

## REVIEWS

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**Telling the Truth: Why Our Culture and Our Country Have Stopped Making Sense—and What We Can Do About It**, by Lynne Cheney. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995, 256 pp., \$23.00 hardbound.

*Herbert London*

Traditionally, the university perpetuated the idea of Western civilization in two separate but related ways. First, it imparted a sense of intellectual method that rejected dogmatic, orthodox, and conspiratorial formulations in favor of a broadminded empiricism and a regard for the world's complexity. Second, it conveyed an underlying appreciation for the values of free societies, most notably a respect for the individual and for the ideals of personal liberty and constitutional democracy that emanated from it.

This view of the academy, however, is alien to the spirit of what aspires to become the new, activist vision, protected by the institution of tenure and academic freedom, as is the traditional version, yet fundamentally at odds with it methodologically and substantively. Armed with a variety of totalistic visions and relativistic assumptions, its partisans have little sympathy for open discourse or analytic procedures that fail to guarantee desired conclusions. As Howard Zinn, erstwhile professor of history at Boston University, once put it, "In a world where justice is maldistributed, there is no such thing as a 'neutral' or representative recapitulation of the facts." In such a view, objective truth is only what the present dictates or the future requires. As Leslie Fiedler noted, "[r]eason, although dead, holds us with an embrace that looks like a lover's embrace, but turns out to be rigor mortis. Unless we're necrophiles we'd better let

go."<sup>1</sup> And Hugh Stretton, a celebrated scholar of politics and government, has said, "the political scientist has a duty to go beyond discovering and understanding. It becomes his business to win."<sup>2</sup>

The organizing principle of the new scholarship inheres in its purpose rather than in its methods or theories. And its purpose is unremitting attack on cultural as well as political and economic institutions. This is a scholarship that sets out to prove what is already known—in short, the direct antithesis of what scholarship is.

It is precisely the assault on reason that prompted Lynne Cheney to write *Telling the Truth: Why Our Culture and Our Country Have Stopped Making Sense—and What We Can Do About It*. This book, despite the criticism I've read from Dr. Cheney's detractors, is not a polemic. In fact, she scrupulously avoids embracing orthodoxies of either the Left or the Right. As she suggests, "We should not, of course, retreat into the old myths." At the moment the attack on objectivity and rationality is from the Left. Logic, or logocentrism to some feminists, is the enemy of the new disciples of relativism. Cheney is leading the truth brigade.

Rarely is it mentioned by the avatars of a new social order that the unjust treatment of women and minorities was condemned by Western philosophies and a body of thought that emphasized individual rights. In the realm of febrile university dogma the West of white male dominance and scientific verities has produced evil in the world. ["Hey, hey, ho, ho, Western Civ has got to go"]. Lynne Cheney demonstrates that only those views which justify a lugubrious scenario can be entertained on campus. Truth itself is the adversary of social transformation. Jeane Kirkpatrick once wryly noted, "We should tell the truth, no matter how good it may be."

In painstaking detail Dr. Cheney cites example after example of attacks on merit,

excellence, truth, and goodness. A reader, however skeptical about her thesis, cannot easily dismiss the many egregious cases she presents. If there is a lamentation to be found in this book, it is "dismiss the evidence, embrace the theory." When Afrocentrists maintain that Greeks purloined Egypt's legacy and Egypt was a black nation, Egyptologists criticized the allegations for their lack of empirical data. However, that didn't influence proponents of the theory. When students expressed uneasiness with a politicized agenda in many colleges, they were told, "If you're going to teach, you're going to get your hands dirty." Presumably unless you embrace the theory, you're unworthy for the academy. When the Organization of American Historians held its 1993 annual meeting, there were sessions on "black, Indian, Hispanic and other minority history, women's history, labor and radical history, gay and lesbian history and multicultural history." But despite the fact it was Jefferson's 250th anniversary and the fiftieth anniversary of the invasion of Sicily, those events did not meet the theory test.

