

The Roots of the Right-Wing Attack on Higher Education

by *Ellen Schrecker*

As we confront the many crises that endanger American higher education today, we keep bumping into the ghosts of the 1960s. The enormous changes that took place on the nation's campuses during that tumultuous decade not only opened those campuses to new constituencies and new ideas, but also created a powerful conservative movement that sought to reverse those changes. Along with the rising cost of higher education, the right's campaign against the academic reforms of the sixties has so undermined public support for the academy that most Americans now see the nation's faculties as radical, elitist, and somehow alien to most ordinary citizens.

From the start, the general public disliked what was happening on the nation's campuses during the 1960s. The media fed that aversion. Even when it was not overtly hostile, it contributed to the antipathy toward the academy by focusing on the most sensational events. Violence, rioting, and Vietcong flags were, one TV reporter explained, "what sells. You always go after the extremes."¹ While the conservative press predictably deplored the campus unrest, even the more moderate *New York Times* evinced little sympathy for the student movement and the faculty's tolerance of its demands. Although it had originally given extensive coverage to the early antiwar teach-ins, the *Times* was hardly supportive. Columnist James Reston, for example, bemoaned the one-sided nature of some early teach-ins, decrying them as "anti-Administration demonstrations disguised as 'teaching' and

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in many cases backed by propaganda of the most vicious nature.”² By the end of 1967, with the campus unrest escalating, the *Times* was condemning “disruptive student action” and castigating faculty members for “irresponsibility” and “for forgetting the fact that to ignore the twin concepts of the sanctity of dissent and government by law, on and off campus, is a threat to academic freedom itself.”³

When a group of armed Black students took over the Cornell University student union in 1969, the *Times* reporter covering the crisis hung out with the faculty’s most conservative members and quoted them at length about the

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school’s “abject surrender” to “an atmosphere of coercion.”⁴ The *Times*’ editorial page echoed that perspective. In editorials entitled, “Reform by Bully,” and “Campus Totalitarians,” the paper excoriated the “spineless response on the part of administrations and faculties to intolerable challenges by radical students” and compared “these outrages against academic freedom” to “Fascist, Nazi and Stalinist totalitarianism.”⁵ For the more conservative *Chicago Tribune*, the professoriate’s sins went beyond capitulation to the students’ political demands to encompass acquiescence in their supposedly immoral and drug-infested lifestyle.⁶

All the evidence we have shows that ordinary citizens were equally hostile. Ninety-eight percent of the 186,000 messages that poured in to California’s educational authorities in response to the Berkeley Free Speech Movement opposed the student activists. In November 1968, the state’s voters overwhelmingly rejected a large bond issue for the California state colleges.⁷ And by the spring of 1969, the Gallup Poll was reporting that 82 percent of its respondents wanted to expel campus militants, while 84 percent supported withdrawing their federal student loans. Three years later, according to the same poll, “campus unrest” still registered as the single most important issue confronting the nation.⁸

Naturally, right-wing politicians picked up on the same themes. Though McCarthyism had subsided within the political mainstream, it hadn’t completely disappeared. From New Jersey to Colorado and beyond, legislators and political candidates condemned antiwar professors, claiming that, in the words of Connecticut Senator Thomas Dodd, the campus movement against the war was in “the hands of Communists and extremist elements who are openly sympathetic to the Vietcong and openly hostile to the United States.”⁹ But it was Ronald Reagan, in his 1966 campaign for governor of California, who transformed the attack on the academy into a winning political formula. From the start, Reagan ran against Berkeley, where, he claimed, “a small minority of beatniks, radicals, and

filthy-speech advocates have brought such shame to a great university.”¹⁰ Given the furor surrounding the Watts riot of the previous summer, Reagan would probably have won the election even without attacking the university. Nonetheless, his tirades against Berkeley consistently drew applause; and, he explained, he denounced the student unrest primarily because he felt the voters demanded it.¹¹

Once in office, he continued to attack the university and the “criminal anarchists and latter-day fascists” it sheltered. While his condemnation of higher education did little to stem the unrest (and may well have intensified it), he did cut funding for the state’s colleges and universities and was able to impose previ-

