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‘Intellectual Diversity’: the Trojan Horse of a Dark Design

by
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Whenever I’ve been asked who won (or is winning) the culture wars in the academy, I say it depends on what you mean by winning.

If victory for the right meant turning back or retarding the growth of programs like women’s studies, African-American studies, Chicano studies, Latino studies, cultural studies, gay and lesbian (and now transgender) studies, postmodern studies, and poststructuralist theory, then the left won big time, for these programs flourish (especially among the young) and are the source of much of the intellectual energy in the liberal arts.

But if the palm is to be awarded to the party that persuaded the American public to adopt its characterization of the academy, the right wins hands down, for it is now generally believed that our colleges and universities are hotbeds (what is a “hotbed” anyway?) of radicalism and pedagogical irresponsibility where dollars are wasted, nonsense is propagated, students are indoctrinated, religion is disrespected, and patriotism is scorned.

The left may have won the curricular battle, but the right won the public-relations war.

The right did this in the old-fashioned way, by mastering the ancient art of rhetoric and spinning a vocabulary that, once established in the public mind, performed the work of argument all by itself. The master stroke, of course, was the appropriation from the left (where it had been used with a certain self-directed irony) of the phrase “political correctness,” which in fairly short order became capitalized and transformed from an accusation to the name of a program supposedly being carried out by the very persons who were the accusation’s object. That is, those who cried “political correctness” hypostatized an entity about which they could then immediately complain. This was genius.

Now they’re doing it again, this time by taking a phrase that seems positively benign and even progressive (in a fuzzy-left way) and employing it as the Trojan horse of a dark design. That phrase is “intellectual diversity,” and the vehicle that is bringing it to the streets and coffee shops of your hometown is David Horowitz’s Academic Bill of Rights, which has been the basis of legislation introduced in Congress, has stirred some interest in a number of states, and has been the subject of editorials (both pro and con) in leading newspapers.

Opponents of the Academic Bill of Rights contend that despite disclaimers of any political intention and an explicit rejection of quotas, the underlying agenda is the decidedly political one of forcing colleges and universities to hire conservative professors in order to assure ideological balance.

Space for Notes



Horowitz replies (in print and conversation) that he has no desire to impose ideological criteria on the operations of the academy; he does not favor, he tells me, legislation that would have political bodies taking over the responsibility of making curricular and hiring decisions. His hope, he insists, is that colleges and universities will reform themselves, and he offers the Academic Bill of Rights (which is the product of consultation with academics of various persuasions) as a convenient base-line template to which they might refer for guidance.

For the record, and as one of those with whom he has consulted, I believe him, and I believe him, in part, because much of the Academic Bill of Rights is as apolitical and principled as he says it is. It begins by announcing that “the central purposes of a University are the pursuit of truth, the discovery of new knowledge through scholarship and research, the study and reasoned criticism of intellectual and cultural traditions ... and the transmission of knowledge and learning to a society at large.” (I shall return to the clause deleted by my ellipsis.)

The bill goes on to define academic freedom as the policy of “protecting the intellectual independence of professors, researchers and students in the pursuit of knowledge and the expression of ideas from interference by legislators or authorities within the institution itself.”

In short, “no political, ideological or religious orthodoxy will be imposed on professors.” Nor shall a legislature “impose any orthodoxy through its control of the university budget,” and “no faculty shall be hired or fired or denied promotion or tenure on the basis of his or her political or religious beliefs.” The document ends by declaring that academic institutions “should maintain a posture of organizational neutrality with respect to the substantive disagreements that divide researchers on questions within, or outside, their fields of inquiry.”

It’s hard to see how anyone who believes (as I do) that academic work is distinctive in its aims and goals and that its distinctiveness must be protected from political pressures (either external or internal) could find anything to disagree with here. Everything follows from the statement that the pursuit of truth is a -- I would say the -- central purpose of the university. For the serious embrace of that purpose precludes deciding what the truth is in advance, or ruling out certain accounts of the truth before they have been given a hearing, or making evaluations of those accounts turn on the known or suspected political affiliations of those who present them.

While it may be, as some have said, that the line between the political and the academic is at times difficult to discern -- political issues are legitimately the subject of academic analysis; the trick is to keep analysis from sliding into advocacy -- it is nevertheless a line that can and must be drawn, and I would go so far as to agree with Horowitz when he criticizes professors who put posters of partisan identification on their office doors and thus announce to the students who come for advice and consultation that they have entered a political space.

But it is precisely because the pursuit of truth is the cardinal value of the academy that the value (if it is one) of intellectual diversity should be rejected.

The notion first turns up, though not by name, in the clause I elided where Horowitz lists among the purposes of a university “the teaching and general

development of students to help them become creative individuals and productive citizens of a pluralistic society.”

