

# Conservatism and the American Academy: Prospects for the 1990s

By T. Kenneth Cribb

In considering "Conservatism and the American Academy: Prospects for the 1990s," I will focus initially on the long-term relation between higher learning and the "permanent things" that conservatism values. I will then comment on cultural relativism and the left-wing resurgence on campus. Finally, I will discuss what I believe to be the appropriate response of the ongoing conservative movement to the state of the American academy as we move into the decade of the Nineties.

Whatever the accident of title or job description, every position I have held since coming of age has located me at the intersection of the world of ideas and the world of affairs. And over the course of my life's work I have become convinced of the importance of higher learning to the quality of our culture and to the character of our polity. If we as conservatives hope to do more than resist the latest left-wing incursion, we should direct a portion of our energies away from the continuing crisis in Washington in favor of a longer-range effort to influence the character of higher learning in the American academy. I say this for two reasons.

First, the importance of higher education in resolving the major task of an ongoing free society. Such a society, if it is to continue and be fruitful, must help the coming generations to acquire knowledge and understanding of the values and institutions that constitute its substance. Christopher Dawson referred to this transmission of culture as enculturation, "the process by which culture is handed on by the society and acquired by the individual."

Richard M. Weaver, the late Professor of English at the University of Chicago, spoke very clearly about the consequences of a breakdown in the process of enculturation:

A prime educational goal...must be the preservation and transmission of our cultural past as something worth preserving in its integrity. There are plenty of people about today who seem ready to sell at a knockdown rate our Western culture. But I must repeat a conclusion I am very sure of: a culture, a nation, or a society which loses confidence in its right to an identity loses the will to live, and where there is no will, nothing can be done.

**Most Important Patrimony.** Dawson and Weaver recognized the importance of formal education in inculcating in youth the spiritual, political, and economic norms that are their most important patrimony. So, as an initial matter, higher education should concern conservatives because of its central role in the propagation of the culture, without which inheritance members of the new generation are as naked and transitory as Burke's flies of summer.

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Second, conservatives should be concerned about the course of events on campus because the ideas that predominate there sooner or later become regnant in the body politic.

A consideration of the roots of the conservative victories of the 1980s should sound an alarm for the 1990s and beyond. For in both respects that I have mentioned – the long-term propagation of the culture and the short-term propagation of political ideas that affect the health of the body politic – the permanent things that conservatism cherishes are under renewed and vigorous assault. Unless this assault is effectively countered, and soon, I predict that the 1990s will be years perilous to the ideal of ordered liberty so recently on the mend at the national level of American politics.

## **RELATIVISM AND THE HIGHER LEARNING**

The great enemy of enculturation is relativism, an enemy that has stalked the corridors of the academy for years, but the echoes of those footsteps resound as never before. Of the strains of academic relativism, two of the most virulent are relativism as among cultures and relativism as among standards.

The merit of enculturation depends on the assumption that there is in the body of Western thought truths that are worth preserving through the ages, truths that justify the immense effort and cost of the educational establishment traditionally entrusted with transmitting the culture. But what if there is no truth? Or more specifically, what if the traditions and institutions of the West, and the moral order that these imply, are neither more nor less valuable than those of other cultures? Well, then enculturation does not matter, because the culture of the West itself does not signify.

**Banishing Discrimination By Discriminating.** One of the more celebrated outbreaks of relativism in recent times was the decision by Stanford University, after bitter ideological struggle, to replace its required course on Western culture with a new course featuring works by women and minorities, and stressing non-Western accomplishments. So discrimination was banished from the old course by selecting new authors. How? By discriminating according to race, creed, nationality, and sex. How enlightened! The Stanford incident inspired a symposium in one of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute's journals, *Continuity*, wherein a contributor cited a 1944 essay by Arthur Koestler on the subject of literary merit:

In Russia, Koestler notes, what mattered was how closely one hewed to the party line, not aesthetic considerations, which were considered "petty bourgeois prejudices." In Nazi Germany, race and party dictated the worth of a particular work. Is it not just as destructive for us to make educational decisions based on sex or race? Political considerations endanger the free spirit of inquiry that is one of the hallmarks and achievements of our civilization. Works should be chosen only for their quality, their contribution to the development of our culture.

The Stanford episode, however, was just that – an episode, a symptom, of a more general problem. A book recently published by Regnery Gateway, *Profscam* by Charles Sykes, documents chapter and verse the relativism that pervades American faculties and curricula. Similarly, a report by the National Endowment for the Humanities concludes:

Too many students are graduating from American colleges and universities lacking even the most rudimentary knowledge about the history, literature, art, and philosophical foundations of their nation and their civilization.

**Wisdom and Virtue.** Once the leveling scythe of relativism has cut the higher achievements of civilization down to size, one need no longer ask what the Endowment's report calls "life's enduring fundamental questions: What is justice? What should be loved? What deserves to be defended? What is courage? What is noble? What is base? Why do civilizations flourish? Why do they decline?" For relativism also attacks any notion of standards that proceed from a moral order and that form the basis of right conduct. Historically, the purpose of higher education was not merely to acquaint the student with the body of Western thought, important though that acquaintanceship is. Rather, from the earliest beginnings of Western culture, the ends of education were those of Plato's Academy: wisdom and virtue. Russell Kirk put it this way in his *Decadence and Renewal in the Higher Learning*:

Thus the higher learning, formerly, was an intellectual means to ethical objects. The disciplines of college and university were intended to develop a philosophical habit of mind, in John Henry Newman's phrase, "of which the attributes are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom."

