

The Councilor: A Journal of the Social Studies


Volume 70 | Number 1

Article 3

The Enemy Within (the Ivory Tower): How Conservatives Came to Despise the Academy

Andrew Hartman
Illinois State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://thekeep.eiu.edu/the_councilor

 Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Elementary Education Commons](#), [Elementary Education and Teaching Commons](#), [Junior High, Intermediate, Middle School Education and Teaching Commons](#), and the [Pre-Elementary, Early Childhood, Kindergarten Teacher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hartman, Andrew () "The Enemy Within (the Ivory Tower): How Conservatives Came to Despise the Academy," *The Councilor: A Journal of the Social Studies*: Vol. 70 : No. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: http://thekeep.eiu.edu/the_councilor/vol70/iss1/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Councilor: A Journal of the Social Studies by an authorized editor of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.



The Enemy Within (the Ivory Tower):
How Conservatives Came to Despise the Academy

By Andrew Hartman
Assistant Professor of History, Illinois State University

In a May 4, 2005 editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* titled “Neocons Lay Siege to Ivory Towers,” a UCLA Professor of English warned of the “profound threat posed to academic freedom” by a California bill to enact the David Horowitz-authored “Academic Bill of Rights.” Horowitz, a repentant sixties radical, has become arguably the most influential conservative activist in the professed struggle against rampant anti-Americanism on campuses across the nation. His benignly-named “Academic Bill of Rights,” fashioned into legislative bills in dozens of states, purports to protect students against professors who “take unfair advantage of their position of power over a student by indoctrinating him or her with the teacher's own opinions.” In practice, the Horowitz bill would allow the state to regulate pedagogical practice, thus serving to decimate academic freedom, as the concept has long been understood.¹

Considering his powerful allies, the Horowitz quest is hardly quixotic. The influence of conservative groups such as the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, founded by Lynne Cheney and Joe Lieberman, dedicated to monitoring and exposing leftist sentiments among academics, has grown precipitously in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks. For these conservative activists, the academy is suspect, a veritable fifth column. For instance, in his latest book *The Professors*, subtitled “The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America,” Horowitz argues that a swarm of intellectuals are undermining national security in their sympathy for terrorists.²

¹ Sections of this article are redacted from Chapters 2 and 5 of my book, *Education and the Cold War: The Battle for the American School* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). A version of this article first appeared at the U.S. Intellectual History Weblog (<http://us-intellectual-history.blogspot.com/>). Saree Makdisi, “Neocons Lay Siege to Ivory Towers,” *Los Angeles Times* (May 4, 2005). For the “Academic Bill of Rights” in its entirety, go to the website of the organization founded by David Horowitz, Students for Academic Freedom (<http://www.studentsforacademicfreedom.org>).

² David Horowitz, *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishers, 2006).



The liberal academic response to such hyperbole typically takes one of two forms: Horowitz and his ilk are either lampooned as simpletons, or simply labeled fascists. Either approach does more to obscure than to clarify the terrain. Instead, a more serious analysis is necessary, one that undertakes a close reading of conservative social thought and that places contemporary arguments against the academy in historical context. This paper represents my initial attempt to attend to such an analysis, to historicize how conservatives came to despise the academy.³

Before proceeding, it is necessary to define the term “conservative,” since, like most political labels, its meaning is unstable. I attach the label to the first coherent political movement of conservatives in U.S. history, which took shape in the early Cold War. This is the movement that crystallized with the Republican nomination of Barry Goldwater in 1964 and that reached its high-water mark with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980—a movement fused together by at least two strands of conservative ideology: 1) a hyper-mythical-nationalism that manifested in a muscular anticommunism, and 2) a traditionalist resistance to secularism. The anxieties that structure the conservative disdain for the academy are closely linked to these two strands, anxieties over how the American nation is portrayed, and over the secular deconstruction of so-called traditional values.⁴

With these two anxieties in mind, conservative provocateur Dinesh D’Souza has distinguished himself as the quintessential anti-ivory tower activist. In his latest book, *The Enemy at Home*, D’Souza makes the outrageous claim that the so-called “cultural left”—which encompasses the academy—is to blame for September 11. “The cultural left,” argues D’Souza, has “routinely affirmed the most vicious prejudices about American foreign policy held by radical factions in the Muslim world.” But D’Souza takes the rhetorical battle against the academy a step further, combining a Horowitz-like mythical-nationalism with a traditionalist critique of secular values. He writes: “The cultural left has fostered a decadent American culture that angers and repulses traditional societies, especially those in the Islamic world that are being overwhelmed with this culture.” Thus, D’Souza melds nationalistic angst together with anti-secular concerns. He conflates the domestic culture war with wars abroad. In this he echoes the father of neoconservatism, Irving Kristol, who, shortly after the Soviet Union crumbled, wrote, “There is no ‘after the Cold War’ for me.

