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THE 1950s AND 1990s: SIMILARITIES AND NOTEWORTHY DIFFERENCES

Lionel S. Lewis[†]

During the McCarthy era, the political lives of those faculty and students concerned with national and world affairs were more isolated from one another than is the case today. For the most part, each occupied their own social sphere, and particularly for faculty and undergraduates, these worlds did not often come together. This was almost inevitable, as the political community on campus, if there was one, was small. As is usually the case with faculty and undergraduates, they were separated by generation and very different interests; contact was at most sporadic and minimal. Even in the period of *in loco parentis*, faculty and undergraduates did not fraternize on political matters any more than on other matters. It was not expected that faculty and students would routinely express themselves freely and exchange views—political, personal, or any other.

Faculty and graduate students might from time to time be more inclined to talk about a wide range of subjects outside the formal academic setting. Concerns, however, about violating norms that guide teacher/student relationships seem to have minimized informality. To be sure, at some colleges and universities there were rallies and public forums about the issues of the day and even demonstrations in which sympathetic faculty took a leadership role and made their views known. Some faculty were often free with their counsel. Yet such activities occurred only on a small number of campuses.

As far as the Communist Party was concerned, it did not seem particularly interested in having its faculty and student members involved in joint political activities. Its obsession with secrecy would almost preclude formal or even transient associations. Faculty and students on the same campus did not even

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belong to the same cells. Moreover, there were only a handful of Communist Party members on only a handful of campuses.

As a natural consequence of this dichotomy, politics and teaching were decidedly distinct. In large part, classrooms were free of discussions about political, social and economic matters. Most faculty strongly believed that it was out of keeping to indoctrinate students; many felt that it was improper to encourage students to become involved in political activities. Thus, students were seldom recruited to become involved in causes.

The 1950s were commonly referred to as "the placid decade." The social sciences were dominated by the structural-functionalist paradigm, which was inherently conservative, but was not put forth as such. Competing perspectives were not part of academic discourse and were not often recognized or discussed. When the political views of an undergraduate were affected by college life, it was often the student culture of the campus that was responsible for the change, not the lectures of a professor. This is still the case today.

It is possible that some faculty might have been concerned that there were risks in injecting their politics into the classroom. Whatever the reason—prudence or professionalism—this seldom occurred. Indeed, many faculty who were active in left-wing politics at that time claim that they took pains not to let their political views color their teaching. Although perhaps a chimera, objectivity was valued and sought. Bias in teaching was seen as a misuse of the classroom by taking advantage of students.

Students and graduates did not come forward to report that attempts were made to subvert or even change their beliefs. William F. Buckley's complaint about the post World War II campus was more about what did not go on in the classroom, rather than what did.¹ Stories were repeated—most often by a relative—that the college experience ruined a young person's sense of right and wrong and ultimately his or her life. But these tales were usually vague, from the fringe, exaggerated, and unsubstantiated.

There is very little evidence that the classroom was used to proselytize students. If academic administrators had had viable reports of such incidents, surely they would have used such information in their efforts to dismiss faculty they believed to be

1. WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY, *GOD AND MAN AT YALE* xiii (1951).

communists, too close to the Communist Party, or even too far to the Left. They did not. In my study of academic freedom cases on 58 campuses involving 126 faculty during the Cold War, in only one account was there even a hint of bias in teaching.² The subject was an economist at Oregon State College.

Reports came to me in second-hand fashion which led me to think that [he] might be spending an undue amount of classroom time discussing political matters not pertinent to scheduled assignments of subject matter. . . . Reports of strong resentment coming to me for the most part second-hand . . . [townspeople, faculty in other schools] have led me to the definite conclusion that [he] failed to manifest a reasonable degree of scientific objectivity in the classroom.³

In the 1950s, academics got into trouble if they were seen as political. Campus officials generally took action against faculty members after government investigators or some zealous moral entrepreneurs identified individuals and created public relations problems or embarrassed the institution. Yet, faculty were just as likely to make themselves unwelcome on campus when they did not fit in socially. This too seems to be the case today.

Still, times have changed, as have some of the goals of higher education. One consequence is that the political culture on campus is not as thin as it was in the 1950s. Another is that faculty debate about the curriculum is less muted and more apparent.

A more common assumption today than in the 1950s is that education is empty and of limited value unless it has a moral component. The belief is that a traditional liberal education—an education without citizenship or that does not attempt to further particular values—is inadequate. This has almost become a commonplace, dinned into the public mind, endlessly repeated but rarely examined. The fact is that higher education has never been successful in this endeavor. A balanced liberal education that might include reading Adam Smith and Karl Marx, Edmund Burke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Nietzsche and Immanuel Kant, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, does not guarantee a particular ideological outcome, nor should it.

2. LIONEL S. LEWIS, *COLD WAR ON CAMPUS: A STUDY OF THE POLITICS OF ORGANIZATIONAL CONTROL* 104 (Transaction Books 1988).

3. *Id.* at 104-05.

