

Intellectual diversity in the U.S.: To what end?

Jonathan R. Cole warns that the conservative movement in the United States trusts neither professors nor students. The real problem in American universities is not radical ideas, he writes, but an absence of ideas, dissent, and vigorous debate

Jonathan R. Cole, ancien doyen de l'Université Columbia, décrit l'attaque menée contre la liberté universitaire par le militant conservateur David Horowitz et d'autres personnes aux États-Unis qui prônent l'adoption d'une déclaration universitaire des droits qui obligera les professeurs à enseigner tous les « points de vue » sur un sujet donné. Est-ce à dire, par exemple, que les professeurs devront inclure la « création intelligente » dans leurs plans de cours, s'interroge Cole. Cole fait valoir que des militants comme Horowitz veulent que l'État surveille l'enseignement en classe parce qu'ils ne font confiance ni aux professeurs « radicaux » ni aux étudiants naïfs. En fait, affirme Cole, le danger qui guette les universités américaines d'aujourd'hui n'est pas le nombre excessif d'idées radicales, mais l'absence de débat vigoureux.

Diversity of all kinds seems to be the new universal good. So, it must be a good thing when conservative activist David Horowitz calls for “intellectual diversity” on American campuses to replace radical or liberal orthodoxy that is warping the minds of the nation’s educated youth. Like much of

what Horowitz has brought us lately—such as his Academic Bill of Rights he would have every state legislature adopt as law, or his recent book, which identifies the “101 most dangerous professors” on American campuses—there is in his work and proposals much factual error, double speak and conceptual muddle that

poses as thoughtful, reasonable, and empirically validated statements of fact. But adoption of a Horowitz-like agenda for presenting the world to our students would be disastrous for American universities.

Here are just a few reasons why. Critics have a right to criticize, but they also have some responsibility to produce conceptual clarity. Horowitz and other like-minded critics, such as The American Council of Trustees and Alumni, fail to offer any clear idea, much less a definition, of what they mean by intellectual diversity and what would represent "balance" in an individual scholar's lectures or seminars, in a department's offerings, or in a university's curriculum and research agenda.¹ We are not offered any convincing evidence, beyond a few illustrative anecdotes and highly edited videos, that campus intellectuals are espousing orthodoxy. What is the size of the orthodoxy problem anyway? What remedy, if any, is necessary for this disease that Horowitz would have us cure?

Despite protestations to the contrary, political accountability to outside authorities is what Horowitz and his supporters really want. That is why they need state legislatures to pass the Academic Bill of Rights. They fear a system that resolves sharply divergent truth claims through a process of peer review rather than political review. In fact, they are most interested in substituting their orthodoxy for what they see as a misguided and dangerous one. How far would they go in producing "intellectual diversity"? Maybe we should teach "intelligent design" in science courses as a balance against the consensus scientific views about evolutionary biology. Or mandate a proper balance between those who criticize the Bush Administration's forays into Iraq, which was based upon lies and false information, with an appropriate number of scholars who will defend the Administration's actions regardless of what are considered now as facts.

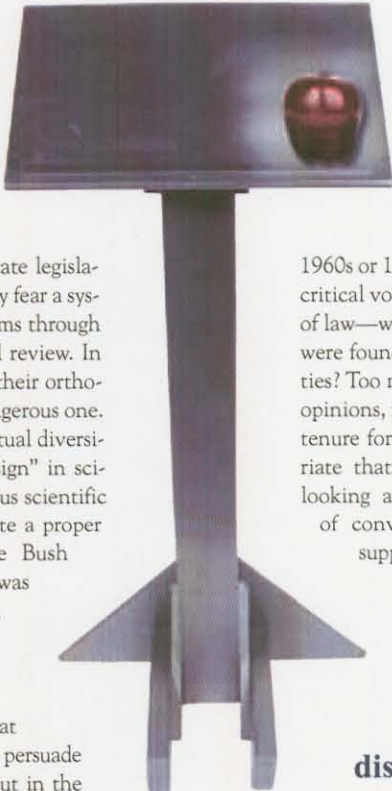
Any ideas should be fair game for debate at universities, but those that fail over time to persuade appropriate experts in the field should lose out in the marketplace of ideas rather than be retained because political pressure has been put on universities to offer them as "representatives" of alternative points of view. I want to postulate that external political interference with academic life, free inquiry, and the open discourse that is essential to it, has almost always had disastrous consequences for systems of higher learning.

