

Book Reviews

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Bruce L. R. Smith, Jeremy D. Mayer and A. Lee Fritschler, *Closed Minds? Politics and Ideology in American Universities* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008).

John K. Wilson, *Patriotic Correctness: Academic Freedom and Its Enemies*, (Boulder CO: Paradigm Press, 2008).

Conservative critics of the state of higher education in North America perceive a myriad of problems from a decline in academic standards and accompanying grade inflation to the abandonment of the traditional curriculum (especially in the humanities and social sciences) in favour of politicized “identity” studies. They blame these and other ills on a process of decadence and decay that, they insist, started in the tumultuous 1960s, and led to the downfall of authentic education. They maintain that special pleadings on behalf of women and minorities have led to “reverse discrimination” and “victimology.” Throw exotic intellectual fashions such as postindustrialism, postcolonialism, poststructuralism and postmodernism into the mix, and they declare that we have a recipe for an academic Armageddon.

In addition to the evisceration of the curriculum, conservatives pay special attention to “political correctness” which, in their peculiar view, poses a severe threat to academic freedom. Not only do they say that it has become impossible to embrace conservative principles, but the dominant “liberal-leftists” are charged with poisoning classrooms by preaching their ideology while simultaneously barring conservative scholars from employment, promotion and equal standing on campus. Instead of teaching literature or history as rigorous academic disciplines, liberals are accused of indoctrinating naïve students with radical ideas that often epitomize profligacy and, occasionally, border on treason. Moreover, not only formal teaching and learning are affected. They fret that normal student and teacher behaviour is constantly under scrutiny. They worry that women, gays and lesbians, adherents of diverse religious faiths or members of ethno-racial minority communities are quick to be offended by any casual remark, and are affronted whenever, as, they are made to “feel uncomfortable.” They are anxious that they may say or do something in all innocence and find themselves in the hands of the “thought police.”

Finally, conservatives are disturbed by an apparent change of attitude toward education on the part of their students. This indictment normally contains two parts. First, it is held that many, if not most, students arrive on their postsecondary campus woefully ill-prepared for serious study — both attitudinally and intellectually. “Progressive”

education in elementary and secondary schools is accused of producing an undergraduate population that is barely literate, hopelessly devoid of even the most elementary knowledge of society and culture as well as of science and mathematics. Second, this crop of alleged dunderheads is also said to be possessed by an incredible sense of entitlement, which leads them to expect faculty to cater to their needs, demand little genuine work and reward their arrogance and ignorance with high grades in the bargain. As a result, the conservative propensity to deal harshly with apathy and incompetence raises another flag — the admonition to treat students munificently lest unforgiving students place a commendable career in jeopardy through the instrumentality of “teacher evaluation” forms.

Now, setting aside any arguments concerning the veracity of this admittedly minimalist conservative jeremiad, one issue emerges from among the others — academic freedom. The main conservative argument appears to be that identity politics, political correctness and student empowerment combine to hamper free expression, and that bias and prejudice in the classroom, in hiring and promotion are almost exclusively directed against conservative teachers. In the alternative, they contend that both liberal and radical ideologues are free to attack traditional social values and institutions at will.

The two books under review take quite a different position. Smith, Mayer and Fritschler’s *Closed Minds?* is a comprehensive and well-researched study that meets and exceeds traditional academic standards of thorough examination and clear, dispassionate exposition of a topic. Wilson’s *Patriotic Correctness*, on the other hand, is somewhat livelier and slightly angrier; it makes many of the same points, but shows a little more fire in the belly.

Closed Minds?, it should be promptly noted, is a production of the prestigious Brookings Institution in Washington. Formed in 1916 and originally affiliated with Washington University in St. Louis, it claims to be “the first private organization devoted to analyzing public policy at the national level.” It is certainly one of the most respected independent “think tanks” in the United States, and is the public policy research institute most frequently cited by the American media. Generally considered “centrist” in its political stance, its pragmatic but innovative studies have been influential in high government circles for decades, and it has even been credited with devising or refining much of the successful post-World War II Marshall Plan.