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ously unheard of tuition charges on the grounds that they would “weed out the non-serious student and promote respect for school property.”¹² Faculty members drew fire as well; by December 1968, Reagan was threatening to “get rid of those professors, who have made it apparent that they are far more interested in closing the school than they are in fulfilling their contract to teach.”¹³ He also bemoaned the one-sidedness of “certain departments” (primarily in the social sciences) where, he claimed, “If a man is not far enough left, he doesn’t get hired.”¹⁴

Nor was Reagan unique. Especially as the turmoil spread, other politicians recognized the political advantages of attacking radical students and professors. Richard Nixon was an early entrant into the fray; in 1965, he attacked a Rutgers professor who supported the Vietcong, and two years later he published an article in *Reader’s Digest* criticizing the elitism of the academy and its supposed moral relativism.¹⁵ George Wallace promoted the same populist refrain, insisting that he was speaking for the “workin’ folk fed up with bureaucrats in Washington, pointy-headed intellectuals, swaydo intellectual morons tellin’ ’em how to live their lives.”¹⁶

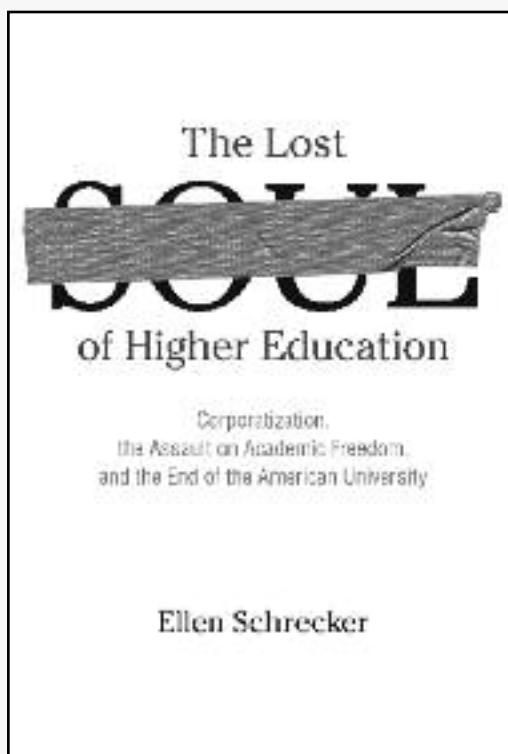
The most formidable voice, or at least the noisiest, was that of Vice President Spiro Agnew, the designated heavy in the Nixon administration. In his own and his speechwriter Pat Buchanan’s overheated prose, he made the conservatives’ case against the academy, the home of what he called the “effete corps of impudent snobs who characterize themselves as intellectuals.” He echoed the allegation that liberal academics (and, often, plain liberals) were “elitists” who “would have us believe that they alone know what is good for America.”¹⁷ Like Reagan, the Vice President considered the social sciences particularly culpable.¹⁸ Affirmative action was as bad, as were the “sordid surrenders and conspicuous cave-ins to intimidation and force” of so many faculty members and administrators.¹⁹

As the student movement spread, politicians matched their words with action. State legislators, who, after all, had considerable control over the nation's public colleges and universities, introduced dozens of bills cracking down on students and threatening to withhold funds from institutions and their faculties. There were more than seventy such measures in California and twenty in Wisconsin, including one that called for the dismissal of professors who assisted student strikers. In February 1969, to take another example, the New York State Senate voted 38-15 to ban student aid to anyone convicted of crimes "committed on the premises of any college." A similar measure went through Congress, albeit somewhat watered down by the education lobby which ensured that it would only come into play at the request of an institution's administration.²⁰

It is, of course, an oversimplification to view the negative response to the campus unrest of the 1960s as if it originated entirely outside the academic community. Such was certainly not the case. As early as 1964, their apprehensions about the Free Speech Movement induced a few Berkeley professors to abandon the university. "I know personally of five or six faculty members who are leaving," one of them wrote to the *New York Times*,

not because of lack of sympathy with 'free speech' or 'political action,' but because, as one put it, who wants to teach at the University of Saigon?