Horowitz is a man who simply does not trust the basic system of knowledge creation and transmission that has produced in the United States the greatest system of higher education in the world. He neither trusts its professors nor its students. He believes that the professors are presenting a world not as proposed or tested theories, but as ideology. He doesn't trust students because he sees them as naïve and incapable of critical reasoning, and of distinguishing between sound and shoddy evidence. He worries about universities that give safe harbour to radically different ideas that question existing institutional arrangements in our society. He does not believe the professoriate capable of self-policing or of distinguishing between claims to truth that do, or do not, measure up against

rigorous methodological standards. At Horowitz's university, professors would hold their intellectual punches for fear of facing star-chamber tribunals for what they say or fail to say in class. It would be a university rich in balanced, but flaccid, curricula. Horowitz would produce a dangerous, as well as a boring, university. In short, he would nullify the long-standing and highly successful compact between American society and its universities.

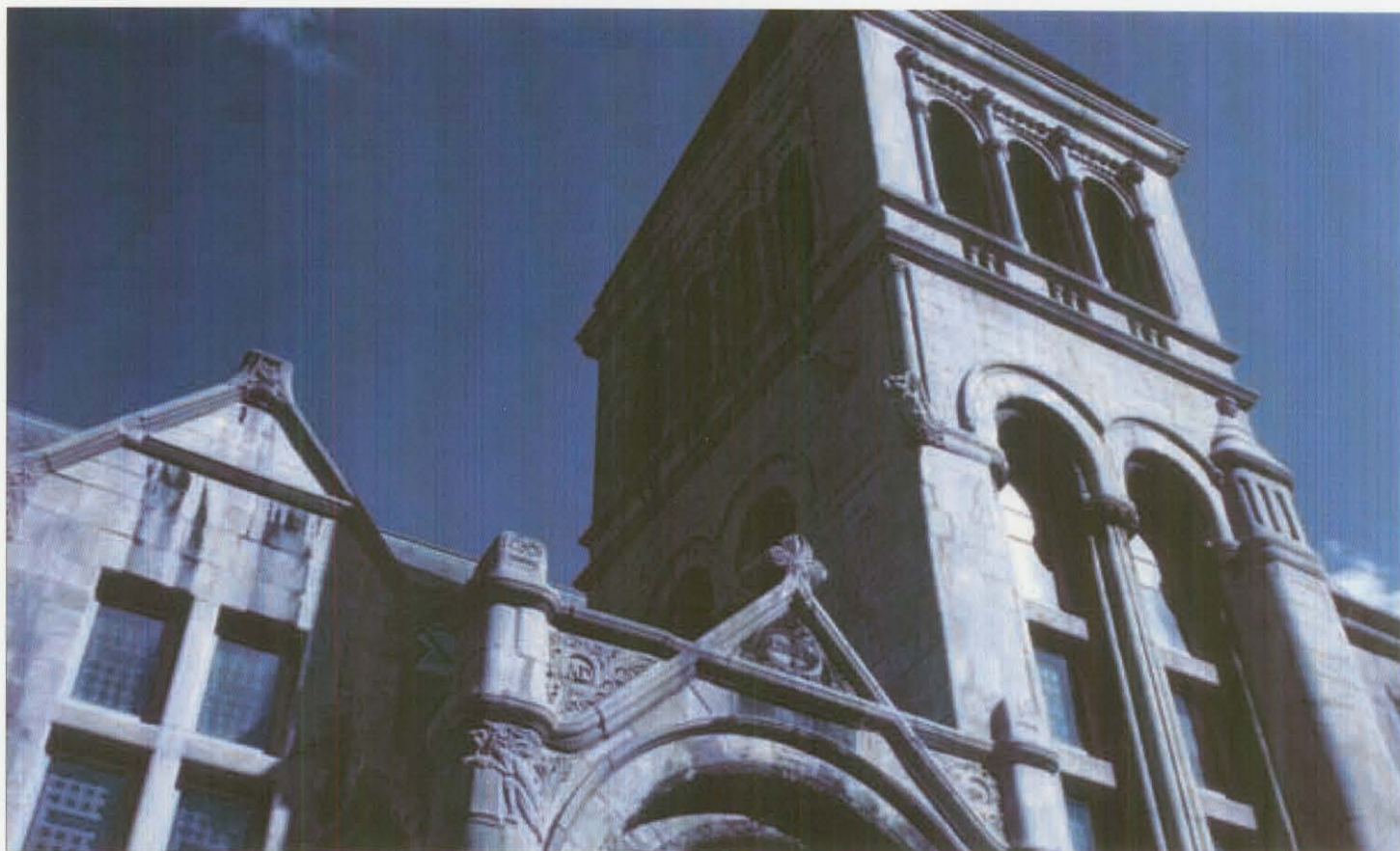
In fact, the problem with today's university lies less in the absence of intellectual diversity and more in the seeming unwillingness of most faculty members to engage in a civil but public clash of ideas. The absence of sustained intellectual contest and criticism of received wisdom and public policy—on the right and the left—is a far greater threat to the university than the problem of ideological imbalance. Where, in fact, is the sustained criticism among faculty and students of public policies that many at the universities privately consider to be wrongheaded? The deafening silence, the absence of debate, at American universities about current domestic and foreign policies, compared with, say, the