In recent years, indoctrination has become an academic responsibility as more and more faculty maintain that an unbiased, objective, ideology-free pursuit of knowledge is a transparent myth. An instructor said of her one-semester seminar, entitled "Difference, Power, Discrimination: Perspectives on Race, Gender, Class, and Culture," that is meant to teach the 480 freshmen at the College of Wooster to think and write critically: "I can't teach from a neutral perspective because I don't think there is one."⁴

A large proportion of the professoriate see truth as relative and believe that they have a civic and moral responsibility to reveal their truth to students. With this belief, objectivity is not necessarily valued nor sought. It is commonly believed that scholarship cannot be disinterested.

This so-called canon is viewed by some vocal faculty as oppressive and a sham, nothing more than part of a scheme to further the ruling ideas of the ruling class. The act of teaching, a significant minority have concluded, must be politicized so that higher learning can focus on immediate concerns. Opinion is as valuable as fact, whatever the fact may be. All ideas are of equal worth. No culture or any of its parts is better than any other. Popular culture is as prized as high culture. One result of this reasoning is that the core curriculum has become ideologically contested terrain, infused with racial and gender issues as it has come to the fore in society. Another result of this thinking, however, is not greater tolerance, but more mindlessness, endless ideological skirmishing, and polarized campuses.

In the minds of many on campus, it follows that if students cannot be taught knowledge, they can at least be taught virtue. It is expected that colleges and universities should be a forum for good. With courses that examine multiculturalism or social and cultural diversity, students may now be exposed to some of the moral issues of the day. Higher education and its products should at least stand for tolerance, mutual compassion, and social progress.

A few years ago, the University of California at Berkeley instituted an American cultures requirement which mandated the study of minority group contributions to American society.

4. Scott Heller, *Race, Gender, Class, and Culture: Freshmen Seminar Ignites Controversy*, CHRON. OF HIGHER EDUC., Jan. 29, 1992, at A33, A35.

At the University of Texas at Austin, instead of some “so-called” classics, freshman English students read a packet of essays on discrimination, affirmative action, and civil rights cases. The majority of faculty who supported this new curriculum felt that the change would provide students more relevance to real-life concerns; only a minority felt that it could politicize the curriculum and students. At Clark University, an attempt was made to encourage faculty to “integrate pluralistic concerns” into what they taught.

In spite of such efforts, there are no indications—from increasing rates of absenteeism, academic dishonesty, or alcohol abuse—that today’s students are becoming more civilized, sensitive, or broad-minded than previous generations of students. There is also no consensus on what constitutes the social good.

At the same time, fewer faculty believe that a general education is possible or desirable as the student body becomes more heterogeneous, and knowledge more specialized. Not many are convinced that it is possible for college graduates to connect intellectually. There is a sense that the student body is too diverse in background and interests to share a common educational experience, and that it would be folly and just short of tyranny to impose one. A course in world history may be necessary for graduation, but the various offerings taught to meet this requirement might bear no resemblance to each other; it is possible that those taking different sections of such a course will have no facts or ideas to share. Seldom questioned is the debatable assumption that students should be permitted to decide for themselves whether or not they wish to learn about the significant ideas and events that have shaped their lives.

Moreover, many students come to college to learn specific skills; they want jobs and careers, not a general education. In the competition for students, colleges and universities seldom offer arguments to challenge such thinking. Why burden students with facts and ideas about their cultural heritage? Are they really that important? And since all facts are of equal value, is not learning that Thomas Jefferson owned slaves as useful as knowing about his intellectual contributions to our democracy?

The point here is simple. A reasoned critique of curricular reforms is necessary to continually improve higher education. It should be welcome. However, changes in academic life have moved somewhat beyond that point in matters of greater

intellectual large-mindedness and inclusiveness. As Cole Porter put it about another era:

Authors too who once knew better words
Now only use four-letter words
Writing prose — anything goes.
The world has gone mad today,
And good's bad today
And black's white today
And day's night today.⁵

An historian from the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton writes that “the production of knowledge is a political enterprise,” and adds that those who disagree with this assertion “are not without their politics; they simply promote their orthodoxy in the name of an unquestioned and unquestionable tradition, universality, or history They are enemies of change.”⁶ They are furthering “the conservative agenda.”⁷ Most are “marginal intellectuals” and “disaffected scholars” who in reality have a deep “suspicion and hostility to intellectuals.”⁸

As arrogant, outrageous and dangerous as these assertions are, they are not quoted here to rekindle the debate over political correctness. They are used only to illustrate a significant change on American campuses since the 1950s—a curriculum with a greater ideological thrust.

Finally, there is an obvious risk in using the classroom as an evangelical pulpit to further views that are not part of the main current of American thought. Powerful forces will surely mobilize to counter what they see as heretical or unsound ideas. We are already witnessing this. Quite precipitously this could put academic freedom and faculty in greater danger than they were in the 1950s.

5. COLE PORTER, *Anything Goes, on NIGHT AND DAY, THE COLE PORTER SONG BOOK* (PolyGram Records 1990).

6. Joan Wallach Scott, *The Campaign against Political Correctness: What's Really at Stake?*, CHANGE, Nov.-Dec. 1991, at 30.

7. *Id.*

8. *Id.* at 33.