In one chilling case after another Cheney illustrates that objectivity is on the defensive. Almost every event in the academy and in the media is based on subjectivity, on how the author feels. In response to colleagues who ask students how they feel about a novel or an historical event, I'm inclined to reach for my "narcissist detector," a prism that reflects only on the "I." Fantasy is the hospitable setting for deconstructionist arguments that an event might have happened or it could have happened. Norman Mailer in his biography of Marilyn Monroe, for example, presents factoids—events that might have happened even though he cannot prove they did.

The result is a university longer on political certitude than on commitment to

pursuing the truth. Thus was it ever, with some important differences: when a reporter asked Woodrow Wilson why he would leave his comfortable position as president of Princeton to run for governor of New Jersey, the future president did not hesitate with a response. He said, "to get out of politics." On its face that remark is funny; it was certainly humorous when Wilson made it. When I used the same line to explain leaving my position as dean to run for governor of New York, no one laughed. In roughly eight decades the academy has become so overtly political that the humor in Wilson's reply is lost on contemporary audiences.

There was a time when university life was simpler and gentler than ours, a less fanatical era when errors in judgment could be corrected without heroic effort, when difference of opinion could be adjudicated by a belief in the search for truth. The university in that less complex era was not saddled with affirmative action policy and redressing the wrongs of the past, nor was it entwined with government interests, refashioning the curriculum in order to satisfy politically active groups, settling community concerns. It had not assumed the function of problem-solving institution of first resort. How prosaic it now seems to describe the university as a purposeful sanctuary from the "real world."

The reason for the slow pace of change in the academy until the sixties was the singularly focused purpose of university life. Teaching and research, learning and study, constituted the faculty-student equation. The utopian effort to refashion the society through university reformism was not yet on the horizon. Nor was the university yet in thrall to the solution of real and perceived social injustice. Administrators had not yet fallen into a rabbit's hole where symbols were deciphering tools and words were decon-

structed like soap bubbles. Not yet had ideas once evaluated on their merit been filtered through the net of race, class, gender and third world ideology. Not yet had students' rights been inserted into the Fourteenth Amendment, while *loco parentis* was being abandoned. Not yet were many students persuaded that rational discourse itself was little more than a plot to keep them subordinate.

In the nineteenth century, Charles Eliot, president of Harvard, said that the reason Harvard had so much knowledge was that freshmen bring so much in and seniors take so little out. Today most scholars and SAT scores reflect a different reality in which freshmen know very little, yet think they know a lot, and seniors know a lot about very little and cannot decide whether to take what they know with them or discard it. Considering the rise of advocacy programs organized around race and sex, the emergence of semiotics as a discipline, and the emphasis on personal experience as the harbinger of knowledge, higher education is often an exercise in "trained incapacity," to borrow a phrase from Thorstein Veblen.

When the society democratized the idea of higher education, college emerged as a universal entitlement; alas, there was a course of study for everyone. But few ask if there should be a college for everyone. With standards reduced to the lowest common denominator, universities have vitiated the pursuit of excellence. One obvious manifestation of this trend is undifferentiated grades. In 1976 I gave up using the Dean's List in the college I administered since it had become little more than a student roster. And this was certainly not the only area in which radical egalitarianism was evident.

The Byzantine contortions exhibited by university administrations in an effort to address the representation of blacks, His-

panics, Native Americans, and other designated minorities have forced colleges and universities to reduce admissions decisions to the very considerations of race they allegedly deplore. Hoist by the petard of fairness, justice, and equal opportunity, university leaders are obliged to administer by category, arbitrariness, and inequality. Rather than apply a blind standard of need for financial aid, university administrators are forced to consider race in their calculus in order to satisfy political expectations.

