness and alienation among large parts of the populace. All seem to live in their isolated spaces, physical and psychological. Suicide rates have increased while life expectancy has decreased. Crime rates have gone down, but anxiety has gone up.

Levin points to the crisis of "isolation, mistrust and alienation," which he attributes to a lack of "belonging, confidence, and legitimacy." (15) We have witnessed something like this before, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as exhibited in books like David Reisman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd: Problems of Youth in the Organized System* (1962). Levin suggests that our institutions have not so much failed us as we have failed them. Institutions have become platforms for individuals to present themselves to the larger world. Those who are now part of these institutions have forgotten that they have responsibilities towards those institutions. The challenge is to revive our institutions and the culture that supports them. For Levin, "our age combines a populism that insists

Daniel Asia is an American composer whose work ranges from solo pieces to large scale multimovement works for orchestra and includes six symphonies. Since 1988, Asia has been Professor of Composition and head of the composition department at the University of Arizona in Tucson; asia@u.arizona.edu. Asia is author of *Observations on Music, Culture, and Politics* (Cambridge Scholars Publishers, 2021). He wrote "A Conservatism That Makes No Sense," for our Winter 2020 issue.

all of our institutions are rigged against the people with an identity politics that rejects institutional commitments and a celebrity culture that chafes against all structure and constraint." (23)

Levin disputes the transcendentalist argument that America is a place for the individual to thrive in his soul and complete personhood, separate and apart from all persons and cultural institutions. He argues for a conservative position that realigns the relationship between the individual and the structures of society. The individual, by and large, sees himself as trying to go around institutions rather than working within the institutions that create the strength of our society. These institutions include where we "work, learn, worship, and govern and otherwise organize ourselves." (26) Levin asks why is it that so many of us have lost our trust and faith in our institutions over the past decades? His answer:

> We lose trust in an institution, therefore, when we no longer believe that it plays an ethical or formative role, serving as a forge of integrity for the people within it . . . This is a betrayal by insiders . . . and it is perhaps the most obvious factor driving loss of faith and institutions." (32)

We used to trust universities because we thought that they were devoted to truth and the education of our younger members of society. We've lost that faith because "insiders use their power to gain advantage, and so violate professional codes, norms of integrity, and other institutional guardrails." (32) Universities thus have betrayed their mission. We now "find professors and scientists and ministers and CEOs and artists and athletes all using the legitimacy built up within professional institutions to raise their own profiles in a broader public arena, and often in ways intended to signal cultural-political affiliations more than institutional ones." (35) We see this with the celebrityhood of sports stars, actors and actresses, and various billionaires, who think that because they are well known they must have something to tell us about matters in which they have no specific knowledge or expertise.

This is certainly a problem for university life and the rest of our institutions, where the worst aspects of university culture that have been taking place for the last fifty to sixty years have now polluted the institutions downstream. If the university is now a place of safe spaces, where free speech has been drastically reduced, and where its primary task is

to inculcate values related to sustainability, diversity, and inclusivity—so that it has completely departed from its original values of seeking truth and wisdom—why should it be held in esteem? If universities no longer transfer serious information and form character, with the goal of molding citizens capable of acting with agency in a democratic society, why should they be revered by the general public?

Levin delves deep into the matter of universities and puts the current situation into historical perspective. Students have been protesting from the beginnings of universities in the medieval period. Moral posturing in institutions of higher learning in the United States was also present from the time of their creation. After all, early institutions like Harvard began as seminaries, providing a particular moral orientation to the world. The atmosphere was intense and aggressive, on the part of students and faculty. However, the university is now a monoculture virtually without debate. In the humanities and the social sciences, liberals and those who lean left outweigh those who are moderate or conservative by about fifty to one. And this does matter.

