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FEDERATION FEATURE**On the Sadness of Higher Education**

By ALAN CHARLES KORS

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The academic world that I first encountered was one of both intellectual beauty and profound flaws. I was taught at Princeton, in the early 1960s—in history and literature, above all—before the congeries that we term "the '60s" began. Most of my professors were probably men of the left—that's what the surveys tell me—but that fact was never apparent to me, because, except in rare cases, their politics or even their ideological leanings were not inferable from their teaching or syllabi. Reasoned and informed dissent from professorial devil's advocacy or interpretation was encouraged and rewarded, including challenges to the very terms of an examination question.


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In retrospect, professors who must have disagreed fundamentally with works such as David Donald's "Lincoln Reconsidered" (with its celebrated explanation of the abolitionists' contempt for Lincoln in terms of the loss of status of their fathers' once-privileged social group) assigned them for our open-minded academic consideration. My professor of Tudor-Stuart history, emerging from the bitter Oxbridge debates over explanations of the English Civil War in terms of class conflict, assigned Jack Hexter's stunning "Reappraisals in Social History" to us. When I opined to him somewhat apprehensively that Hexter appeared to have exposed the tendentious use of statistics in my professor's own prior work, he replied, "You're absolutely correct." These were not uncommon experiences in Princeton's classrooms, and I knew, then and there, that I wanted both to do history and to teach.

In grad school at Harvard, while a few dates left in the midst of dinner on discovering my free-market and hawkish politics, and while I did get thrown out of a party for opposing, when asked, Eugene McCarthy's view of Vietnam (this should have been a warning), the classroom remained open and, by design, intellectually pluralistic. In our graduate colloquium, we read the major historiographical debates, in works theoretical and monographic, and critical acumen was acknowledged in the force of an argument, not in its political provenance. When Harvard exploded, in 1966–67, I was in Paris, researching my dissertation in the Bibliothèque Nationale; when Paris blew up the next year, I was locked away in Cambridge, Mass., finishing my dissertation. (My friends on the left, only partly in jest, explain my backwardness by my having missed two revolutions.) When I went off on job interviews, I was not once asked a question, ever, about my worldview, but only about my historical research and notions of teaching. Politics were simply not in the category of appropriate inquiry.

In social contexts, up through the 1970s, some few colleagues might be harsh over our political differences, but most loved the idea of individuals who thought differently from themselves. In the midst of the "cultural revolution" of the early 1970s, I co-founded a College House and lived warmly with students who mostly ranged from liberal Democrats to true believers of the New Left. They loved to

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discuss everything, and they did so in good faith and (almost) always *ad rem*. My students, whom I still meet frequently outside of class, still love to discuss everything, and they still do so in good faith and without *ad hominem* distractions from real conversation and debate. Critics of higher education who blame students for today's catastrophes are categorically wrong about agency. It is the faculties (both the minority of zealots and the majority of cowards) and the administrations (both the minority of ideologues and the majority of careerists with double standards) who are to blame.

The academic world I so loved revealed itself best in an undergraduate course I'd taken on the history of Europe in the 20th century. When the professor, a distinguished intellectual of the left, returned the midterms to the hundred-plus or so of us who were in his course, he said that we'd saddened and embarrassed him. "I gave you readings that allowed you to reach such diverse conclusions," he explained, "but you all told me what you thought I wanted to hear." He informed us that he would add a major section to the final exam: "I'm going to assign the book I disagree with most about the 20th century. I'm not going to ask you to criticize it, but, instead, to re-create its arguments with intellectual empathy, demonstrating that you understand the perspectives from which he understands and analyzes the world." I was moved by that. The work was Friedrich Hayek's "The Road to Serfdom," and it changed the course of my intellectual and moral life.