Notwithstanding the chastening effect a virulent orthodoxy can have on the free exchange of opinion, it is hard to know how students are affected. Some merely go through the motions, giving professors what they want to hear. Others rebel, often after they have graduated. I can recall members of my generation who read without comment the characterization of Sambo sitting under a tree eating watermelon in an early edition of Commager and Morrison, *History of the United States*, yet proceeded to lead civil rights marches and legislative activity that challenged black stereotypes of the past. While Cheney is legitimately peeved at the assault on truth, this concern should be tempered by experience. Some of the irrationalists are bound to come to their senses, albeit the loss of talent and the waste of time before that moment of illumination should not be taken lightly. A Francophilia among many humanists prompted by the work of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault has led to the view that reality is nothing more than a social construct. Students glibly assert this point until they have to write home for money or they need a job. Reality sometimes has a way of deconstructing deconstruction.

Yes, the university as the repository of knowledge has changed. Words pegged into the lexicon of contemporaneity such as action, change, engaged, subvert, and

radicalize, have altered, perhaps irrevocably, centers of higher learning. Transmitting the best that has been said and written has been replaced by efforts at political conversion. Preaching has undermined teaching. All this in the name of social transformation.

To make matters worse, an elaborate superstructure now protects the tenured radicals. They have their own departments organized around race, gender, and third world ideology. They have their own organizations, produce their own journals, find disciples and confer Ph.D.'s, offer awards and give tenure. The cycle of regeneration is not easily broken. Oppression studies finds new victims each year who must be addressed by new offerings and possibly new areas of concentration. There are the critical legal experts who contend that law is a mechanism to maintain the status quo of male dominance and class hierarchy. There are the radical professors who have arrogated to themselves verbal freedom denied "dominant group members." And there are the students of *designated* minorities who ask for preferential treatment in order to redress historical wrongs.

As Jacques Barzun once noted, these conditions are the manifest forms of *preposterism*. In Orwellian terms, the opposite of what is said contains the true meaning. Art is anti-art; openness is repression; transformation is totalitarianism; truth is fiction. So far into the realm of fantasy have we gone that several years ago a Senate Committee on Agriculture asked Jane Fonda, Jessica Lange, and Sissy Spacek to testify because they starred in films about farm life. (This could be an example for Dr. Cheney's next book.) To be on the right side of ideology affords the protagonist freedom to say anything. Cheney quotes Howard Kurtz in his book *Media Circus* as calling for a break from "the shackles of objectivity."

In the face of all the objections, Lynne Cheney magisterially stands up for truth: "There is something called truth. Imperfect as we are, we can never hope to know it fully or possess it completely; but beyond the spin of the moment, it exists for us to pursue." Encouraging the resumption of truth's pursuit in an atmosphere of existentialism and relativism is difficult to conceive, notwithstanding the extraordinary example of the Soviet empire toppled by the verities of history. Is there a movement for reason? Is there a sense of excellence? Is there a belief in the ennobling qualities of life in order to restore some balance from the onslaught of cultural depravity?

These questions have complicated responses. There are those still devoted to reasoned discourse, the search for excellence, a belief in objectivity, and the ennobling qualities of life, but they are on the defensive. Although Dr. Cheney doesn't say so directly, these people need structures that can nurture them—although I hesitate to quote Trotsky in this paragraph, I'm referring to "parallel structures," oases of truth seekers in the desert of irrationalism: scholars devoted to the free and open exchange of opinion; historians seeking objectivity; artists revealing universal verities; journalists who put a premium on objectivity.

What Dr. Cheney has provided is an impassioned alarm. Her impressive array of examples refutes the obvious criticism that these are selective and exaggerated claims. She is an exemplar of what she propounds: Cheney tells the truth. For that and for so much in this book, readers will be very much in her debt.

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*Herbert London is John M. Olin Professor of Humanities at New York University, New York, NY 10003.*

## Notes

1. Leslie Fiedler quoted by Israel Shenker in "Scholars Debate whether 'Feel' Has Killed Rationalists' 'Think,'" *New York Times*, 4 March 1969, 52.
2. Hugh Stretton, *The Political Sciences: General Principles of Selection in Social Science and History* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 431.

**Women's Studies Graduates: The First Generation**, by Barbara F. Luebke and Mary Ellen Reilly. New York and London: Teachers College Press, 1995, 224 pp., \$44.00 hardbound, \$21.95 paperback.