³ It should be noted that I do not necessarily subscribe to the notion of a leftist academy, especially in disciplines outside the social sciences and humanities. On how today’s younger generation of academics is more politically moderate than their predecessors who came of age during the raucous sixties, see Patricia Cohen, “The ‘60s Begin to Fade as Liberal Professors Retire,” *The New York Times* (July 3, 2008).

⁴ The modern American conservative movement, a topic largely ignored by mainstream historians between the 1960s and the 1990s, is once again a fashionable topic with a rapidly growing literature. For a good overview of the historiography, see Leo P. Ribuffo, “The Discovery and Rediscovery of American Conservatism Broadly Conceived,” *OAH Magazine of History* 17, 2 (Jan 2003), 5-9.



So far from having ended, my Cold War has increased in intensity, as sector after sector has been ruthlessly corrupted by the liberal ethos.”⁵

Conservatives also know “the liberal ethos” as “moral relativism,” which takes shape in both the domestic and foreign arenas. For instance, for conservatives, a moral relativist thinks that all gender behavior is equally appropriate, and, likewise, thinks all governments of the world are morally equivalent. Therefore, moral relativists represent a threat to both the family and the nation. Prior crusades against moral relativism, such as the Scopes Monkey Trial, typically remained in country. The conflation of the domestic culture wars with wars abroad first developed during the Cold War and only became especially pronounced in the Reagan era. It is this strain of conservative thinking that this article seeks to understand historically.

I briefly begin with an examination of the social thought of the so-called “New Humanists” of the 1920s, who laid the groundwork for the conservative critique of relativism. I then look at some of the most important conservative thinkers of the 1950s, including Russell Kirk and William Buckley, Jr., and how their critiques of relativism began to cohere with nationalistic imperatives of the Cold War. I follow with a close reading of three outspoken critics of the academy from the Reagan-era culture wars: Allan Bloom, Dinesh D’Souza, and Lynne Cheney. I argue that the gulf between conservatives and academics has indeed widened, even though such a divide has long been latent.

* * * *

The two most important intellectuals of early twentieth century traditionalism were New Humanists Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More. Babbitt, a Harvard literature professor, and More, a literary critic for numerous journals, theorized education as a process of discovering and exploiting superior talent. They believed that an aristocratic order was inherent to humankind. They theorized a dualistic humanity: humans were at one with the animal world in their propensity to succumb to base instincts, yet some people were capable of achieving a higher self, distinct from recourses to nature. This elevated existence was akin to “high” culture, or what Babbitt termed a “consciously directive purpose.” Few people attained such a purpose. Those who did were predisposed to rule over society because their humanism allowed them a degree of nobility. According to the New Humanists, the high culture of the ruling class had historically guarded against

⁵ Dinesh D’Souza, *The Enemy at Home: The Cultural Left and Its Responsibilities for 9/11* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 2. Kristol is quoted in Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York: Henry Holt), 81.



the baser instincts of the masses, who were naturally prone to, at best, crudeness, and at worst, evil.⁶

Although such aristocratic political beliefs were strangely dissonant in a nation of rhetorical democrats, American conservatives were attracted to the ways in which the New Humanists opposed the main currents of twentieth century American thought, what Babbitt and More termed “humanitarianism,” what might now be termed “moral relativism” or “the liberal ethos.” Whereas humanitarians viewed knowledge as something observed in its temporal and spatial contingencies, the New Humanists understood knowledge in its relation to tradition, eternal verities, and unchanging truths.⁷

Babbitt and More laid out a clear conservative pedagogical alternative to relativism, one that accentuated a time-honored respect for authority and hierarchy. Rather than allowing students to submit to their own evil instincts, the New Humanists believed that traditional knowledge would inculcate what they termed the “will to refrain.” Babbitt wrote: “This quality of will may prove to be alone capable of supplying sufficient counterpoise to the various lusts, including the lust of feeling, that free unfolding of man’s natural will.” The truly educated person did not develop a “will to action,” but rather a “will to refrain from action.”⁸

The New Humanists held that only an elite few were educable. For them, the purpose of education was not to raise the material welfare of the masses, but rather to endow exceptional people with moral and ethical instruction. Education was a dangerous thing to give to everyone else. More wrote: “It is ordained that in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.” For Babbitt, there were two basic classes of humans: “average man,” and the “saving remnant.” Education was to be compartmentalized accordingly. To do otherwise was to ignore the natural laws of nature. This was a natural-law critique of relativity. Things did not change. There would always be a ruling class.⁹

Writing as they did in the 1920s, when college remained out of reach to the majority of Americans, the New Humanists showed no disdain for the academy. They saved their critique for those progressives who were democratizing the public schools. The New Humanists believed that university life, especially the liberal arts, was a saving grace

⁶ Ronald Lora, *Conservative Minds in America* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1971), 69, 76.
Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), 167-169.