It also showed me immediately how I wanted to teach as an intellectual historian. Each year, I teach thinkers as diverse as Pascal and Spinoza, Hobbes and Butler, Wesley and Diderot. I offer courses on intellectual history, and the goal of my teaching is to make certain that my students understand the perspectives and rich debates that have shaped the dialogue of the West. I don't want disciples of my worldview. I want students who know how to read deeply, how to analyze, how to locate the essential points of similarity and divergence among thinkers, and, indeed, how to understand, with intellectual empathy, how the world looks from the diverse perspectives that constitute the history of European thought. I know that I am not alone, but I also know, alas, that I am in a distinct minority in my pedagogical goals in the humanities and the so-called social sciences.

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The academic world that won the heart of a kid from Jersey City's hardscrabble Dickinson High School was also a deeply flawed place in those early 1960s. It was virtually impossible for the most qualified black applicants to gain admission to Princeton; there were exceptions, but they were few indeed. There was widespread, crude racial bigotry among students; there was contempt for the women imported into Princeton on weekends, with a sharp division made between those gentlewomen one might marry and those coeds to whom anything might be promised for favors ("Sweet Briar to wed; Trenton to bed" was one of the politer formulations); there was a vulgar, sadistically cruel and, indeed, violent hatred of homosexuals there, with exceptions occasionally made for reasons of social class. There was an anti-intellectualism in the student body that astonished me, a lack of interest in all but the most famous speakers or performers, and—the terms truly were used—a contempt by those pleased by "gentlemen's Cs" for those "grinds" who studied long hours or with enthusiasm. There was a social snobbery more reminiscent now of the 1920s than of anything more recent, and an emphasis on "seeming" over "being" that would have confirmed Rousseau for his later admirers.

My freshman year was Princeton's final year of mandatory chapel (of one's choice, at least)—a requirement I found deeply intrusive, although they'd advertised it fairly enough—but if exposure to spirituality were meant in any way to replace coarseness with kindness and decency, mandatory chapel was without value. That Princeton also was a place of undergraduate political intolerance. In my junior year, the rooms of two quite thoughtful, warm, bright and intellectual Marxist seniors were broken into, their "Little Lenin Library" ripped to shreds, and the sole copies of their applications to graduate schools ruined by bottles of ink. The perpetrators turned out to be some of the "biggest men" on campus, and they all were let off with barely a slap on the wrist. That was no golden age, and honest souls across the

political spectrum never will talk realistically about the tragedy of higher education today without acknowledging that moral and historical reality.

There was much about the best sides of "the '60s," thus, that I admired and welcomed: the assault on racial discrimination and prejudice; the recognition of women's moral and legal equality, and the critique of vulgar sexual stereotypes; the softening, despite SDS, of so many students' lives; the manifest growth of tolerance of human difference (far more, in retrospect, among the "flower children" than among the would-be revolutionaries); the striking respect with which individuals increasingly treated each other across racial, sexual and heterosexual/homosexual divides. When I began teaching in 1968, I found my students often off-the-wall in terms of what they believed about the political (let alone astrological) worlds, but I preferred them immeasurably to the bigoted, closed, smug, self-inflated and callous students whom I had known just four to eight years before (as I had preferred my classmates from Dickinson High School to my classmates at Princeton). There must have been one moment in the mid-'70s when the pendulum had swung to as ideal a place as one might realistically have hoped for; I probably slept late that day.

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What has changed? In terms of the university *in loco parentis*, which has been restored and expanded with a vengeance, the revolution has been breathtaking. For students from "the '60s" who moved into the world apart from the academy, there were adjustments to the reality principles and values of a free, dynamic and decent society. The activists of the 1960s who stayed on campus, however—in original bodies or in spirit imparted to new bodies—expected students to take them always as political and moral gurus. Students did not do so. They had the gall first to like disco, and then to like Reagan. Such students had to be saved from the false consciousness that America somehow had given them.

Thus, under the heirs of the academic '60s, we moved on campus after campus from their Free Speech Movement to their politically correct speech codes; from their abolition of mandatory chapel to their imposition of Orwellian mandatory sensitivity and multicultural training; from their freedom to smoke pot unmolested to their war today against the kegs and spirits—literal and metaphorical—of today's students; from their acquisition of young adult status to their infantilization of "kids" who lack their insight; from their self-proclaimed dreams of racial and sexual integration to their ever more balkanized campuses organized on principles of group characteristics and group responsibility; from their right to define themselves as individuals—a foundational right—to their official, imposed and politically orthodox notions of identity. American college students became the victims of a generational swindle of truly epic proportions. If that part of the faculty not complicit in this did not know that it was happening, it was by choice or willful blindness.