**Professing Feminism: Cautionary Tales from the Strange World of Women's Studies**, by Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge. New York: Basic Books, 1994, 256 pp., \$24.00 hardbound, \$13.00 paperback.

*Catherine Zuckert*

In the last twenty-five years, women's studies have become a well-established part of the curriculum of American colleges and universities. As the authors of both these books point out, there are now more than six hundred undergraduate and several dozen graduate programs. The authors of these two books disagree rather dramatically, however, about whether one should celebrate or bemoan this evident success.

As the title of their work indicates, Luebke and Reilly present the results of a survey they conducted of the graduates of women's studies programs. All had majored in women's studies, and most had a positive view of their experience. Eighty-eight women and one man responded to the questionnaire; 47 were in their twen-

ties, 29 in their thirties, 7 in their forties, 3 in their fifties, and 2 in their seventies! Sixty-four said they were raised by both parents—some in happy relationships and some in not. Fifty-four stated their mothers worked outside the home; twenty-six said they were raised by feminists. Fifty-two continued their education beyond their bachelor's degree; twenty-six had earned master's degrees; nine more were working toward one. Six respondents had earned a J.D. degree; one a Ph.D., one a D.Ed.; nine others were pursuing an advanced degree. Only three respondents served in the military. Contrary to some stereotypes, perhaps, fifty-three women and one man described themselves as heterosexual; fourteen women identified themselves as lesbians; two said they were celibate; four did not respond.

Most of the book consists of summaries of the descriptions named individuals gave of their experience with their major and the way it affected their later life and career. For example, after graduating from the University of Missouri in 1983, Sarah T. Luthens held "a variety of part-time and full-time jobs: school bus driver, United Parcel Service manual laborer, YWCA women's center director, legal secretary, phone canvasser, security guard, non-profit administrator, and 'quasi-social worker' for a residential program for women leaving prison. She has also worked as a nut-butter factory worker and hammock production worker in an egalitarian community, door-to-door canvasser and field manager for a nonprofit environmental group, phone-survey supervisor, union administrator, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission investigator, women's studies teaching assistant, law clerk, bar exam prep course sales representative, and telephone surveyor for a market research group." She earned her J.D. degree at the University of Washington in 1991; since 1992 she has

been a full-time union organizer with North West Service Employees International Union. The main reason Sarah majored in women's studies, was "it appealed to [her] sense of social justice like no other discipline." But, she pointed out, it also helped her land several explicitly feminist jobs. She also thought it was a significant factor in her admission to law school.

Sarah identified herself as a lesbian. After graduating from Pitzer College in 1974 and earning a master's degree at Oregon State University in September 1983, Lindsay Rahmun, on the other hand, "has been 'a community college instructor, consultant, mediator, and mostly a mother.'" After graduation, she reports, she "wanted to do practical things: homesteading, carpentry, gardening." Her focus on feminism in her major encouraged her to try such activities, including forms of physical labor usually considered to be "men's work." In 1974 Lindsay applied for an administrative job. She thought her B.A. in women's studies along with her experience on a student-faculty-staff committee made her the perfect candidate to be an assistant to a university affirmative action officer. "For about a week [she] felt smug about having majored in such a useful, career-oriented field. Then the bubble burst; [she] didn't even get an interview." Nevertheless, Lindsay reported, her major had affected her personally. It gave her "a forum for focusing on feminist issues.... Women's Studies gave [her] the basis for a thousand thoughts, discussions, arguments and dreams that have come in the years since."

While most women emphasized the positive change studying feminist theories had made in their lives, the reports were not uniformly positive. Although Patricia M. McGarry, a former women's studies administrator at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, said she would choose

the same major again, if she had it to do over, she would do it differently. She "was extremely disappointed" by her work at UMass. She "did not feel accepted into the women's community.... [She] could not understand how women who wanted the same basic things could disagree so often. [She] could not understand how faculty and students who didn't find [her] 'radical' enough could make [her] leave Women's Studies as a major." She did eventually graduate, but, she reports, she is not working in women's studies anymore.

