

Witch Hunts in the Academy

One element of the present dominant conservative consensus in America is aimed at rescuing the university from the nay-sayers, radicals, communists and relativists who are alleged to have taken over the American university and subverted its charter of academic freedom. There is already a movement afoot to create a 'student bill of rights' and Florida has introduced a legislation that would give students the right to sue professors who persistently introduce 'controversial matter' into the classroom.

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It is not often in America that news about 'higher learning' is permitted to intrude into a public sphere dominated by conservative talk radio shows, an all-consuming 'fascination' with some 'human interest' story – the Asian tsunami, the battles waged by the bedside of a brain-dead woman, the death of a pope who already appears to be on his way to canonisation – that disappears as quickly as it had surfaced, and various manifestations of America's monumental self-love. Every year, in late winter, nearly all major newspapers carry a special supplement on 'The Final Four', or the 'Road to the Final Four'. One might be inclined to think of the 'Final Four' as something akin to the 'Big Three' – Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin at their famous meeting in Potsdam – or the G-7 nations which convene every year. This special supplement of six to twelve full pages conveys, however, nothing more lofty than information on collegiate basketball and the long road to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) championship. Elaborate charts are furnished to show how, in the best spirit of competitiveness, 64 teams prevailed over their competitors, and the display culminates in a grand diagram charting the elimination of the losers and the road leading to the semi-finals. Endlessly adrift in 'March Madness', the nation hungers for news about 'Wildcats', 'Blue Devils', 'Hoosiers', 'Hoyas', 'Aztecs', and 'Braves'.

For all the fervour with which the *New York Times* reported the massive death and destruction wrought by the tsunami, before the tsunami disappeared altogether

as a news item from its pages in mid-January, the tsunami never received a supplement. Aceh, Sumatra, Jaffna, and Chennai are not places calculated to sustain the attention of people who know Bengal principally in the plural, as in the 'Bengals' or tigers of the University of Cincinnati. Never mind the thought that other slow-motion tsunamis, such as the one in Iraq where infant mortality rates have risen dramatically since the first Gulf War in 1991 even as in most other parts of the world infant mortality has declined, do not even make it to the news. Whatever the role, well-documented as it is, of the repressive place of media cartels in American society, there can be no doubt of the pervasiveness of anti-intellectualism in American life. There have been periods in American history, the McCarthy era being a case in point, when this anti-intellectualism was palpable [Hofstadter 1970], but other commentators are inclined to associate it with the strands of pragmatism encountered since the inception of the Republic. Nearly a century ago, the iconoclastic Thorstein Veblen noted with remarkable perspicacity that the conduct of the American university, the product of men largely inclined to view it as a business proposition, had been handed over to managers, accountants, and 'efficiency engineers' [Veblen 1918]. Those trends have accelerated with alarming alacrity as university CEOs, while mouthing platitudes about 'excellence', have borrowed every page from the corporate charter, denying workers rights to unionise and rapidly increasing the ranks of ill-paid adjunct, untenured, and part-time faculty even as they have awarded themselves plump bonuses.

The increasing corporatisation of the American university, unpalatable as it is, is now conjoined with a new though not unprecedented danger that stalks the American academy. In the 1980s and early 1990s, as the 'political correctness' (PC) wars raged over campuses, and the multicultural 'left' and the 'right' disputed the merits of canonical works of literature and philosophy, a number of shrill voices were heard bemoaning the loss of values in education and the trivialisation of western civilisation. Emboldened by Ronald Reagan's electoral triumphs and the ascendancy of the 'moral majority', well-placed conservative commentators warned about the increasing encroachment of various viruses of French origins, from Lacanian psychoanalysis and Foucauldian analysis to post-structuralism and post-modernism, and the consequent subversion of academic standards. ED Hirsch's, *Cultural Literacy* (1987), Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), and Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (1991) were only among the most prominent of the tracts, of varying combativeness and analytical depth, which sought to restore so-called 'balance' to American college education and ensure that American college kids would not renounce the great intellectual inheritance of western civilisation for something as paltry as the fiction of Alice Walker, Afrocentric history, Rastafarian poetry, or the autobiographies of victimised indigenous women such as Rigoberta Menchu.