⁷ Lora, *Conservative Minds in America*, pp. 73-75. Clarence Karier nicely places the New Humanists in the historical context of educational ideas, *The Individual, Society, and Education: A History of American Educational Ideas* (Urbana: the University of Illinois Press, 1986).

⁸ Babbitt, *On Being Creative* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1932), 199, as cited by Karier, *The Individual, Society, and Education*, 188.

⁹ Lora, *Conservative Minds in America*, 81-84.



against the philistinism engulfing the rest of America. Thus, it is not until the university was democratized in postwar America that conservatives begin to develop a sustained critique of the professoriate.

Although it was still possible to be both liberal and anti-relativist prior to World War II, by the postwar era political and epistemological relativism usually went hand in hand. And vice versa, conservatives increasingly framed their political arguments as critiques of relativism. Independent conservative writer Russell Kirk led the charge. According to a *New York Times* 1998 retrospective, Kirk's 1953 book *The Conservative Mind* "gave American conservatives an identity and a genealogy and catalyzed the postwar movement." Kirk attributed his conservative philosophy to the influence of the New Humanists, who taught him to appreciate the aristocratic accentuation of excellence and distinction and to loathe the mass democratic emphasis of equality. He believed that relativism spawned an emptiness that led to nihilism.¹⁰

Kirk intervened in the debates over academic freedom that sprung up in relation to the red scare of the early 1950s. In his widely read *Academic Freedom*, published in 1955, Kirk offered a defense of academic freedom vastly different from liberal arguments. Echoing the New Humanists, Kirk rooted academic freedom in aristocratic principles: as aristocratic values died, so too did academic freedom. According to Kirk's rationale, the heyday of academic freedom was during the medieval period, when the church was universally accepted as the authority and, since medieval universities were under the auspices of the church, they too were accepted as conveyors of truth. For Kirk, the Reformation and the French Revolution destroyed the authority bestowed upon intellectual life, obliterating the pursuit of eternal truths free from the compulsions of the masses.¹¹

Kirk argued that academic freedom was only defensible according to Edmund Burke's "contract of the eternal society." Kirk juxtaposed academic freedom against democracy. He argued that, for liberals, even those who doubled as the vociferous wardens of academic freedom, "the impulse of the present generation is everything." If contemporary society deemed academic freedom outmoded, liberal relativists could not offer a theoretical defense. Kirk emphasized the tradition of natural law rather than contemporary mores: "If academic freedom exists anywhere, then, it exists in the realm of natural rights and social conventions sanctioned by prescription; and if theorists deny the reality of natural law, logically they must deny the reality of academic freedom." Liberals wrapped their defense of academic freedom in relativist notions of democracy. Kirk

¹⁰ See Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Santanaya* (Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1953).

¹¹ Russell Kirk, *Academic Freedom* (Chicago, H. Regnery Co., 1955).



believed that the scholar's sole master was "Truth," which often worked against the stated needs or desires of "Demos."¹²

Like the New Humanists, Kirk's conception of education was explicitly elitist, and thus inharmonious in relation to the postwar democratic zeitgeist. But unlike the New Humanists, whose arguments usually remained aloof from immediate political concerns, Kirk's analysis was imbued with the hidden kernels of conservative partisanship. For instance, whereas Kirk theoretically attributed the destruction of academic freedom to democracy, in practice he blamed left-leaning professors who he described as indoctrinators. "One of the abuses of academic freedom," he wrote, "is to convert the liberty of thinking and talking about politics into license. The teacher and scholar ought to be free to speculate about politics, so long as he does not abuse his opportunities by indoctrinating his students, and so long as he does not endeavor to subvert the foundations of society under the cloak of instructing society."¹³

Such conservative partisanship was more explicit in the work of William Buckley, Jr., the founding editor of *National Review* and one of the leaders of the postwar conservative movement. Buckley blamed the failings of American education on the "widespread academic reliance on relativism, pragmatism, and utilitarianism." In his 1950 treatise against Yale professors, titled *God and Man at Yale*, Buckley lamented the fact that "there is surely not a department at Yale that is uncontaminated with the absolute that there are no absolutes, no intrinsic rights, no ultimate truths."¹⁴

