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Resistance vs. Reform

Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University*

W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 2010. 174 pages. $24.95

By Paul Almonte

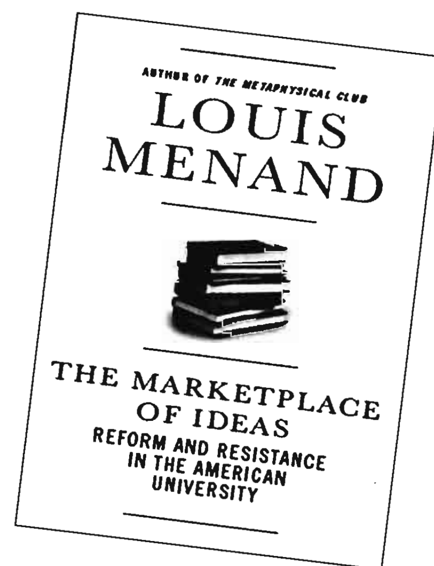
"Knowledge is social memory, a connection to the past; and is social hope, an investment in the future"

—Louis Menand

In *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University,* Louis Menand offers a concise history of how key structural components of the American university have come to be, and how these components have—or have not—evolved in the face of changing student demographics and public needs. According to Menand, resistance has always seemed to outpace, if not fully repress, reform: "There is always a tension," he notes, "between the state of knowledge and the system in which learning and teaching actually take place. The state of knowledge changes more readily than the system." That gap is the driving impetus for Menand's work. How the skills and values universities claim to instill relate to the broader "marketplace" and how higher education has reacted to calls to renew or re-imagine itself to prepare students better for the ever-evolving worlds of work and leadership they will inhabit, is crucial—both for the future of higher education and our nation.

The book breaks down his examination of the university into four questions: "Why is it so hard to institute a general education curriculum? Why did the humanities disciplines undergo a crisis of legitimation? Why has 'interdisciplinarity' become a magic word? And why do professors all tend to have the same politics?" Menand's argument is "that these issues are all fundamentally systemic—they arise from the way in which institutions of higher education sustain and reproduce themselves."

Particularly valuable is Menand's focus on general education and the history of the core curriculum (whether constituted as a distribution system or a series of "great books" or other form of classic knowledge seminar), which has been the cornerstone of a university education: "Historical and theoretical knowledge... unearths the *a prioris* buried in present assumptions; it encourages students to think for themselves... the goal of teaching students to think for themselves is not an empty sense of self-



satisfaction. The goal is to enable students, after they leave college, to make more enlightened contributions to the common good." Given the often fractious relationship between higher education and society as a whole, focus on what constitutes the common good, and how we teach it, is terribly important.

Having to legitimize ourselves — to students who rarely receive thorough explanations of what a core curriculum is

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supposed to accomplish or to a broader public that may view all non-career-specific education as ivory tower nonsense — is an opportunity neither to ignore or waste. As schools review and revamp curricula, they should pay close attention not only to what is offered, but how presumed outcomes are being presented: students should understand terms like "the common good" by knowing more fully why a business major should take courses in ethics or philosophy or why a biotechnology major studies religion or utopian literature. The ideas and values discussed within those courses will help them make informed and ethical decisions in their applied careers.

Also interesting, I think, is Menand's discussion of interdisciplinarity. Wondering how this idea became a cure-all "innovation" for higher education's ivory tower isolation, Menand suggests that it is wrongheaded to view interdisciplinary teaching as "opposed" to traditional disciplinary "silos." Instead, he views the former as an extension of the latter — and, at its laziest, an eliding and replication of the worst problems of our disciplinary-specific, specialized models of teaching.

This is perhaps where the issues Menand raises are most applicable to the implicit assumption often made about four-year degrees: that students receive both a broad understanding and the beginnings of some specific professional training. Here, Menand challenges us to examine our own efforts. Are we, for example, relying too heavily on terms like interdisciplinary — and the few faculty members teaching together in what always seem to be "pilot" programs—and not focusing enough on how we're actually teaching the core curriculum in each of our individual classes or how the ideas from those courses are related to a student's major coursework?

Professional conservatism

Menand also reminds us of issues — the problems associated with the ways we train Ph.D.s and our professional and institutional "conservatism," to name two — that often hinder innovation and our effectiveness in supporting and influencing the public marketplace of ideas. Menand worries, for example, whether graduate school self-selection narrows the idea pool and hurts our overall ability to attract a broad-enough group of would-be scholars and teachers to create and maintain the engagement of ideas, the dialectic that keeps the humanities relevant. There is less ferment from the bottom than is healthy in a field of intellectual inquiry." Menand connects this to what he sees as the narrowing of our own professional thought and practice. The matter of a faculty's "professional conservatism" — the refusal to change antiquated curricula and systems — combined with its relatively liberal public politics threatens to undermine the best values of the college. Again, Menand challenges us to ask ourselves who we are and whether the answer we come up with speaks to who our students are and what their—and society's—needs are, contending that "[t]he academic world would be livelier if it conceived of its purpose as something larger and more various than professional reproduction."

With their emphasis on Jesuit traditions and values, our institutions have always viewed their purpose as "something larger" and we certainly ask our students to be more than just career-ready. Still, Menand's questions are relevant; we are all struggling with "marketplace" issues, not simply in examining how we reflect or critique societal values, but also how our students — and the people who will presumably hire them — view our project. As Menand notes, "It is important… for the university to engage with the public culture and to design its investigative paradigms with actual social and cultural life in view."

What is the role of the public intellectual and the role and responsibility of colleges and universities in shaping and preparing that individual? How do we — in our Jesuit philosophy, structure, and practice — better engage the "general culture" as we promote the values and relevance of a religious education and a citizenship founded on social justice? With Menand, we must ask ourselves what "investigative paradigms" we are missing or ignoring. "It is," as he says, "the academic's job in a free society to serve the public culture by asking questions the public doesn't want to ask, investigating subjects it cannot or will not investigate, and accommodating voices it fails or refuses to accommodate." Though somewhat short on his own answers as to how we effect the change or influence the discussions he sees necessary, the questions Menand raises, and the history — our history — he calls us to examine are valuable ones. Our answers, particularly as we look to secure the position of our institutions in the future of higher education, are even more important.