Crusade

That phase of the crusade against multiculturalism, of which there are far more impressive critiques from the left, has now passed over into something much more ominous. As George Bush famously declared in November 2004 in the wake of his victory over John Kerry, he had earned political capital and he aimed to spend it; and many of his supporters, wherever they are lodged, are now claiming a mandate to enact agendas which are alleged to represent the views of a majority of Americans. While corporate, evangelical Christian, and nakedly self-aggrandising realpolitik worldviews may not always

coincide, it is an indubitable fact that the Congress, the courts, the corporations, the Christian right, and the cartels that rule the airwaves all reflect the dominant conservative consensus. One element of this consensus is aimed at rescuing the university from the nay-sayers, radicals, communists, and relativists who are alleged to have taken over the American university and subverted its charter of academic freedom. Indeed, the word 'rescue' is the operative trope in the lives of these defenders of the faith: as Jesus rescues the sinners who repent, and pregnant girls are rescued from evil abortion providers in daring raids, so college students must be rescued from the claws of 'tenured radicals' who are said to hate the very freedoms that America uniquely promises.

It is against this backdrop that one might begin to understand the eruptions of interest in the recent turmoils within the academy to which American public life is ordinarily indifferent. Before turning to a recent and still inconclusive controversy, one might advert, with some unanticipated advantage, to the much discussed, indeed ridiculed, pronouncement of Harvard president Lawrence Summers in January 2005 that the small presence of women in 'high-end scientific professions' could be attributed in part to innate differences between the sexes. Pointing to what he described as "reasonably strong evidence of [intellectual] taste differences between little girls and little boys that are not easy to attribute to socialisation", Summers averred that the "variability of a male and a female population" is true with respect to attributes that are not "culturally determined".¹

Contemptuous Assessment

Rather like the clownish Duke of Edinburgh, who has acquired notoriety for his gaffes – inquiring of aboriginals on the Queen's visit to Australia in 2002 whether they still threw spears at each other, and quarrelling with Indians at a visit to the Jallianwala Bagh whether as many Indians had in fact died at the hands of General Dyer's men as stated in the plaque at the memorial – Summers is known for his rather contemptuous assessments of individuals and nations that do not meet his standards of evolved entities. That students and faculty, and not only women at Harvard, took his comments as something more than just a gaffe is not surprising. When Summers' apology finally came, it was much too late; and the faculty at Harvard, for the first time in its history,

delivered a vote of no-confidence (and, at least for the time being, of little consequence) at a special meeting convened to consider whether the faculty reposed confidence in Summers to continue as president of the nation's oldest and most prestigious educational institution. Describing herself as left speechless by Summers' comments, the Harvard sociologist Mary Water remarked, "Has anyone asked if he thinks this about African-Americans, because they are under-represented at this university? Are Hispanics inferior? Are Asian superior? That's the road he's going down and I don't want to see any university go down that road".²

Summers' Memo

It is a sign of the gains made by women in the professions, and the changes in the protocols that have made overt sexism in the academy entirely disreputable, that Summers, who is never previously known to have expressed contrition, should have had to seek forgiveness and describe himself as chastened by the furious reactions to his remarks. Yet it is remarkable that in the ensuing controversy, even his most determined critics could not call to mind Summers' previous conduct as chief economist of the World Bank. Presiding in that elevated position, Summers penned a memo, subsequently leaked to the *Economist*, wherein he suggested that Africa's integration into the world economy could be better achieved if African nations could be persuaded to part with their natural resources and receive, in striking testimony to the blessings of free trade, generous shipments of nuclear wastes, asbestos, leaded gasoline, and other toxins. "I have always thought", wrote Summers, "that underpopulated countries in Africa are vastly underpolluted; their air quality is probably vastly inefficiently low in pollutants compared to Los Angeles or Mexico".³ So reprehensible a view, one would think, would have earned Summers the sack. One likes to think that decent men and women would have arisen in revolt. As an eloquent spokesperson for 'world enhancing trade in air pollution and waste', Summers was rewarded with the secretaryship of the US Treasury and, after the Republican capture of the White House, the presidency of Harvard. Apparently, the conscience-stricken faculty of Harvard is only aroused by certain gaffes, and the most despicable assumptions about Africa and black people can be entertained without fear of retribution.