"While each Women's Studies program is different and each graduate is unique," Luebke and Reilly conclude, "when we analyzed graduates' responses we identified several outcomes that majors mentioned: being empowered; developing self-confidence; learning to think critically; understanding differences; discovering the intersections among racism, homophobia, sexism, classism, ableism, antisemitism, and other forms of oppression; and experiencing community. These themes are similar to those identified by the researchers who assessed Women's Studies and student learning on seven campuses throughout the United States" (199).

In *Professing Feminism* Patai and Koertge point to the same study published by the National Women's Studies Association in 1992 as evidence of the problematic organization and results of such programs. Although the authors of the study urged each participating institution to draw up its own plan of assessment, they did list a set of key questions to be addressed:

1. Does women's studies cultivate personal empowerment and social responsibility?
2. How successfully does women's studies support students as they press their feminism on campus?

3. Is the authority of experience legitimized and are students urged to comprehend the experience of others?
4. Does women's studies foster connected learning?
5. Are students introduced to the constructed and situated character of disciplinary knowledge?
6. Are students encouraged to reconstruct knowledge from multidisciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives?
7. How do programs navigate tensions between creating safe but challenging classroom space?
8. Finally, how do we shift and make explicit the power relations both in the classroom and the institution?

"Nothing in these programmatic questions suggests that it might be the business of Women's Studies to foster research in, or at least make students aware of, women's history, women's literature, or recent social science work on women and gender," Patai and Koertge point out. "Instead, all stated goals seek to promote processes and attitudes.... [They] assume that an academic department should, as a key part of its mission, support student activism and the shifting of power relations within the institution."

The students responding to the survey were generally very positive about their experience, Patai and Koertge admit. "They praised the women's studies classroom as a place of affirmation and validation where they could find their personal voices and strengthen their identities. They gave high marks to the analyses they were taught to make of sexism, racism, ableism, ageism, classism, and heterosexism." But "customer satisfaction" is not the sole, nor should it perhaps even be the primary, standard by which the success of an educational program is judged. Patai and Koertge devote most of their

effort to showing how the explicitly political aims of women's studies undermine the academic integrity of the programs.

Both Patai and Koertge have feminist credentials. (Patai is a professor of women's studies and Brazilian literature at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst; Koertge is professor of the history and philosophy of science and adjunct professor of women's studies at Indiana University, Bloomington.) And they are careful to distinguish feminist scholarship, undertaken and taught within traditional academic departments, from women's studies programs per se. Feminist scholarship has raised new questions, led scholars to collect and analyze new information, and challenged widely accepted traditions, they emphasize. Feminist scholars with appointments in regular departments must submit their work to the scrutiny and standards of their discipline. On the other hand, as a result of the explicit emphasis on political activism, people hired in women's studies often lack the credentials necessary for regular academic appointments.

Patai and Koertge are not so concerned about the academic respectability or prestige of people teaching women's studies courses, however, as they are with the effects of the explicit emphasis on activism—often at the expense of academic content and standards—on the education of students. Over the years, they observe, classes in women's studies have acquired a rather definite ideological cast. Neither criticism nor dissent is allowed. The reason is political; women—at least women in women's studies programs—must remain united in the face of the external enemy. Women—like Patai and Koertge, one suspects—who dare to disagree or criticize are excoriated; they are not truly "women" and they are expelled from the movement.

The desire to maintain a united front has not prevented participants in women's

studies from fracturing into a myriad of smaller "identity" groups, according to race and ethnicity as well as sexual preference. And, because "group identity is assumed to determine all arguments a person makes or any actions she takes" (79), it becomes almost impossible for members of different groups to come to any agreement. One needs a table or hierarchy of past oppression to determine which group has the most pressing claim to recompense, but members of the different groups cannot agree on whose experience was worse and which group should, therefore, receive preference now.