In the academic university—the curriculum and classroom, and the hiring that underlies them—it all varies by where one looks. To understand why and to understand one of the few vulnerabilities of universities to actual accountability and reform, one must understand the hierarchy that predicts academic institutional behavior: sexuality (in their language, "sexual preference") trumps neutrality; race properly conceived easily trumps sexuality; sex properly conceived (or, in their language, "gender") easily trumps race; and careerism categorically trumps everything. From that perspective, the careerists who run our campuses have made a Faustian bargain (though they differ on which is the devil's portion).

Being careful, on the whole, to keep the natural and physical sciences, mathematics, and a variegated Column A of departments (sometimes psychology, sometimes philosophy, sometimes linguistics), and the professional schools that relate symbiotically to practical America relatively free of political agendas—though even in these cases, the barriers to crude politicization may break down—the careerist administrators have kept largely intact those disciplines where added value might be measured. From diverse motives of ideological sympathies and acute awareness of who can blackball their next career

moves, they have given over the humanities, the soft social sciences and the entire university *in loco parentis* to the zealots of oppression studies and coercive identity politics. In the latter case, it truly has been a conspiracy, with networking and common plans. In the former case—the professoriate and the curriculum—it is generally, with striking politicized exceptions, a soft tyranny of groupthink, unconscious bias and self-inflated sense of a mission of demystification. Most of the professors I meet are kind, indeed sweet, and certainly mean no harm. It is profoundly sad to see what they have become.

There also has been, compounding academic problems, a dumbing down of the professoriate that quite numbs the mind—best seen not in the monographs that earn people their degrees, but in the egregious nonsense, crude meta-theorizing, self-indulgence and tendentious special pleading that are not merely tolerated without criticism, but rewarded at the highest levels. Those who want to understand critically the degradations that have occurred should look at, for starters, the stunning works of Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral, editors, "Theory's Empire: An Anthology of Dissent"; John Ellis, "Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities"; and Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, "Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science."

Academia also has become a place where professors can achieve the highest rewards, except in the protected fields, for acting out their pathologies. In higher education, to paraphrase the Woody Allen stand-up line, we increasingly send our students to schools for learning-disabled and emotionally disturbed teachers. One cannot wholly escape these sides of universities even by majoring in the hard sciences; at least a few humanities and social science courses in oppression studies and demystification are generally required for graduation. Even if students escape these phenomena in their choice of study, though, they will meet them in freshmen orientations, residential programming and the very rules and regulations of their campuses.

Those often kindly teachers, however, do have a sense of urgent mission. Even if we put them on truth-serum, the academics who dominate the humanities and social sciences on our campuses today would state that K-12 education essentially has been one long celebration of America and the West, as if our students were intimately familiar with the Federalist Papers and had never heard of slavery or empire. Having convinced themselves that the students whom they inherit have been immersed in American and Western traditions without critical perspective—they do believe that—contemporary academics see themselves as having merely four brief years in which to demystify students, and somehow to get them to look up from their Madison and Hamilton long enough to gaze upon the darker side of American and Western life. In their view, our K-12 students know all about Aristotle, John Milton and Adam Smith, have studied for twelve years how America created bounty and integrated score after score of millions of immigrants, but have never heard of the Great Depression or segregation.

Academics, in their own minds, face an almost insoluble problem of time. How, in only four years, can they disabuse students of the notion that the capital, risk, productivity and military sacrifice of others have contributed to human dignity and to the prospects of a decent society? How can they make them understand, with only four years to do so, that capitalism and individualism have created cultures that are cruel, inefficient, racist, sexist and homophobic, with oppressive caste systems, mental and behavioral? How, in such a brief period, can they enlighten "minorities," including women (the majority of students), about the "internalization" of their oppression (today's equivalent of false consciousness)? How, in only eight semesters, might they use the classroom, curriculum and university *in loco parentis* to create a radical leadership among what they see as the victim groups of our society, and to make the heirs of successful families uneasy in the moral right of their possessions and opportunities? Given those constraints, why in the world should they complicate their awesome task by hiring anyone who disagrees with them?