The net result, I fear, will be a sharp decline in public support for what was the finest state university in America; a rift within the faculty and the departure of some of its best members; and the persistence of suspicion and animosity in a world where suspicion and animosity have no place.



Other academics were equally distressed. The important neoconservative Sidney Hook lost little time in deploring the “lawlessness” of the California students and the “really disgusting” behavior of the university’s faculty in failing “to condemn the action” and thus seemingly “to condone indirectly the students’ behavior.”²² The passage of time only sharpened Hook’s critique of what he came to call “a turning point in the history of American higher education.” Bemoaning the “sad, sad role of the faculty at the University of California,” in a piece entitled “Second Thoughts on Berkeley,” Hook again noted that “this approval of student lawlessness on the part of the faculty” not only “constitutes the most shocking

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aspect of the role of the faculty in the Berkeley episode” and “can only serve to encourage further lawlessness,” but it also “runs the risk of provoking representatives of the public...into actions directed against the abuses.”²³

Hook’s portrayal, though partially correct in its assessment of the public response, did nonetheless distort the situation. To begin with, the academic profession was hardly of one mind with regard to the student unrest. In summarizing the results of two surveys of faculty opinion, Everett Carl Ladd, Jr. and Seymour Martin Lipset describe a seriously divided professoriate that they characterized as “ambivalent” about the student movement’s political and educational demands. What surprised them, however, was that even those faculty liberals who agreed with the students’ politics often deplored the unrest. Thus, for example, while 63 percent of Ladd and Lipset’s respondents agreed with the goals of the 1968 student activists at Columbia, only 5 percent supported their take-over of the campus. Moreover, when it came to matters of university governance, faculty members from every point on the political spectrum opposed significant student participation in academic affairs.²⁴ They would give power to the students on matters like dress codes or dorm regulations, but not over curriculum or personnel decisions.²⁵

The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) reflected the splits within the academic profession. Though the delegates to the association’s 1969 annual meeting did pass resolutions urging an end to the war in Vietnam and warning against bringing the police onto the campus, they could not reach a consensus on student demands for a say over educational policy.²⁶ Within a year, however, the organization was embroiled in a debate about whether it should take any stand on political issues. Generational divisions surfaced as younger and more radical academics insisted that universities were already so enmeshed in the state that not to

take an overt position (presumably one in opposition to current U.S. policies), was in effect to support the status quo.²⁷ More conservative voices, however, argued that, in the words of a long-time AAUP leader, “the intrusion of political or moral questions into academic deliberations” not only “weakens the capacity of faculties to cooperate in accomplishing their educational task,” but also risks the loss of external support.²⁸

That debate about the advisability of taking political positions was raging throughout the academic community—within disciplinary organizations and on campuses all across the country. On the whole, faculty members tended to take sides in accordance with their own political proclivities. Insisting that political advocacy

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would undermine the rationale for academic freedom and thus expose the academy to external attacks, Sidney Hook also argued that abandoning neutrality would split the university wide open.²⁹ His qualms were not without substance. Berkeley’s History Department, to take one example, voted to condemn the Nixon administration’s invasion of Cambodia in 1970, but did so over what one scholar called the “hysterical” opposition of some of its most illustrious members.³⁰

It was clear, however, that with regard to the turmoil on their own campuses most faculty members, whatever their political perspectives, supported whatever tactic seemed most likely to allay the unrest—the supposedly spineless behavior that their conservative colleagues deplored.³¹ After all, as the decline in faculty productivity during the University of California’s most tumultuous years revealed, the turbulence was hardly good for research and scholarship.³² Significantly, one phenomenon that Ladd and Lipset noted—though admitted they had little hard evidence for it—was that the moderate and liberal professors, who comprised the majority of faculty members at schools like Berkeley, Harvard, and Columbia, did not maintain a consistent stance, but shifted their positions in accordance with the developing crises. Thus, when administrators authorized a violent police action, faculty members sided with the students; and when the students’ demands became more radical and began to target professors, the faculty turned against them.³³