The modern university has at least four functions: training students to earn a living, perform research, seek out truth and beauty, and transmit the legacy of civilization from one generation to the next. The balance has shifted tremendously over the last seventy-five years or so, such that the last is now by far the weakest. The study of the humanities for the purpose of leading students toward membership in a democratic society is in jeopardy. Levin claims that the "sum of all this" is "an institution largely directed at professional training, moved by an impulse for liberation from injustice, but," he insists, "always challenged by a small, persistent band of earnest and tradition-minded humanist gadflies." (98)

I wish this were actually true, but it isn't. That humanist band of traditional minded professors and students has grown so small and ineffectual that it has almost no effect on the academic environment or the general conversation that plays out in major components of the university. Those interested in a liberal education are being squeezed out by the scientists, for whom these are really not issues they care about, and the moralizers, who are on the left and have simply won the ideological battleground. Those who aren't aligned with either of these forces are forced into partnership with them to find justification, to find legitimization for their existence.

There are other problems as well. Students feel that they have to watch every word they say in conversation with each other. The code of speech and behavior is enforced by a strong sense of groupthink which is related to identity politics. Discussions aren't really about the matter at hand, but somehow always about the politics behind opposing views. If you talk about students' experiences, and disagree, it is as if you are threatening or dismissing their very personhood. Levin is right to argue that the "trouble is not that we have forgotten how to agree but with that we have forgotten how to disagree." (103) For all involved—faculty, students, and even now administrators—the situation is quite unbearable. One never knows when casually uttering a wrong phrase might get one into real trouble. This fear—and this is not too strong a word to use—puts at risk the search for truth through discussion, debate, and the usual work in the classroom. It is a serious threat to the liberal arts.

Despite his mistaken hope that "tradition-minded humanists" continue to challenge the politicized university, Levin is correct in much of his analysis. He argues that the new temper on the campus is one of a militant moralism. Those who know that "they act on behalf of justice . . . [i]mplicitly seek to cleanse and redeem society through acts of performative outrage against oppression and various forms of calling out oppressors." (109) These moralists now make the university a setting where the liberal search for truth and beauty is fundamentally compromised.

Levin holds responsible for this those who have the desks where the buck finally stops: the administrative class. They, in their wisdom, have tried to "keep peace by making perfect progressive social activism the official code of university life." It is this genuinely held view by our new administrators that now creates the expectations, goals, and desires of our students. Their position should be that of leading the university in the search for knowledge and truth rather than taking a leadership position on one side of the culture war.

Levin's conclusion is simple: those who believe the university is an institution of learning and teaching need to seek and find administrative positions to steer such institutions to a more moderate position. There they can engage in the struggle for the university—for its character and purpose—as a teaching and learning institution, rather than one that presents, supports, and indoctrinates a particular political orthodoxy.

Or maybe there is another answer: resurrect and clone John Silber, the

former president of Boston University, who may have been one of the last principled university presidents. Both have the same chance of happening. While I appreciate Levin's optimism, I am pessimistic about his proposal. I fear that only outside intervention will now succeed at righting this situation. This might include a shareholders' revolt, where the public refuses to support public institutions and demands changes in tax laws to force private colleges to rethink how they function. We might also see a revolt of the participants, where students and their parents decide they will not continue in this charade but will seek other means of education and credentialization. Also, Boards of Regents and accrediting agencies could begin to engage in real oversight. Finally, the government could refuse to offer financial support, withhold student loans and research funds, or withdraw tax exempt status when institutions engage in political activism rather than education.

Admittedly, these actions seem unlikely. Yet, there are still a few universities and colleges of virtue and honor; and in others, small pockets of real education and accompanying high standards that support such enterprises. Confucius Institutes are on the run and there are individuals who in their beliefs and actions have taken valiant stands that have been heard and to which there is a growing response. The Department of Education has revised Title IX directives to something that is almost sane, though more recently a new presidential administration has proposed reviewing these changes. Homeschooling and charter schools are sending off graduates to higher education who may just want and demand more from their curriculum. To make changes that really matter will involve a tough fight against an entrenched administrative class. It is a fight worth engaging, and as Levin I suspect would concur, no one said that righting this educational ship would be easy.