Summers might perhaps feel relieved that the spotlight has not been lingering on him alone, but one is hard pressed to feel his plight. As Summers' own past and the history of numerous figures in the Bush administration amply suggests, white males with immense power generally move from one form of mischief to another, their dementia compounded by ever greater power. But others, even within the privileged space of the academy, might not be able to weather the storm. Such may well be the experience of Ward Churchill, a professor of ethnic studies at the University of Colorado-Boulder whose resignation has been demanded by the university's board of regents. Churchill claims membership in an American Indian tribe; his detractors, who describe him as a 'fraud', as white as lily snow, are nonetheless ready to scalp him. What has made Churchill the poster-boy of the right's opprobrium is an essay that Churchill published on September 11, 2001 which he entitled, 'Some People Push Back: On the Justice of Roosting Chickens'. Detailing, among other things, the immense loss of life perpetrated by the Americans in Iraq over 10 years of sanctions, and the indifference of Americans to the genocide wrought by their own government, Churchill wrote that the hijackers who commandeered the planes that brought down the twin towers and a portion of the Pentagon "finally responded in kind to some of what this country [the US] has dispensed to their people as a matter of course". The people housed in the World Trade Centre that day were, Churchill admitted, 'civilians of a sort'. Not one to mince words, Churchill added: "But innocent? Gimme a break. They formed a technocratic corps at the very heart of America's global financial empire – the 'mighty engine of profit' to which the military dimension of US policy has always been enslaved – and they did so both willingly and knowingly." Churchill called them 'little Eichmanns', and wondered that America had gotten off so 'very, very cheap'.⁴

For three years, Churchill's essay languished in cyberspace and in the little press. Some months ago, it came to the attention of people at Hamilton College in New York state where Churchill was scheduled to make an appearance; before long, Churchill was being ripped apart by conservative cable and radio stations as 'insane', an instantiation of the university as a refuge for left-wing radicals contemptuous of American values. The invitation to Churchill was withdrawn; Churchill was,

in turn, pressured into stepping down as chair of the ethnic studies department; and, on February 3, the university's board of regents, a body generally comprised of businessmen, establishment figures, corporate leaders, and political appointees, passed a resolution apologising to the nation for Churchill's 'disgraceful comments' which were described as having 'brought dishonour to the university'. Meanwhile, the Colorado senate, which one can only infer has little other business to conduct, voted 31-1 to affirm its support of a resolution condemning Churchill for his remarks and expressing support for the victims of September 11. The only dissenting voice came from a legislator, Peter Groff, who described the war in Iraq as an endeavour that would allow "some obscure professor in Iraq" to "talk about [political leaders] in a way that we don't agree with".⁵ If so many lives had been given to defend the rights of an obscure professor in Iraq, was an obscure, or nearly obscure, professor in the US to be thrown to the wolves?

Churchill's Transgression

September 11 lives in the American imagination as a day of infamy, and its victims have already been admitted into the pantheon of martyrs. Churchill is scarcely the only one to have suggested that America has been paid back in its own coin, but he is among the very few to have argued that victims are not always entirely unimpeachable. His precise blunder consists in having chosen his words well – much too well. Churchill had described the victims at the twin centres as 'little Eichmanns', "braying, incessantly and self-importantly, into their cellphones, arranging power lunches and stock transactions, each of which translated, conveniently out of sight, mind and smelling distance, into the starved and rotting flesh of [Iraqi] infants." Presiding over a bureaucratised system of murder, Eichmann never killed anyone himself. From Churchill's standpoint, he could not have made a more apt comparison: the technocrat, obsessed with making the trains to Auschwitz run on time, finding his match in the stockbroker whose investments bankroll the most immense killing machine known to humankind. But there is a transgression that has taken place here, one that a supreme if albeit unwritten law of American intellectual life (such as it is) does not permit. The Holocaust must never be likened to any other form or incident of genocide; it goes beyond genocide, well beyond language

