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# All Is Ok with the Universities

### *by David Randall*

***The Student: A Short History***, Michael S. Roth, Yale University Press, 2023. pp. xii + 202, $26.00 hardcover.

Michael Roth, president of Wesleyan University, presents the reader with a slight, wandering work. *The Student* skims from thumbnail accounts of iconic teachers (Confucius, Socrates, Jesus) and their students, to a sketch of medieval and early modern modes of learning (universities), to the emergence of the modern student (Kant, Rousseau, Humboldt, Emerson). Roth particularly cites the philosophes on the radical end of the Enlightenment, Rousseau and Kant, with their categorical imperatives toward spiritual and social liberation, as inspirations for the modern student.

> The goal of creating a classroom of active learners—whether they are collaborating on a project or working through a text together to see how it might be relevant to their lives—is very close to the goal that Kant articulated for enlightenment. It is to leave behind immaturity and take responsibility for one's learning. Students are in the process of becoming active, of coming into maturity, and yet the goal of maturity cannot be decisively fixed in advance. There are many ways of learning freedom. The student is in a not yet phase, a time of ripening. Kant said that we lived not in an enlightened age but in an age of enlightenment—a process of leaving behind the "conveniences" of immaturity. Philosophers of education like American John Dewey and Brazilian Paulo Freire share this process-oriented view of the student's path. (169-70)

Roth proceeds to a survey of American student culture (fraternities, activism) that concludes in the present day (nuanced, complex). *All is basically OK in the university* is the real message of the book; the historical essay is prelude.

Some part of the book is an intellectual essay on the natures of the teacher and the student; some part is the history and sociology of Western education, especially in America. Occasional sidebars on blacks and women oppressed and seeking education appear to have been inserted to meet the modern academy's ideological requirements: "For

Douglass, the arc of his own life exemplified the link between learning and freedom. He knew that in the context of enforced white supremacy, learning to read was 'running away with myself'." (76) Pieties such as "Slaves could not be students; students could not be slaves" (75) make one wonder if Roth has heard of the *paedogogus*, the noble Roman child's Greek slave or freedman tutor. Study and liberty do not always align.

Roth is a self-appointed spokesman for the left-liberal college establishment, and his book tiptoes delicately in its account of modern academia. He avoids mentioning the radical onslaught that has subordinated the ivory tower to the "diversity, equity, and inclusion" (DEI) ideology and its enforcing bureaucracies; diversity, activism, and various radical ideologies appear as minor elements of the whole rather than tyrants with the whip hand. His history of the student repeats to a mass audience a liberal university president's complacent and tranquilizing reassurance that nothing has gone wrong: "Young people for centuries have been at the forefront of resisting 'the establishment,' and it is no wonder that those who want to protect existing practices often turn against students and their teachers for their failure to appreciate the world their elders have built." (164) Students are just as they always were, eager to liberate their minds and the world, and a touch of liberal criticism of progressive bumptiousness will make it all right again. Roth's in his office, all's right with the world.

That Roth thinks the history of the student and the teacher leads teleologically to a Rothian world is no great surprise. But what is an alternate, more accurate history of the student, and what might it tell us about the university now?

We might start by going back to Isocrates rather than to Plato. It was Plato's contemporary Isocrates, after all, who in the West fused philosophy with an educational program that served the city—who founded the enduring marriage of the liberal arts education to service as statesman, as general, as more ordinary civil servant. With the philosophical rhetor Isocrates, more relevantly for a Western nation than Confucius, we have the idea that a student *ought* to dedicate himself to public service—that it is not ultimately a betrayal, as with a student of Plato or a disciple of Jesus, to apply the student's vocation to the service of the world. So the excellently Isocratean Cicero, with extraordinary influence down through the centuries:

> We must also read the poets, acquaint ourselves with histories, study and peruse the masters and authors in every excellent art … we must argue every question on both sides, and bring out on every topic whatever points can be deemed plausible; besides this, we must become learned in the common law and familiar with the statutes, and must contemplate all the olden time, and investigate the ways of the senate, political philosophy, the rights of the allies, the treaties and conventions, and the policy of empire. (Cicero, *De oratore*: I, 158)

A history of the student keyed to Isocrates and Cicero might teach us that the liberal arts ideals always have been a way to train elites to try to serve the commonweal when they use the power of the state to give orders. Also, that these ideals are as much the justification for a new elite to replace an old one as they are a justification for an existing elite; humanists justify thrusting aside churchmen from the state bureaucracies on the (moral, mutedly revolutionary) grounds that they are better students, therefore better people, and therefore better qualified for government. Rousseauian fervor is well and good, but the true student is Lord Burleigh putting his humanist education to good use by courteously cataloguing to Gloriana, *in utramque partem*, the arguments for and against war with Spain.

An Isocratean history of the student allows us to understand the DEI educational project as yet another ideology justifying a new elite's takeover of the state and parastate bureaucracies. But the words of Isocrates also show how sharply DEI departs from the proper liberal and civic ideals of the student: "But since we have the ability to persuade one another and to make clear to ourselves what we want, not only do we avoid living like animals, but we have come together, built cities, made laws, and invented arts." (*Antidosis* 254) The DEI drones graduating from America's Wesleyans don't try to persuade; they just give orders.

The DEI drones weren't actually interested in learning at college. To study is above all a training in humility, the recognition that you have much to learn. We don't want our future masters of the universe to be students because it will make them good or polished, but because we think the humility of study is good preparation for giving orders. But DEI activists don't do humble because they aren't really students who recognize that they can be improved by learning. An education in freedom without humility makes them masters in training and nothing more.

Set aside Roth's myopic blindness to how American universities have become factories to create DEI henchmen for a tyrant state. Roth's ideals are not the proper ones for students. "The student as disciple is someone who is so receptive as to be ready for rebirth" (44)—well, yes, but a university should not function as a temple and a teacher should not think of himself as a Messiah. Confucius, Socrates, and Jesus have unequaled virtues, but our true teachers should be Isocrates and Cicero, who taught us how to study to build and preserve the City of Man. And, yes, to seek the City of God—but seek it slant. We want students, not seminarians. These need not be hostile professions, but they are distinct ones.

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