The research reported in this volume includes original survey data and analysis, focus groups and extensive interviews with both major and more modest figures in postsecondary education. The temperate and disinterested results reveal a very different picture of the nature and effect of ideology in the university. It cannot be denied, of course, that the majority of professors in the humanities and social sciences lean somewhat to the left on the political spectrum; however, *Closed Minds?* presents three important caveats. First, conservative and populist critics rarely mention that faculty in other areas such as business administration, economics and some of the so-called “professional” schools drift somewhat to the right. So, the overall balance of political opinion is much more even than is often portrayed. Second, even where there are

politically committed and articulate teachers, students are rarely distressed by any apparent “bias.” Quite the contrary, many students seem to believe that professors who are passionate about their subjects are providing just the sort of thought-provoking education that universities are intended to offer; thus, as long as such teachers are tolerant of dissenting opinion and fair-minded in the assessment of student performance, there is “no harm, no foul.” Third, complaints that the preponderance of liberal teachers in some departments make it difficult for conservative-minded scholars to win appointments in prestigious institutions do not seem to hold up. Yes, most faculty may be centre-left in their personal and even their professional opinions, but that is largely because brilliant conservative thinkers largely eschew a career in the classroom. There is far more money to be made and, perhaps, a more congenial work environment to be found, in the private sector.

Where the authors display special insight and offer a credible criticism of their own, is in the teaching of what used to be called “civics,” and now percolates through many disciplines in the liberal arts. The problem with postsecondary education, they claim, is not the presence of bias in the classroom or the faculty lounge, it is precisely the opposite. Political correctness may have involved an exaggerated concern for “feelings” as opposed to thoughts. However, because of populist assaults on “elitism,” the Republican regimes which have controlled the White House for twenty of the past twenty-eight years, and the increasing fiscal dependency on the state and private corporations, universities have become timid, and now tend to shun vigorous political debate. The fact is, then, that there is a political chill in the air, but it comes not from the left but from the right. Of course, it is often possible to find some centre of radical thought wherein feminists or neo-Marxists of one sort or another are able to hold court. These are, however, usually small, marginalized segments of the academic community. Their influence is seldom what they once hoped for, and their critics continue to fear it to be.

Apart from displays of dyspepsia by right-wing interest groups, *Closed Minds?* concludes that there is delicate ideological peace on campus — so much so that students are not being educated to become active and effective participants in the polity as much as efficient producers, compliant consumers and submissive citizens. If this is so, ideological peace has been purchased at far too high a price.

John Wilson approaches the same situation and comes to somewhat similar conclusions, but his methods are somewhat less “objective” and his language is considerably more robust. *Patriotic Correctness* takes direct aim at, what Wilson considers to be the real and enduring threat to academic freedom, namely ideologically driven right-wing advocates who have launched an assault against the college campus, and are in no mood to take prisoners.

Wilson is not without evidence for his position. His major proposition is not that “9/11 changed the world,” but that it did change the context of American political culture. Flag-waving patriots, religious fanatics, xenophobes, nativists and populists of various descriptions were given leave to act out their resentments against all those whose ideas and actions could be described as corrosive of traditional American values. The usual

suspects were easily identified and the fight was on. Ethno-racial minorities that dared to identify a history of ill-treatment, pursuers of unconventional lifestyles, women, and openly gay and lesbian people were immediate targets. Soon, students and teachers whose academic work involved or implied any significant measure of social and political criticism followed. Throwing up their hands in horror that scientific hoaxes such as evolution and global warming were being calmly accepted by most universities, and apoplectic at hints that the al-Qaeda attacks might have been related to aggressive US policies and could be interpreted as some form of “blowback,” the ideologues went into action.