Buckley's mission was to convince the Yale Board of Trustees to retake the university from the professors who subverted the curriculum to their atheistic and socialist ends. Convinced that the large majority of Yale alums agreed with him, especially those who endowed the university with its riches, Buckley believed the Board was perfectly within its rights to purge those teachers unwilling to teach Christian values. Buckley opposed academic freedom insofar as it meant "freedom of the faculty member to teach what he sees fit as he sees fit." Academic freedom, according to Buckley, has "produced one of the most extraordinary incongruities of our time: the institution that derives its moral and financial support from Christian individualists and then addresses itself to the task of persuading the sons of these supporters to be atheistic socialists."¹⁵

Buckley's lament over the secularization of the academy represents an important turning point. Buckley was a Catholic, and Catholics had long been critical of the

¹² Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, 2-5.

¹³ Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, 114.

¹⁴ William Buckley, Jr., *God and Man at Yale: The Superstition of "Academic Freedom"* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1951), 25-26.

¹⁵ Buckley, *God and Man at Yale*, x-xii.



university system, but for its Protestantism, not its secularism. A traditionalist-secularist divide replaced the Catholic-Protestant divide, as conservative Protestants joined Catholics like Buckley in their disdain for the secular academy. Thus, whereas the New Humanists defended tradition in the name of natural law, the conservative attack on relativism increasingly came to wear religious clothing.¹⁶

In this sense, University of Chicago professor Allan Bloom was a throwback. An atheist who preferred Ancient Greek to Judeo-Christian culture, Bloom grounded his philosophical critique of relativism in natural law. Bloom's 1987 book *The Closing of the American Mind*, for which there are 1.2 million copies currently in print, was published in the midst of the so-called "canon wars." The first symbolic controversy in this struggle developed at Stanford University in 1986 when the Black Student Union publicly complained about the required freshman core curriculum, which was based on the Western canon. The students described it as Eurocentric. A panel found in favor of the minority students, and a new multicultural program replaced the core. This outraged traditionalists, including Secretary of Education William Bennett, who decried that the university had caved to "a campaign of pressure politics and intimidation."¹⁷

The Closing of the American Mind was a spirited defense of the canon, but more than that, it was the defining Reagan-era critique of relativism. Bloom wrote: "There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative." According to Bloom, "The true believer is the real danger. The study of history and of culture teaches us that all the world was mad in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism. The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think you are right at all."¹⁸

Although Bloom's analysis was agreeable insofar as, minus a belief system, our students do indeed seem apathetic, his historical narrative was problematic in its resort to nostalgia in interpreting American education. He argued that American schools once had as their goal the inculcation of "democratic man," who was "to know the rights doctrine; the Constitution, which embodied it; and American history, which presented and celebrated the founding of a nation." Bloom theorized that, because the old view was

¹⁶ Patrick Allitt argues that Catholics were central to the postwar conservative revival, especially in its traditionalist veneer, *Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America, 1950-1985* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

¹⁷ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987). Bennett is quoted in Robert M. Collins, *Transforming America: Politics and Culture During the Reagan Years* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 180. There has yet to be good historical treatment of the Reagan-era culture wars. For a decent sociological analysis, see James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

¹⁸ Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 25-26.



grounded in the universal standards of natural rights, Americans discovered a basis of unity. “Class, race, religion, national origin or culture all disappear.” In theory, this sounds preferable to cult-of-ethnicity tribalism, the oft-decried identity politics. Of course, Bloom’s theoretical conception of the glory days ignores the way the system actually worked in practice, as universities rarely admitted non-WASP males. Bloom’s universalism covered over its particularities. It assumed that what was best for people like him was best for everyone.¹⁹

For Bloom, latent relativism was made manifest on campuses when universities caved to the demands of a highly politicized student populace. To this extent, he compared the American university response in the 1960s to the German one in the 1930s. “Whether it be Nuremberg or Woodstock, the principle is the same. As Hegel was said to have died in Germany in 1933, Enlightenment in America came close to breathing its last during the sixties.” For Bloom, ethical relativism replaced natural rights, “The imperative to promote equality, stamp out racism, sexism and elitism, as well as war, is overriding for a man who can define no other interest worth defending.”²⁰

Dinesh D’Souza, like Bloom, also became famous writing about the campus wars in his *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*, (1991). D’Souza, the quintessential conservative critic of the academy for the way he blends hyper-mythical-nationalism and traditionalism, also represents one of the central historical factors contributing to the increased conservative animosity towards professors: the growth of private think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute. Conservatives now have institutions of their own, apart from the university system; and D’Souza, a Hoover Institution fellow and frequent Heritage Foundation visitor, symbolizes the advent of right-wing think tanks and conservative intellectuals who function outside of, and against, the academy.

