

The Dissident Professor

To begin with a whine worthy of a country song: It's hard to be a conservative professor in America today. And it's a self-righteous whine! We conservatives are those who prefer truth and morality to success and popularity. And it's a whine that reflects a most confusing state of affairs. Conservatives, in principle, long for a world where they could celebrate a vital communal tradition or culture, and leftists, in principle, love to be antiestablishment dissenters. But in the American academic community today, the liberals or leftists are the establishment, and the conservatives are the dissident critics of the community's view of morality and justice. This strange situation presents conservative professors with the opportunity and the duty to stand by the principles that made them conservative. If living the virtuous life truly is more important than mere careerism, then our time has come. In standing with the dissidents against the tyranny of imposed opinion, we conservatives are in good company.

Leftist professors preach the virtues of dissent. Tenured radicals tell moving stories about their youthful demonstrations on behalf of civil rights and against the War in Vietnam, and so against racist populism and patriotic chauvinism. And they praise today's efforts by the feminists and gays to emancipate themselves from the repression of the moral majority. Intellectual leftists

have also preached against capitalism's vulgar love of success at the expense of culture. But despite the best efforts of alleged postmodernists to integrate leftism with the philosopher Martin Heidegger's anti-Americanism, cultural leftism remains in a period of decline. The pragmatist Richard Rorty, probably America's most influential professor of philosophy, reminds postmodern snobs that cultural leftism is an oxymoron.¹ The Left has no perspective by which to privilege cultural over banal human aspirations, and so leftist writers should be wholly devoted to achieving a classless society, one without cruel repression and in which everyone has an equal opportunity to fulfill his or her private fantasies. Rorty observes that the fall of communism has discredited political revolution as the route to that society. So the leftist method should now become the therapy of politically-correct propaganda. Professors and other writers should work to purge our language of cruel, humiliating words, in order to eradicate cruel, humiliating experiences. They dissent from and work to change ordinary language and ordinary experience, but to make them more ordinary or banal. Rorty is confident that racism, sexism, and classism, not to

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mention metaphysics and theology, can be talked out of existence; and doing so in the name of justice, we are led to believe, should be regarded as the goal of American education today.

Leftist professors now tend to identify intellectual excellence with political correctness, with thought and action on behalf of the true or wholly consistent or egalitarian understanding of justice. Only they are completely free from popular and traditional racism, sexism, classism, and so forth. Only they are wise and moral enough to understand all that is implied in (and to be wholly devoted to) a classless society. They often claim to be devoted to diversity, but this means nothing more than diversity of physical appearance, clothing, and sexual orientation. Banished is diversity of opinion about fundamental human questions. Nor are these professors really "multiculturalists," if culture means devotion to some inegalitarian or illiberal religious morality. Multiculturalism properly understood is a tool used to devalue one's own culture, meaning one's own religion, with the equal and incompatible claims of others. Today's leftist professors are not really anti-Western, for they use the generic non-Western perspective to level the imperial or inegalitarian features of the West. They criticize the West's past according to a Marxian/Hegelian or a radically Western view of the world's future. Multiculturalism really defends egalitarianism or permissive democracy against the claims of all cultures, even as it empties culture of its content by separating it from intense devotion to a particular country or religion. Culture becomes a weightless whim, and so incapable of providing a moral point of view from which to resist dominant opinion.

Leftist professors are proud enough to believe they are wise. They say that everything is political, and that they understand the true purpose of political life. They be-

lieve they know what justice is, and that most people do not. The strength of popular racism, sexism, and heterosexism are exaggerated to distinguish their own wisdom more clearly. Wisdom, for leftist professors, is the privilege of our time, for even the best thinkers of the past were tainted by sexism and classism and so unjust and unwise. They identify wisdom with justice to ensure the superiority of themselves and their time and to negate the thought that Plato, the Bible, or Shakespeare might still have something fundamental to teach human beings today about, say, love and death. They believe they know and must teach that there is nothing for us to learn about our human condition from dead white males, more because they are dead than white or male. And their view of history is purely pragmatic or ideological; history is useful only as a weapon to legitimate the present and project for the future.

The chauvinism of our professors is impossible to exaggerate. In the past, they assert complacently, all human beings were deluded and cruel—with cruelty defined as all moral restraint that did or does not contribute to progress toward justice. Despite calling themselves Nietzschean relativists, they exhibit an astounding certainty that their justice and wisdom exceed the virtues of any human beings before them. Of course, if they really possessed the relativist's open-mindedness, they would encourage students to think about and choose cruelty (that is, morality) if they pleased.