In Wilson’s narrative, the major villains are zealots such as David Horowitz who has been carrying on a holy war against treacherous professors whose mission seems to be to convert American youngsters into a phalanx of quislings who are always inclined to “blame America first.” Ever since he broke with his radical, Marxist and proto-hippie colleagues in the depths of the sixties, became an apostate and surfaced as a leader of the neo-conservative right, Horowitz has busied himself lobbying for his Academic Bill of Rights in state legislatures. In its typical form, it involves protecting students from teachers by banning openly political speech. He also pays money to students to “rat out” their professors and to supply him with film, tape and ever newer information technology that reveals leftist professors making left-sounding statements. The result is his book, *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Professors in America* (2006).

Others get their come-uppance from the vituperative right as well. Condemnations of specific institutions such as Antioch College, particular individuals including Noam Chomsky and ideas involving almost any criticism of Israel abound. As Wilson lays out in meticulous detail (there are 1,233 footnotes in only 214 pages of text), there may not be a vast right-wing conspiracy as Hillary Clinton once mused, but there is certainly a vast number of like-minded right-wingers who seem sincerely persuaded that the universities are cesspools of subversion, and that it is the task of red-blooded Americans to expunge them so that the clean, clear admiration of God, country and decent living can return.

Some of this is truly unnerving, but Wilson is not content to describe an academy under siege. He closes his book with a wider critique of the corporate and military influence on academic administration, for-profit diploma mills, efforts to ban faculty and staff unions, and the general ambiance of what he calls “Wal-Mart University.” He also points out that academic organizations such as the American Association of University Professors and public groups such as the American Civil Liberties Association, while noble in their defence of liberty, are insufficient to ensure the protection of academic freedom fully and expeditiously. He therefore calls for a new initiative which he tentatively calls the Institute for College Freedom. As he envisions it, ICE would “engage in five main projects: research, education, policy advocacy, defense of individual rights, and global advocacy for academic freedom.” Those who are especially sensitive or have already been singed by the fires from the right might find this proposal attractive.

Less daring or desperate souls will also be energized by *Closed Minds?* Appealing to a larger tradition and incorporating a longer time frame, the authors appeal to students, faculty and obsequious administrators alike to refresh their memories of times when universities were not as “risk-averse” and did not cater almost exclusively to the vocational and stolidly practical matter of preparing young folk for the workplace. Critical and reflexive education is, after all, essential to any future to which people can seriously commit themselves and any education worthy of the name. Smith, Mayer and Fritschler would dearly like to have it back.

Both books are plainly and exclusively about circumstances in the United States of America. Canadians, however, can read both for useful instruction in the current academic culture in America, as well as for some general understanding of academic freedom as it is confronted by acrimonious argumentation from the political right.

Equally important are the possible comparisons and contrasts between the experience of American academicians and the fate of university professors in Canada. Although rarely as dramatic as our cousins to the South, Canadian postsecondary educators have our own turbulent history with political and corporate interference and censorship. Dozens of cases come to mind, but among those that feature prominently are those of Frank Underhill at the University of Toronto in the early 1940s, Harry Crowe at the precursor to the University of Winnipeg in the mid-1950s, Marlene Dixon at McGill in the 1970s, and David Noble at Simon Fraser University in the first decade of this new century.

It would be ill-advised to draw many direct parallels between Canada to the United States both regarding the special circumstances of terrorism and the general academic climate and political culture. At the same time, the rising significance of corporatism, populism and, to a lesser degree, religious fundamentalism is at least similar in each country. The dominance of the Republican political agenda in the US and the comparative popularity of the Reform-Alliance-Conservative mélange in Canada hint at similar patterns of belief and behaviour. If nothing else, it is safe to say that this is not a time when intellectualism is held in high regard and academic freedom tops few voters’ lists of important issues in either country. Accordingly, people interested in the genuine independence of the academy and its autonomy in terms of both governance and finance from the dominant institutions of our increasingly corporate society have much to ponder. Those seeking an American perspective to complement our own would do well to read both books.