"For many Women's Studies faculty," Patai and Koertge observe, "teaching is a more important, and probably more gratifying, activity than research. Indeed, feminists have been in the forefront of the current movement to give teaching and service greater recognition in the university." But, since "Women's Studies teachers are deliberately using their classrooms as sites for the recruiting and training of students to be feminist activists," they tend to adopt "standard proselytizing tactics such as providing comfort and support for neophytes, denouncing the enemy, rejecting opinions that contradict or complicate the party line, and engaging in rituals of confession and celebration to keep the faithful pure and committed. These are all procedures that tend to constrict, rather than open, mental horizons, and straiten, rather than enlarge, argument." Women's studies programs are supposed "to offer their students at least the semblance of a liberal education."

They do so, at least purportedly, by teaching them to engage in "critical thinking." But in practice Patai and Koertge contend that "critical thinking" amounts to no more than a wholesale dismissal of past authors and most scientific disciplines and procedures as "white" and "male." Stu-

dents in women's studies classes learn to express their feelings; they encounter the angry, if not hostile emotions of others. But they do not learn to analyze problems or data; they do not learn to distance themselves from the problem, to listen to and then critically evaluate other views. The emphasis on the personal, the emotional, the experiential, accompanied by a denigration of all opposition as well as abstract, logical, or mathematical argumentation makes women's studies not merely divisive, but out and out anti-intellectual.

Most of us have heard stories, if we have not directly experienced the divisions between radical separatists and heterosexuals and attacks on males in women's studies classes. These stories gain greater credence, of course, when they are retold by two committed professors of women's studies, and those professors back up their own experiences with accounts from others. We should be grateful, therefore, to Patai and Koertge for having the courage (or perhaps anger) not only to admit but also to denounce the evident abuse of academic freedom.

This reader cannot but wonder, however, to whom they thought they were writing and for what purpose. At the beginning of the book they say they do not want to add fuel to the antifeminist fires; they write to save rather than to undermine women's studies. But by cutely categorizing the doctrines and practices of their colleagues as "idpol," "wordmagic," "total rej" and "biodenial" to liven up their rhetoric, they are surely going to alienate anyone now associated with women's studies. A more sober analysis of the defects or limitations of identity politics, including the tendency in works concerned with the social construction of reality to ignore the biological or reproductive requirements of society, would probably have been more effective with their purported audience, women who have or



have had feminist sympathies but are increasingly uncomfortable with the more extreme claims now being raised.

If Patai and Koertge are correct in noting the tendency of people associated with women's studies to silence all dissent for the sake of maintaining unity in the face of the enemy, however, reform is not likely to come from within. So the question arises, what can anyone outside such programs do to remedy the abuses? I doubt that any administrator would be so foolhardy as to propose abolishing the women's studies program at his or her college or university. But faculty outside women's studies might press administrators to apply university rules uniformly. Concerning sexual harassment, for example: if women or homosexuals were treated the way heterosexuals and males are sometimes treated in women's studies classes, there would be a hue and outcry. If faculty appointments in women's studies were made in regular departments, Patai and Koertge suggest, their work would be measured by the standards of their discipline. Sloppy writing or ideological indoctrination would not be tolerated on "political" grounds. Feminist theorists might respond that all education

is fundamentally political. They are at least partly right, I think. What their claim means is that one can acquire a liberal education only in a liberal regime. Would these critics of liberalism admit that they are giving their students something other than a liberal education?

In the end, I suspect, the problems in women's studies programs will not end until the problems that gave rise to women's studies in the first place are adequately addressed. Women were absent in both the curriculum and the faculty; female students did not feel encouraged to speak in class or to follow professional careers. The more young women feel "empowered" by their education, the less need they will feel for special courses. The less systematic discrimination they encounter, the less apt they will be to reject all past intellectual and artistic works as well as social institutions as invidious products of "patriarchy." Critics who merely carp about the "feminazis" feed the excesses they claim they deplore.

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*Catherine Zuckert is a professor in the department of political science at Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota 55057-4025.*