

The Real Failure of Liberal Faculty

The current debate about whether university faculty indoctrinate students with liberal ideas suggests that the real failure of university faculty is being overlooked. A basic misunderstanding about what the terms “conservatism” and “liberalism” stand for, both historically and in today’s context, is shared by students who label themselves as conservatives, as well as by the faculty who identify themselves as either conservatives or liberals. This misunderstanding also underlies the self-labeled conservative think tanks and organizations that are funding the current attack on higher education, as well as the media pundits and journalists who are, in their reporting, passing on the misconceptions they acquired during their years in university classrooms. Labeling Vice President Richard Cheney as a conservative and, in another newspaper account, as a market-liberal conservative are just one of many examples that could be cited.

The real failure of university faculty has been in not enabling students to understand that words have a history—especially the words that make up our political vocabulary. Words such as conservative and liberal carry forward in a highly condensed manner the ideas, values, and silences that emerged from earlier complex debates and writings. When they are used in a formulaic manner, as is the case today, they carry forward both earlier and current misunderstandings. Students who now label themselves as conservative and charge that they are being indoctrinated in the classroom might have a better understanding that they are really in the liberal tradition of thinking if they had been asked to read and reflect on the writings of such conservative thinkers as Edmund Burke, Samuel Coleridge, T. S. Eliot, Michael Oakeshott, James Madison, and Clinton Rossiter. They would then have a basis for recognizing that they share few, if any, of the ideas and values of these conservatives. These students should also be asked to read environmental conservatives such as Wendell Berry, Aldo Leopold, and Vandana Shiva on the importance of conserving of species, habitats, and the world’s diverse cultural and environmental commons

In addition, if students had been asked to read the writings of classical liberal thinkers such as John Locke, Adam Smith, John S. Mill, as well as the writings of Herbert Spencer who used Social Darwinism to explain the significance of winners in a free-market

system, they would then be able to recognize that the real tension between themselves and their liberal professors is the tension between the values of market liberalism and the social justice liberalism of their professors.

Widely shared knowledge of what separates the tradition of conservatism from the tradition of liberalism that so many professors identify with and promote in their classes (e.g., the assumption that the individual is the basic social unit, that change is progressive, that the Western way of thinking is the most culturally advanced, etc.) might lead more faculty to be aware of the mixed messages they convey to their students. While their liberalism is based on many of the same cultural assumptions that underlie the excesses of the industrial culture they criticize, they also communicate to their students their concerns about the current efforts to overturn the traditions that genuine conservatives have historically viewed as essential to the civil rights of the current and future generations. The undermining of the separation of church and state, an independent judiciary, key provisions of the Constitution, as well as the efforts to reverse the gains in the areas of civil rights and the labor movement, economic support for marginalized social groups, the legal protections won by environmentalists, and what remains of civilian control of the military, are sources of deep concern on the part of many faculty who identify themselves as liberals. Because the word “conservative” has been appropriated by the market liberals that support the policies of President George W. Bush many of these professors use the language of liberalism to argue for conserving what is now under threat from powerful political groups who call themselves conservatives but are working to bring more aspects of daily life under the control of market forces—even as these market forces have led to outsourcing jobs, cutting back and even eliminating retirements and health benefits.

The irony that characterizes the current furor over so-called conservative concerns about liberal indoctrination in the classrooms of America is that both the majority of liberal faculty as well as the self-labeled conservative students support different facets of the modern social agenda—with the liberals supporting the social justice agenda that emphasizes individual opportunity in a secular consumer dependent society while the faux conservatives support an economic agenda that requires the destruction of intergenerationally connected and culturally diverse communities. At least the libertarian CATO Institute recognizes the mindlessness that is so widespread in our political debates

when it put on its website that only in America is its political agenda identified with conservatism.

One more failure that characterizes a university education in America is that few students will graduate with an understanding of the characteristics of a fascist society—and how fascism has emerged from within weakened democratic societies.

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