D’Souza framed *Illiberal Education*, funded by the John Olin Institution, as a response to the revolution that had taken place on American campuses in the wake of the sixties. In his words, this revolution was “conducted in the name of those who suffer from the effects of Western colonialism in the Third World, as well as race and gender discrimination in America. It is a revolution on behalf of minority victims.” D’Souza, himself a South Asian immigrant, extended the argument against relativity to his vehement opposition to affirmative action, or what he terms “preferential treatment.” For him, standards were matter-of-fact. An admittance system should be grounded in the universal standards codified by the Founders—the code of equal opportunity and equal

¹⁹ Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 26.

²⁰ Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 314.



responsibility. In practice, this meant that college students were to be admitted based on their GPAs and how well they score on the SAT. Period.²¹

D'Souza also opposed multiculturalism and new academic programs such as women's and black studies, all the result of the sixties. He wrote: "Older, traditionally liberal professors are retiring and making way for a new generation, weaned on the assorted ideologies of the late 1960s: the civil rights movement, the protest movement against US involvement in Vietnam, and the burgeoning causes of feminism and gay rights." He lamented that, for these sixties-generation scholars, race, class, or gender explained everything. In contrast to a liberal education that he idealized, the revolutionized academy taught students that "justice is simply the will of the stronger party; that standards and values are arbitrary, and the ideal of the educated person is largely a figment of bourgeois white male ideology."²²

For Lynne Cheney, wife of Dick—and, as chairwoman of the National Endowment for the Humanities from 1986 to 1993, one of the foremost protagonists in the culture wars—the victim's revolution manifested in a revisionist national narrative. In 1994, prompted by political leaders concerned with falling standards, a large group of historians and educators, led by UCLA historian Gary Nash, developed the National History Standards. These standards, based on professional historiography, quickly generated a venomous media blitz, led by Cheney. In a now famous *Wall Street Journal* opinion piece, Cheney blathered that the standards portrayed American history as "grim and gloomy." Many found her message amenable. In 1995, the U.S. Senate voted 99-1 to condemn the standards. Presidential candidate Bob Dole described historians as "intellectual elites who seemed embarrassed by America."²³

Cheney's 1995 book *Telling the Truth*, an irony-free title, took up the war on relativism. She scorned the academic fashion of reading power and hierarchy into everything, including canonical texts that represented, in her mind, universal truths. She wrote, "The humanities are about more than politics, about more than social power. What gives them their abiding worth are truths that, transcending accidents of class, race, and gender, speak to us all."²⁴

²¹ Dinesh D' Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 13, 5.

²² D' Souza, *Illiberal Education*, 229.

²³ Cheney's *Wall Street Journal* opinion piece is cited in Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 3.

²⁴ Lynne Cheney, *Telling the Truth: Why Our Culture and Our Country Have Stopped Making Sense—and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 14.



Cheney couched her denunciation of the National History Standards in her anti-relativist framework. She writes: “The National History Standards are the most egregious example to date of encouraging students to take a benign view of the failings of other cultures while being hypercritical of the one in which they live.” She continued: “The Cold War is presented as a deadly competition between two equally culpable superpowers, each bent on world domination. Ignored is the most salient fact: that the struggle was between the communist totalitarianism of the Soviet Union, on the one hand, and the freedom offered by the United States, on the other.” Like D’Souza and Horowitz, Cheney worried that the moral relativism of the professors opened the backdoor to an unflattering portrayal of America; moral relativism, meet anti-Americanism. This is a potent narrative about the academy that has attached itself to the popular conservative imagination.²⁵

In conclusion, I should briefly highlight one of the more ironic transformations in the relationship between conservative intellectuals and the liberal academy. Whereas the New Humanists, Russell Kirk, and Allan Bloom were elitists in their belief that a liberal education should act as a defense against the less agreeable aspects of democracy, the latest wave of anti-academics—Cheney, D’Souza, and Horowitz, not to mention Ann Coulter, Bill O’Reilly, and Rush Limbaugh—have marketed themselves as champions of the rights of ordinary people against elitists on university faculties. Although this paradox is somewhat comical, it should give us pause. In the nation that speaks the language of Populism, it is rarely an advantage to be imagined in opposition to the people.

²⁵ Cheney, *Telling the Truth*, 29.