Most professors today understand their educational task as the correction of the diverse, vulgar (Rorty's word is "redneck"), and obsolete prejudices of their students. I teach at a small college where most professors are leftist and some students come to college with strong fundamentalist or evangelical religious convictions. The faculty

connect such conviction with closed-mindedness and injustice. And so they aim to expose the students to “uncomfortable” thoughts, to put them on the road to wisdom and justice. But for conservatives, the goal is to deprive the students of any perspective by which they can resist the comprehensive claims of the classless society, or prefer love, personal responsibility, and living well with death to the pursuit of perfect justice. Those who proudly dissent from popular prejudice aim to keep ordinary students from dissenting from professorial wisdom. The wise cannot be made uncomfortable by the opinions of others. On that point, “secular humanist” professors and “fundamentalist” students agree, for the last thing either wants to do is engage in a “Socratic dialogue” about the naturalness or goodness of homosexuality or women’s liberation, much less about the competing claims of reason and revelation. And the fundamentalist whose



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mind is closed by certainty about God’s will is at least more conscious of his human limitations than the professor who sees himself as replacing God with his wisdom.

Today’s politically-correct professor often recognizes no limits to efforts to bring racism, sexism, and classism to an end. As Alan Kors and Harvey Silverglate report in *The Shadow University*, many universities now openly pursue the “progressive” goal of assuming absolute control over the thought and action of students. The administrators believe they can use almost

any means necessary to create a classless society—one which does not recognize the distinctions between men and women and gay and straight, and which has no place for the soul or conscience or unapproved personal association at all—incorporating all of campus life, from the classroom to the dorm room to the bathroom.² What can be achieved for the students is a prelude to what can be done for all Americans. Religion, for example, must be judged not by its

truth or its adequacy in addressing ineradicable and transpolitical human longings, but for its contribution to inculcating devotion to a rights-based understanding of justice. The family must be judged according to the same principle, and so according to its egalitarian socialization of children. The danger of a child being raised well by two heterosexual parents is believing that his or her form of family is better than others, and so the school must correct the historical and anthropological

narrowness of that opinion.

Dissenting leftist professors, in the name of correcting the cruel tyranny of ordinary life, tyrannize the American academic community. They dislike dissent in their realm as much as they imagine ordinary Americans do in theirs. As the establishment, they are comfortable in their preference for conformity. Their confusion of their fashionable dogmatism with wisdom is the greatest threat to freedom of thought in America today. The libertarian argument that American free thinkers must be rescued,

above all, from stultifying rural (or suburban) idiocy was never more than partly true and now makes no sense at all.

But a more fundamental assault on freedom is the leftist professors' contempt for common decency and moral virtue. They regard traditional claims for virtue—which include the thought that men and women have sacred duties to each other, their families, their country, and to God—as a rationalization for repression. And so education for virtue—both by parents and schools—is also regarded as tyranny to be remedied through their expertise. They aim to liberate individuals to choose their own destinies without dogmatic constraint, even as they undermine the conditions under which responsible choice can be made. A choice that is wholly lacking in constraint is impossible for a merely human being.

Virtue—the disciplined exercise of personal responsibility—is what allows human beings to resist impersonal determination by either the market (meaning the expert manipulation of the needs of consumers) or the contemporary state (meaning big, bureaucratic government). And that exercise must be cultivated by personal institutions such as the family, neighborhood, and church. When functioning effectively to inculcate and support moral virtue, such institutions will not conform to the egalitarian view of justice that experts call wisdom. So the defense of American virtue is really the defense of human beings who are responsible enough to be free and to resist impersonal or expert determination. The leftist professors incoherently both work against and deny the possibility of that personal resistance.

Conservative professors are those who do not identify devotion to the classless society with wisdom or human happiness. So they are not leftists, although they are not necessarily on “the Right.” Some reasonable

conservatives believe that the very distinction between Left and Right—or between progressive and reactionary—depends on the leftist view of history and is intended to make the Left look good and its victory inevitable. Conservatives are not justly defined as those who are *for* racism and sexism! And some professors proud to stand with their conservative colleagues, such as defenders of the continuing relevance of classical education, still brag that they never vote Republican.³

Conservative professors, in my view, are those who dissent from the reigning intellectual tyranny. By opposing the impersonal, responsibility-denying lie that animates the community in which they work, they resemble anti-Communist dissidents such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Václav Havel. But conservative professors, like the anti-Communists, are united far more by what they oppose than by what they favor.⁴ They all are for living responsibly in light of the truth, but they differ on exactly what the truth is and on what social and political conditions best support it.