For many, mainly conservative, academics, the students’ demands and the faculty’s apparent capitulation to them struck at the heart of the university’s mission. In particular, they feared that the radicals’ insistence on relevance would undermine the faculty’s core educational responsibilities by diminishing its control of the curriculum. Moreover, the attempt to pacify campus militants by bringing in minority group students and designing special programs for them would, these

conservatives feared, politicize the university. Not only would such measures abandon the cherished neutrality of the academic profession, but they would also create what Donald Downs called “a new conception of the university as an instrument of social progress and social justice,” thus negating its time-honored role as “simply...an instrument for the Socratic pursuit of truth.”³⁴

What was at stake here was a confrontation between two different approaches to higher education: one, the traditional ivory tower conception of the academy as an institution devoted to the pursuit of truth, and the other, more activist vision of the university as an institution embedded in and contributing to the society around

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it. Historically, of course, American colleges and universities have combined both missions—and more.³⁵ Clark Kerr’s much-reviled depiction of the “multiversity” as a “confused” and “inconsistent” but effective institution of higher learning remains as apt today as when he proffered it in 1963.³⁶ But, given the controversies over the changes that took place later in that decade, defining the nature of the university turned into a highly charged partisan struggle that rages to this day.

The opponents of those changes also charged that the academy had lowered its standards by acceding to demands for such educational and social reforms as affirmative action. These Cassandras were not just complaining about the influx of new groups of presumably less-well-qualified students or the adoption of new and less rigorous courses of study. The faculty, too, was losing its distinction. The expanding system of higher education had attracted a new breed of college teachers, “a kind of *Lumpenprofessoriat*,” who, in the words of one critic, pandered to students and treated radical political activity as “a respectable substitute both for classroom performance and for scholarly productivity.”³⁷ These presumably second-rate instructors, another critic feared, had entered the academy to escape the draft, not to pursue their love of learning.³⁸ Unionization was also seen as a threat to the quality of higher education. As some faculty members embraced collective bargaining in the late 1960s, others warned that it would undermine standards by substituting bureaucratic criteria like seniority for the meritocratic process of peer review.³⁹

There was more than a whiff of elitism to these complaints, for the academic critics of these reforms rarely looked beyond the Harvards and Berkeleys of their self-enclosed universe. They seemed unaware that even in the 1960s the real world of academe encompassed nearly 3,000 institutions and

hundreds of thousands of instructors far removed from the competitive precincts of the major research universities and top liberal arts colleges. Nor, did critics acknowledge that most college students in America were far more likely to be studying accounting and elementary education than physics or philosophy. Instead, they bemoaned the passing of what they considered the university's golden age when intellectually serious (white male) undergraduates eschewed politics and lounged appreciatively at the feet of their professors to soak up the truths purveyed by Plato, Shakespeare, and the other Greats.⁴⁰

Nonetheless, despite their elitist provenance, these complaints about the

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decline of the university had remarkable staying power. Over time the *Lumpenprofessoriat* of the sixties became the tenured radicals of the late eighties and early nineties and the lamentations about the lowering of standards were now embellished with tales about the jettisoning of Western Civilization and its literary canon. Similarly, the rampaging radicals of the late sixties and early seventies had morphed into the politically correct thought police who cracked down on unwary souls making ethnic jokes or commenting on someone's personal appearance. Highly exaggerated though it was, by the early 1990s, this demonized portrayal of American universities and their faculties had become entrenched in the popular mind. The pervasiveness of such negative scenarios, however, reflects something other than the salience of their analyses. They became prevalent, at least in part, as the result of a highly self-conscious and well-financed campaign to destroy the influence of the academic left.

Such a statement does, I know, smack of a conspiratorial mindset. But, the evidence for such a campaign is too overwhelming to ignore. It began in the 1970s when the business community, facing an economic slowdown as well as an increase in government regulation, felt itself on the defensive against a hostile public climate. In response, a few corporate leaders began to formulate a long-term strategy for making America's political culture more business-friendly. As these businessmen saw it, academia—its social scientists, in particular—stood in the way of the ideological reorientation they sought. The nation's colleges and universities were, in the words of Hewlett Packard's David Packard, "havens for radicals who want to destroy the free enterprise system." Somehow, if the corporate sector was to reverse that situation and counter what it considered the academy's malign influence, it would have to create an alternative, and more conservative, source of expertise.⁴¹