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The power of universities comes from their monopoly of credentials. As Richard Vedder so deeply understands in his "Going Broke by Degree," they are the only institutions allowed to separate young individuals by IQ and by the ability to complete complex tasks. *They do not add value to that*, except in technical fields. Recruiters do *not* pay premiums because of what the Ivy League or the flagship state universities teach in English, history, political science, or sociology. They hire there *despite, not because of*, that. Recruiters do not pay premiums because our children have been sent to multicultural centers for sensitivity training. Recruiters pay premiums for the value already there, which universities merely identify. So long as recruiters pay premiums, however, it is rational for parents who wish to gain the most options for their children to send them to the university with the most prestigious degree. That will not change in the current scheme.

We now have closed-shop, massively subsidized, intolerant political fiefdoms, and they are the gatekeepers of society's rewards. Without incentives for different models of higher education, we shall have this same system of colleges and universities as far as the mind can foresee. The tax-free mega-endowments will grow. The legislators and the public will not end the subsidy. The alumni will continue their bequests. The trustees will proudly attend the administrative dog-and-pony shows, the most efficient act on any campus. Well-intentioned donors will support ghettoized "centers" (without faculty lines, cross-listed courses, graduate fellowships, or degrees) that marginalize inquiries that should be central to the academy. These provide protective coloration for administrators, help with fund raising in certain quarters, and permit a transfer of funds to the accelerating thirst for ever new forms of regnant campus orthodoxies. Until civil society makes administrators pay a price for the politicized hiring, curriculum and student life offices they administer, nothing truly will be reformed.

In my fantasies, I try to imagine a way to force these academic enterprises to engage in the truth in advertising they claim to value. Let colleges and universities have the courage, if they truly believe what they say privately to themselves and to me, to put it on page one of their catalogues, fundraising letters and appeals to the state assembly: "This University believes that your sons and daughters are the racist, sexist, homophobic, Eurocentric progeny or victims of an oppressive society from which most of them receive unjust privilege. In return for tuition and massive taxpayer subsidy, we shall assign rights on a compensatory basis and undertake by coercion their moral and political enlightenment." It won't happen.

One still can protect a few individuals and keep a hint of pluralism alive by means of honest exposure, shame and ridicule, but this is work—vital and moral, and an end in itself—that affects only the margins. The sad bottom line is that there are no incentives for administrators to offer a different product, such as a niche of high-quality education, equal treatment, liberty and merit. Parents invest understandably in the value of degrees, not in the quality of curriculum and faculty.

A model of higher education that offered a prestigious degree, high admissions standards, a superb and rigorous education, a faculty that was truly and usefully intellectually pluralistic, and a climate of individual rights and responsibilities (joined with rights of voluntary association) would, I believe, sweep the field. No one can afford to build a great university to offer that model, however. For obvious structural and institutional reasons, no one is going to "seize" a major university for such an experiment, though the vision of what could be accomplished by one great alternate model is mesmerizing. Until then, we only can work to protect the innocent, expose what the media are willing to expose, and await a generational shift in administrators and the professoriate. Such a shift, alas, not only is not on the horizon, but also recedes ever further from view given the bigotry against intellectual difference and pluralism, the incentives for conformity, the disincentives for courage and independence of mind, and the willingness, indeed eagerness, of society to subsidize those who have contempt for the very culture and values that make both that subsidy and that tolerance of derision and condescension possible.

The academic world that I entered is gone. I teach for my students, whom I love, and I fight for

intellectual pluralism, for legal equality and for fairness simply because it is my duty to bear witness to the values I cherish, with no expectation of success.

Mr. Kors is a professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania.

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