It seems to be whining beyond belief to connect the oppression and isolation of American conservative academic dissidents with the time in prison of Solzhenitsyn and Havel. The American dissidents live in freedom and prosperity, and they are usually secure in their jobs once they are awarded tenure. But the philosopher-novelist Walker Percy argued that a situation worse than the Gulag is that of having no influence. The Soviet Communists feared Solzhenitsyn's truth-telling, and with good reason. But our leftist establishment seems to have little to fear from conservative dissidents, and so it is free to dismiss them, in Rorty's words, as know-nothings, blinded by greed or animosity, or just insane. It is hard to think and live well in ineffective isolation. According to Percy, truth-telling American writers suffer from

Solzhenitsyn envy.⁵

Conservative professors must use the lip service the Left pays to intellectual freedom to their advantage. To be sure, leftist professors preach liberation while also saying, quite incoherently, that most or all opinion is determined by race, class, and gender. And so they are for both intellectual freedom and political correctness. But most intellectuals—with the notable exception of the pragmatist Rorty—are embarrassed to be caught in contradictions, and conservatives must use that embarrassment to get them to put their class interest—freedom—before justice. They can almost always be counted on to be too confused to say that the time for freedom is over because we are now wise. More generally, taking a stand on behalf of freedom of thought is the best way to win liberal allies, such as the card-carrying members of the ACLU.

Conservatives should favor the impartial application of standards of excellence for hiring, promotion, and tenure decisions. They should support leftist professors who meet them and demand the same consideration in return. No set of standards, of course, is ever perfect, and complete impartiality is impossible. But the goal should be standards solid enough to keep careerist radicals from using fashionable dissent and disgruntled conservatives from using the excuse of unfashionable dissent to mask a real absence of achievement. For conservative professors, something close to the rule of law is usually much better than the rule of men (and surely better still than the rule of women).

Conservatives should favor tenure, on the traditional grounds that it protects the teaching of the truth. Tenure sometimes protects incompetent leftists who teach nonsense with impunity. But its abolition would endanger tenured conservatives in many more cases than tenured radicals.

Radicals would usually be protected and conservatives cast out by the tyranny of the community's majority.

Conservative journalists and politicians who oppose tenure in the name of competence and accountability do so in ignorance of who really rules most programs in the social sciences and the humanities and of the character of most college and university administrators. According to Paul Cantor, "Some critics of tenure think that abolishing it will provide a means of bringing to bear the less radical views of society as a whole on the academy. But the more likely outcome would be to give new power to a subset within the academy, namely the educational establishment or perhaps even the education school establishment—which is generally more radical than the academy as a whole."⁶ The tightening stranglehold schools of education have over administration, assessment, and accreditation is a far greater threat to intellectual liberty than the foolishness of tenured professors of literature. Too many of those schools' leading professors work to replace the pursuit of truth and excellence with ideological rigidity, the mindless use of technology, promiscuous sensitivity, and unearned self-esteem. "Reform the schools of education!" not "Abolish tenure!" should be the conservative cry.

Conservative professors should also, in most contexts, present themselves as the true partisans of diversity. The leftist professors identify diversity with increasing the numbers of black and female faculty and students, and they usually contribute to diversity by hiring African Americans and women who agree with them. Conservatives should say that the true Socratic would put a greater premium on diversity of opinion, and so on hiring those who dissent from the leftist establishment. The Socratic argument for a faculty with diverse opinions is that no mere mortal is

wise, and all good professors are likely to see part, but only part, of the truth. The intellectual argument for uniformity of opinion can only come from the wise.

What should conservative professors do with their academic freedom? They cannot, in most cases, use it to reform their institutions, and they sometimes join the old fogies in resisting initiatives such as expanded core requirements and standardized syllabi that might be beneficial under different circumstances. Dissidents must often defend their freedom against efforts at communal integration. Even most tenured conservative professors are marginalized. They disagree with their colleagues too fundamentally to have much to say to them, and their colleagues, in turn, view their lack of wisdom with contempt. Conservative and leftist faculty cannot laugh at many of the same jokes about politics and religion, for what one takes seriously, the other finds ridiculous. Conservative professors at various institutions must talk with each other to fend off isolation and the obsessions it can produce. Whining less, they should share the pride and fun in taking a rebel's stand.

Conservative faculty should teach and write with the intention of influencing others in the name of the truth. In the context of most American colleges and universities today, their task is to form countercultural communities. They should not make the mistake of Rorty or Allan Bloom of believing that the formation of such communities is becoming impossible. They should have a reasonable faith in the moral realism of ordinary people, and so should not hesitate to make populist appeals and attack the moral irresponsibility of the intellectual elite. But even privileged and sophisticated Americans are not really becoming flat-souled and lamely apathetic. They still long to know and love each other, the truth, and God.