and even the realm of what is termed human experience. If this stipulation is accepted, one can understand why Churchill's invocation of 'little Eichmanns' is viewed as demeaning not only the victims of 9/11 but even the victims of that unspeakable horror known as the Holocaust. It is this same insistence on the singularity of Jewish suffering that also accounts in substantial measure for the sustained investigation to which pro-Palestinian professors at Columbia University have been subjected.⁶ It is a sheer heresy, in the present climate of the American university – against the backdrop of America's war on terrorism and the characterisation of Islam as a form of mediaeval, barbaric, and unfulfilled religiosity – to suggest that Palestinians have faced immense suffering in the post-second world war period, that the state of Israel has forfeited whatever good merit it may have accumulated at its inceptionary moment, and that Palestinian suicide bombers, when viewed in relation to Israel's massively disproportionate exercise of military force against Palestinian civilians, can perhaps legitimately be viewed with compassion and sadness as much as anger and hatred.

That a few pro-Palestinian professors, falsely charged with the abuse of their authority, anti-Semitism, and intimidating students into silence or submission,⁷ should have raised the shackles of those who, even as they are incapable of making a distinction between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, can successfully cajole university administrations into appointing inquisitorial committees. This speaks volumes about how the space for critical reflection and dissenting views has shrunk in one of the last bastions of American freedom, the university. There is already a movement afoot to create a 'student bill of rights', and its chief instigator, David Horowitz – an ardent advocate of unbridled American power and a remarkable illustration of the adage that nothing succeeds in America as much as abrasive stupidity and confident mediocrity – has gone on record as saying that he is motivated by nothing more than the intention to ensure that the leftist professors who are said to dominate campuses do not cower their students into silence or submission and that they are forced to abide by the very intellectual diversity that they had once championed.⁸

Legislation introduced in the state of Florida would give students the right to sue in a court of law professors who "persistently introduce controversial matter into the classroom or coursework that has no

relation to the subject of study and serves no legitimate pedagogical purpose".⁹ Under the provisions of this bill, an instructor teaching a course on genocide in Rwanda or Nazi Germany might be sued by a student if he or she were to introduce, 'persistently', references to American genocidal actions in the Americas, Cambodia, Vietnam, or Iraq. We have been hearing from Horowitz and others of his ilk for the last few years of the Jihadists who are apparently determined to transform the American university into a species of the madrassa. It is now clear that the Jihadists who have turned to campuses as their happy hunting grounds are not Islamists, or those conveniently labelled Muslim fundamentalists, America-haters, or communists, but rather those who can tolerate no departure from the dominant creeds of the Republican party, militarism, American jingoism, and other associated evils. **EW**

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Notes

- 1 Remarks at a National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) Conference, January 14, 2005, online at <http://www.president.harvard.edu/speeches/2005/nber.html>
- 2 Marcella Bombardieri, 'Harvard women's Group Rips Summers', *Boston Globe*, January 19, 2005.
- 3 Memo of December 12, 1991, online at: <http://www.whirledbank.org/ourwords/summers.html>
- 4 The essay is online at www.darknightpress.org
- 5 See the coverage at <http://newmedia.colorado.edu/silverandgold/messages/4192.html>
- 6 N R Kleinfeld, 'Tensions from the Mideast Get Personal at Columbia', *New York Times*, January 18, 2005.
- 7 The Ad Hoc Grievance Committee appointed by Columbia University to inquire into student allegations of faculty misconduct submitted its report on March 28, 2005 and found that the charges were without foundation, though it did note that there had been some sharp exchanges and that at least one faculty member might have used intemperate language. The report is online at http://www.columbia.edu/cu/news/05/03/ad_hoc_grievance_committee_report.html; the controversy is ably recounted in Scott Sherman, 'The Mideast Comes to Columbia', *The Nation*, April 4, 2005.
- 8 David Horowitz, 'In Defence of Intellectual Diversity', online at <http://chronicle.com/free/v50/i23/23b01201.htm>
- 9 House Bill H-837 is online at www.flsenate.gov

References

- Hofstadter, Richard (1970): *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, Alfred A Knopf, New York, [1963].
- Veblen, Thorstein (1918): *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities By Business Men*, B W Huebsch, New York.