1960s or 1970s, is cause for deep concern. Where are the critical voices and defenders of basic ideas—like the rule of law—when we need them most and that, historically, were found in significant numbers at our great universities? Too many faculty members, even those with strong opinions, now say, "I'd rather not get involved." What is tenure for, anyway? And, if it's the liberal-left professoriate that Horowitz fears, one can only conclude by looking at outcomes that it has done a terrible job of convincing college youth of the merits of its supposedly subversive ideas.



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Horowitz is right about one thing: More academics identify themselves as politically liberal than as conservative. But Horowitz attributes this to a power elite of leftist liberal professors' wielding their power to discriminate against those with more conservative ideas. He is wrong about this on two counts. First, the liberal orientation of faculty members at American universities is nothing new; there has been no sharp turn to liberal orthodoxy. Seymour Martin Lipset and Everett Carl Ladd, Jr., among others, have shown that the American professoriate has consistently over the past 50 years identified more with a liberal political agenda than with a conservative one. Secondly, the life of the intellectual, the scientist, the scholar, tends to attract those who are critical of existing social institutions, inequalities, public policies, and dogmas, those more interested in change than stability, those who identify themselves as liberals. That process predominantly involves self-selection by these people into the academic life, not discrimination against conservatives in the academic reward system.



During my 14 years as provost and dean of faculties at Columbia, I oversaw more than 700 tenure cases involving thousands of faculty members, and I found no evidence that the so-called liberal-left or conservative professoriate allowed their personal politics to influence hiring and promotion decisions. The personal political views of candidates were never raised as an attribute that would either qualify or disqualify candidates for tenure. The quality of research and teaching, as assessed by a set of qualified external and internal peers, was the overwhelming criterion used to determine who received tenure. Perhaps this is a case of windmills being mistaken for enemy soldiers.

Horowitz's confusion of process with outcomes is compounded when he draws the false and misleading inference that professors' personal political beliefs are correlated with the way they conduct their classes. Edward Said, the extraordinary literary critic and defender of the Palestinian people, was the *bête noir* of types like Horowitz, but in all of the years that I knew Said at Columbia he taught literature, not politics (with a point of view to be sure), challenged his students to think more clearly, and was revered by them. They flocked to his classes, and I never heard a single complaint that he was biased or intimidating or refused to listen to alternative views of his students.

If Horowitz fears radical professors, the American public does not, according to Harvard sociologist Neil Gross and his colleague Solon Simmons of George Mason University, whose 2006 survey showed that the public has far greater trust in higher education than most other institutions, and that fully 80 per cent were opposed to the government controlling "what gets taught in the college classroom." The public has real concerns about universities and colleges, but political orthodoxy of radical professors is not

high on that list.¹ Number one is the high cost of college tuition (43 per cent)—a concern of roughly equal importance to liberals and conservatives. More than twice as many people thought that "binge drinking by students" (17 per cent) rather than "political bias in the classroom" (8 per cent) was the biggest problem facing universities. Although 12 per cent of the public felt that the term "radical" appropriately describes professors, 40 per cent preferred the term "professional." A majority believed that professors respected their students regardless of their political views. Older, conservative Republicans, who have had relatively little education themselves, are the group most concerned with biased professors.