An influential memorandum that future Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell sent to the chair of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's Education Committee in August 1971, laid out the strategy. The business community would have to "be far more aggressive than in the past" and mount a sophisticated public relations campaign to insert conservative ideas into the nation's public discourse. "Perhaps the most fundamental problem," Powell explained,

is the imbalance of many faculties. Correcting this is indeed a long-range and difficult project. Yet it should be undertaken as a part of an overall program. This

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would mean the urging of the need for faculty balance upon university administrators and boards of trustees.⁴²

Not only would conservative business leaders have to create their own intellectual infrastructure, but they would also have to destroy the credibility of the already existing academic one.

Powell had some powerful allies. Nixon's former Secretary of the Treasury, William Simon, was the key figure here. As the head of the John M. Olin Foundation in the late 1970s, he used his organization, as a recent admirer put it, "not as a charitable foundation, but as a source of venture capital for the vast right-wing conspiracy."⁴³ Nor was Olin the only funder involved; the Lynde and Harry Bradley, Sarah Scaife, Coors, and Smith Richardson foundations also directed money to conservative intellectuals, student interns, alternative campus newspapers, and right-wing faculty groups.⁴⁴ They were particularly generous to the conservative think tanks that housed right-wing intellectuals and former public servants. By the late 1980s, the Hoover Institution, Heritage Foundation, and American Enterprise Institute, to name the most prominent, were receiving millions of dollars to arrange conferences and produce policy documents for bureaucrats, politicians, and the media.⁴⁵ At the same time, the funders also gained an academic imprimatur for the free market ideas they championed by endowing professorships and establishing such special programs such as the influential Law and Economics programs at schools like Chicago, Harvard, Stanford, Yale, and the University of Virginia.⁴⁶ By the mid-eighties, this network of conservative institutions and individuals was furnishing the media and the nation's political elites with an alternative source of expertise that looked, at least superficially, like scholarship.⁴⁷

Olin and the other right-wing foundations also sought to marginalize the academic mainstream by directly attacking the nation's colleges and universities. One of their main weapons were the more than fifty alternative student newspapers that not only offered strident and frequently tasteless critiques of their home institutions, but also served as incubators for future conservative journalists. Perhaps the most successful alumnus of this venture was Dinesh D'Souza, the founder of the *Dartmouth Review* and author of the 1991 best-seller, *Illiberal Education*, which he produced as an American Enterprise Institute fellow with the help of \$120,000 from Olin. Similar outlays subsidized both the writing and the publicity for such other attacks on the academic world as Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals* and, of course, Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind*.⁴⁸

The right-wing foundations also subsidized organizations that challenged the supposed radical domination of the academy. Established in 1987, the National Association of Scholars claimed to represent those allegedly suppressed right-wingers within the professoriate who were upholding "what is admirable about Western civilization" and standing fast against such intellectual remnants of the 1960s as feminism, multiculturalism, and revisionist history.⁴⁹ The NAS also opposed affirmative action, as did some other organizations (also funded by Olin et al.) that litigated against preferential admissions for minority groups. In a related area, the libertarian Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) fought against the speech codes designed to make campuses more welcoming to women and people of color—a campaign that supported academic freedom but also undermined public support for higher education. And then there's the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), founded in 1995 by Lynne Cheney and Senator Joseph Lieberman to encourage donors, trustees, and policy makers to take a more active role in pressing for such academic "reforms" as the restoration of the traditional curriculum.

What is so striking about this conservative campaign against the academy is how self-conscious it was. In a 1989 speech at the Heritage Foundation, a former Reagan official openly acknowledged that he and his colleagues were seriously engaged in "a counteroffensive on that last Leftist redoubt, the college campus."⁵⁰ That counteroffensive has paid off handsomely. Not only has the nation's intellectual discourse shifted noticeably to the Right, but by the time the mainstream media was promoting the so-called "political correctness" controversy in the late 1980s, the professoriate's reputation was in tatters. As the current economic crisis intensifies the financial plight of the nation's colleges and universities, that loss of status has been devastating. Unless the academic community can regain the confidence of the American public, it may find itself on the verge of extinction. 

ENDNOTES

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