Teaching, yes -- it is my job to introduce students to new materials and equip them with new skills; but I haven't the slightest idea of how to help students become creative individuals. And it is decidedly not my job to produce citizens for a pluralistic society or for any other. Citizen building is a legitimate democratic activity, but it is not an academic activity. To be sure, some of what happens in the classroom may play a part in the fashioning of a citizen, but that is neither something you can count on -- there is no accounting for what a student will make of something you say or assign -- nor something you should aim for. As admirable a goal as it may be, fashioning citizens for a pluralistic society has nothing to do with the pursuit of truth.

For Horowitz, the link between the two is to be found in the idea of pluralism: Given the “unsettled character of all human knowledge” and the fact (which is a fact) “that there is no humanly accessible truth that is not in principle open to challenge,” it follows, he thinks, that students being prepared to live in a pluralistic society should receive an education in pluralism; and it follows further, he says, that it is the obligation of teachers and administrators “to promote intellectual pluralism” and thereby “protect the principle of intellectual diversity.”

But it is a mistake to go from the general assertion that no humanly accessible truth is invulnerable to challenge to the conclusion that therefore challenges must always be provided. That is to confuse a theory of truth with its pursuit and to exchange the goal of reaching it for a resolution to keep the question of it always open.

While questions of truth may be generally open, the truth of academic matters is not general but local; questions are posed and often they do have answers that can be established with certainty; and even if that certainty can theoretically be upset -- one cannot rule out the future emergence of new evidence -- that theoretical possibility carries with it no methodological obligation. That is, it does not mandate intellectual diversity, a condition that may attend some moments in the pursuit of truth when there is as yet no clear path, but not a condition one must actively seek or protect.

To put it simply, intellectual diversity is not a stand-alone academic value, no more than is free speech; either can be a help in the pursuit of truth, but neither should be identified with it; the (occasional) means should not be confused with the end.

Now if intellectual diversity is not an academic value, adherence to it as an end in itself will not further an academic goal; but it will further some goal, and that goal will be political. It will be part of an effort to alter the academy so that it becomes an extension of some partisan vision of the way the world should be.

Such an effort will not be a perversion of intellectual diversity; intellectual diversity as a prime academic goal is already a perversion and its transformation into a political agenda, despite Horowitz's protestations and wishes to the contrary, is inevitable and assured. It is just a matter of which party seizes it and makes it its own.

For a while (ever since the Bakke decision), it was the left that flew the

diversity banner and put it to work in the service of affirmative action, speech codes, hostile-environment regulations, minority hiring, and more. Now it is the right’s turn, and Horowitz himself has mapped out the strategy and laid bare the motives:

“I encourage [students] to use the language that the left has deployed so effectively on behalf of its own agendas. Radical professors have created a ‘hostile learning’ environment for conservative students. There is a lack of ‘intellectual diversity’ on college faculties and in academic classrooms. The conservative viewpoint is ‘under-represented’ in the curriculum and on its reading lists. The university should be an ‘inclusive’ and intellectually ‘diverse’ community” (“The Campus Blacklist,” April 2003).

It is obvious that for Horowitz these are debating points designed to hoist the left by its own petard; but the trouble with debating points is that they can’t be kept in bounds. Someone is going to take them seriously and advocate actions that Horowitz would probably not endorse.

Someone is going to say, let’s monitor those lefty professors and keep tabs on what they’re saying; and while we’re at it, let’s withhold federal funds from programs that do not display “ideological balance” (“balance” is also an unworthy academic goal); and let’s demand that academic institutions demonstrate a commitment to hiring conservatives; and let’s make sure that the material our students read is pro-American and free of the taint of relativism; and let’s publish the names of those who do not comply.

This is not a hypothetical list; it is a list of actions already being taken. In fact, it is a list one could pretty much glean from the Web site of State Senator John K. Andrews Jr., president of the Colorado Senate (<http://www.andrewsameric.com/>), a site on which the Academic Bill of Rights is invoked frequently.

Andrews, like everyone else doing the intellectual diversity dance, insists that he opposes “any sort of quotas, mandated hiring or litmus test”; but then he turns around and sends a letter to Colorado’s universities asking them to explain how they promote “intellectual diversity.”

Anne D. Neal, of the Lynne-Cheney-inspired American Council of Trustees and Alumni, plays the same double game in a piece entitled “Intellectual Diversity Endangered” (http://www.cfif.org/htdocs/freedomline/current/guest_commentary/student_right_to_learn.htm). First she stands up for the value of academic freedom (“no more important value to the life of the mind”), but then she urges university trustees to see to it “that all faculty ... present points of view other than their own in a balanced way” (something you might want to do but shouldn’t have to do) and to “insist that their institutions offer broad-based survey courses,” and “to monitor tenure decisions” for instances of “political discrimination,” and to “conduct intellectual diversity reviews and to make the results public.”

These are only two examples of what the mantra of “intellectual diversity” gets you. And to make the point again, these are not examples of a good idea taken too far, but of a bad idea taken in the only direction -- a political direction -- it is capable of going. As a genuine academic value, intellectual diversity is a nonstarter. As an imposed imperative, it is a disaster.

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