Because of the way they label and classify professors and academic discourse, Horowitz and his followers fail to acknowledge the many crosscurrents of intellectual diversity in universities that cannot be captured through caricatures. The liberal left is hardly a monolithic, orderly group of academics conforming to a single orthodoxy. For example, in their orientation to the core ideas of the liberal state and the place of multiculturalism in it, professors sharply diverge. Some believe that sub-cultural groups in a larger society

should be able "to sustain and perpetuate their cultural or religious differences...and their distinct communal identities." Others believe that individuals in sub-cultural groups should be offered the opportunity "to attain 'mainstream' educational, socioeconomic, occupational, and political status..." that conforms to the larger value and cultural system and strives to eliminate group-based differences.² On a host of issues, from the prerogative of parents to sustain religious beliefs that do not conform to the interest of state-run schools to the legitimacy of customs related to circumcision, two proponents of liberal theory might well differ passionately—while classifying themselves as politically "liberal." In short, the

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complexities and nuances in academic discourse limit the value of type-casting professors as either ideologically liberal or conservative, and Horowitz fails to mention them.

Finally, there is a problem with Horowitz's idea of a fact. His book, *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America*, is replete with factual errors and grossly misleading statements in every Columbia University case he cites. Horowitz claims Lisa Anderson, a political science professor and dean of Columbia's School of International Studies, selected Middle East

studies professor Rashid Khalidi, to occupy the Edward Said Chair at Columbia. She did not. A blue ribbon committee of scholars reviewed the credentials of scores of candidates before deciding Khalidi was the best person in the nation for the job. Horowitz, noting that Columbia University president Lee Bollinger appointed Victor Navasky, a journalism professor and former editor and publisher of the *Nation*, to a group examining the future of journalism, asserts that Bollinger made no attempt at ideological inclusiveness. That is factually wrong. Although I doubt that Bollinger considered political ideology when inviting people to serve, he did include people like Karen House, the senior vice-president of Dow Jones and publisher of the *Wall Street Journal*, which is hardly known for its liberal editorial page. Finally, in uncovering the 101 most "dangerous" academics in the United States, Horowitz apparently could not find a single conservative professor that met his definition of "dangerous." Is the American academy totally free of dangerous conservatives? It defies statistical probability.

Before jumping on an illusory bandwagon labeled "Eliminate liberal or radical orthodoxy/ Legislate intellectual diversity," we would be well advised to be skeptical. What is their actual intent? Are they portraying accurately a disease at our colleges and universities, or are they asking for a remedy for a non-existent disease that will undermine academic freedom and free inquiry at our institutions of higher learning? Jumping on that bandwagon will almost certainly contribute to the weakening of the system of higher learning in the United States that remains the envy of the world—one that dominates the list of the world's greatest 20 or

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50 universities. If we allow political outsiders to undermine those values and structures that enable the teaching and discoveries that come from the very same universities that Horowitz identifies as exemplars of intellectual orthodoxy, but which actually suffer from no disease and that contribute mightily to the artistic, humanistic, scientific, social, and economic welfare of the nation, then the international preeminence of American universities will be at real risk. It will require active resistance, vigilance, and courage from those who understand the real idea of a university to see that this does not happen. **AM**

¹ The American Council of Trustees and Alumni has concluded: "Throughout American higher education, professors are using their classrooms to push political agendas in the name of teaching students to think critically. In course after course, department after department, and institution after institution, indoctrination is replacing education." (May, 2006).

² Neil Gross and Solon Simmons, "Americans' Views of Political Bias in the Academy and Academic Freedom," Working Paper, May 22, 2006.

³ See Richard Shweder, "Conflicting Varieties of Liberal Expectancy: With Special Attention to Schooling in America." Prepared for SSRC/RSE volume, *Multicultural Schoolyard Fights: Is There a Conflict Between Pluralism and Inclusion in American Higher Education?* Forthcoming. Pre-print, 3-4. Quoted with permission of the author.

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