Americans, it seems to me, live particularly deranged and angry lives today. They are restless, as Alexis de Tocqueville observed, in the midst of prosperity, and they are particularly disoriented because they have so little clue why. The politically-correct experts tell them that their misery and confusion can be cured through linguistic, economic, or political reform. Yet that ineffective advice only confuses them more. Experts have largely deprived them of the metaphysical and theological language that corresponds to their human longings. And their mouthing of politically-correct therapeutic platitudes barely suppresses the fury that corresponds to that deprivation. They can live less angrily and more reasonably and responsibly only to the extent that they have a true understanding of their longings, which includes a true account of human joys, miseries, and limitations. Such self-understanding is a prelude to a renewal of all forms of human community.

As Solzhenitsyn and Havel have explained, Americans are unhappy because they cannot really live the lie of the ideology of the classless society. The best educational antidote to the lie today is the study of literature.⁷ According to the old-fashioned liberal Lionel Trilling, literature is the result of "the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty."⁸ It is a corrective to every attempt to understand human beings according to some ideology or to reduce the problem of self-understanding to theory. Literature, in this view, includes not only novels, plays, and poems, but Platonic dialogues, St. Augustine's *Confessions*, and such subtle, elusive, yet stunningly comprehensive accounts of the human condition and political order as Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. Works of literature are rightly judged according to both their fullness and their precision in describing

the way human beings are. So characteristically “modern” or “existentialist” or too theoretically-influenced writers who describe the abstract or unconnected individual invented by liberal theorists as if he were a real human being rank low.⁹ Writers from our time perhaps especially to be recommended are the most personal and penetrating critics of the ideological tendency of American democracy who wrote both philosophic prose and novels, such as Solzhenitsyn and Percy.

Not so long ago, American leftist intellectuals often assumed that great literature supported their cause. Simply reading the best books with an open mind frees the human being from the complacent philistinism of the middle class and for revolutionary thought. Liberal education is liberating and so anticapitalist education. Or so at least is *liberal* education in FDR’s sense. But now leftist professors prefer reading literary theory to literature itself. They say that politically-correct theory should determine the manner and the extent to which we should read nontheoretical books. So they often insist that we judge works of literature solely according to our contemporary wisdom concerning race, class, and gender. Rorty and Martha Nussbaum recommend novels only insofar as they sensitize the reader to the cruel suffering caused by classism.¹⁰ They use novels to achieve the political goal that they impose upon them in their tyrannical and futile attempt to reduce human greatness to theory.

Today only conservatives accept the truth of the traditional dissident claim of liberal education that the best books take the thought and imagination of human beings beyond the constraints of the dominant opinion of their time and place. Read with open minds and on the terms set by the authors, the best books are an indispensable beginning in an age of theory for un-

derstanding and accepting the personal responsibilities of free, rational, and limited beings who love and die.¹¹

Notes

1. Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).
2. Alan Charles Kors and Harvey A. Silvergate, *The Shadow University: The Betrayal of Liberty on America’s Campuses* (New York: The Free Press, 1998).
3. Victor Davis Hanson and John Heath, *Who Killed Homer?* (New York: The Free Press, 1998), 258.
4. See Mark C. Henrie, “Rethinking American Conservatism in the 1990s: The Struggle Against Homogenization,” *The Intercollegiate Review* (Spring, 1993), 8-16.
5. Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), 158.
6. Paul A. Cantor, “It’s Not the Tenure, It’s the Radicalism,” *Academic Questions* 17 (Winter 1997-98), 34.
7. But because most literature courses in college are now so bad and because what natural scientists teach really is part of the truth, I am not saying that students should take only literature courses—English, political philosophy, theology, and so forth—in college. Natural science professors, in fact, typically are smarter, better role models, less ideological, harder and fairer graders, and often more religious than those in the social sciences and humanities. Their admirable love of the truth, if not the whole truth, ought to shame their politically-correct colleagues.
8. Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1979), preface (no page number).
9. According to Pierre Manent, “modern literature has sought to unmask the falsity of all human relationships, the illusory character of love, and the ludicrousness or fraudulence of language. The upshot is an exploration of what it means to become an individual” (*Modern Liberty and Its Discontents* [Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998], 152.) So modern literature attempts to describe the truth of Rousseau’s theoretical insight. It is wrong on friendship, love, and language, and by showing that all that is distinctively human or social is a worthless illusion, it can justify pragmatic self-surrender. But as an attempt truthfully to describe and so defend the individual, it remains an antidote, if the weakest one, to the conformism of politically-correct theory.
10. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).
11. For more than a beginning, see Ann Hartle, *Self-Knowledge in an Age of Theory* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997).