Once one accepts that ethical standards are relative, there is no defined content to notions of wisdom or virtue, and these concepts lose their value as objects of the higher learning. Thus relativism as among cultures subverts higher education's role in transmitting the culture, and relativism as among standards subverts education's role in leading the individual to wisdom and virtue. As we survey the arid expanse of academe, well might we lament with Eliot in his lines from *The Rock*: "Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"

## **THE HARD LEFT RESURFACES ON CAMPUS**

But in addition to the more long-standing problem of relativism, a problem born of the failed nerves of liberalism, there is another phenomenon at work on today's campus: the reappearance of the Sixties-style hard left radical, this time with the greying sideburns of the tenured professor.

While conservatives have been preoccupied with developments in Washington during the last eight years, the Left has been quietly at work transforming the American campus into a staging area for a long-term offensive aimed at recapturing the national agenda. The activities of such Leftists are documented in *Destructive Generation: Second Thoughts about the Sixties*, by former New Left gurus Peter Collier and David Horowitz. This phenomenon, if allowed to perpetuate, will add to the querulous relativism of liberalism the hard-edged nihilism of the militant Left.

In two important respects the campus prospect has worsened since the Sixties: 1) The Leftists who entered academe during the Vietnam era are now in positions of power in both college faculties and administrations. They preach but do not practice pluralism, and bring a particular virulence to bear in attacking traditional American values that sustain ordered liberty. There ought to be no mistake about the determination of this opposition. 2) Now excluded from many traditional bastions due to conservative electoral returns, the

organized Left has dedicated money and cadre to develop the universities as staging areas for left-wing agitation (e.g., southern Africa, Central America, SDI, nuclear power, and other contemporary issues).

Some examples:

To create a Marxist culture in this country, to make Marxism an unavoidable presence in American social, cultural, and intellectual life, in short to form a Marxist intelligentsia for the struggles of the future – this seems to me the supreme mission of the Marxist pedagogy and a radical intellectual life today.

– Frederick Jameson, professor, Duke University

[T]o my total bewilderment, I discovered that Marxism is beginning to be a paramount mode of intellectual discourse among the academics in the social sciences, something which for someone coming from Eastern Europe is incomprehensible.

– an open letter to ISI from Andrzej Bryk, Polish student at the University of New Hampshire

*Politics of Letters* argues that American verbal culture...and the teaching of English and college education, in general, all tend to reflect and reproduce a class system of inequality.

– The publisher's description of a book by Richard Ohmann, professor, Wesleyan University

One of the more disturbing aspects of the reemergence of the hard Left on campus is its heavy-handed attempt to silence non-conforming opinion. The traditional theater of operations for such academic censorship is the tenure decision. More and more, however, students themselves are under pressure from administrators to adopt politically correct opinions, language, and behavior. From mandatory "sensitivity" training seminars, to star chamber proceedings conducted by administrative inquisitors to punish "insensitive" student conduct, to the suppression of dissident student publications, free speech itself is under siege at college after college. So much so, that courts have had to intervene to protect student political expression from zealous academic censors, to the applause of conservative intellectuals and even the ACLU. *The Wall Street Journal* recently cited a written comment by a University of Pennsylvania administrator who objected to an undergraduate memo expressing "my deep regard for the individual and my desire to protect the freedoms of all members of society." The administrator underlined the word individual and wrote back: "This is a 'RED FLAG' phrase today, which is considered by many to be RACIST. Arguments that champion the individual over the group ultimately privileges [sic] the 'individuals' belonging to the largest or dominant group." Sadly, academic freedom is in danger of becoming an oxymoron.

**Battle for Nicaragua.** But the Leftist recrudescence in the academy is not purely an intellectual phenomenon. Listen to Horowitz and Collier describe the highly organized effort to subvert United States policy in Central America:

Started on U.S. college campuses by two Nicaraguan nationals acting for the Sandinistas, the Nicaragua network soon became a national organization, with chapters in hundreds of American cities and on campuses across the country. Its "pledge of resistance" was signed by seventy thousand Americans, who declared themselves ready to

undertake illegal actions to oppose U.S. intervention in Nicaragua. The crucial importance the Nicaraguan communists attached to such activities was underlined by Thomas Borge, one of the most important members of the *Commandante* directorate and head of internal security: "the battle for Nicaragua is not being waged in Nicaragua. It is being fought in the United States."

The same kind of organization was established with respect to El Salvador, CISPES – the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador. Despite the fact that it was founded, according to Collier and Horowitz, by agitators who came into our country for the specific purpose of denying American help for Duarte but supplying aid to the Communist guerrillas, CISPES nonetheless was able to engage the support of Congressmen Dellums, Dymally, and the ubiquitous Pat Schroeder, all of whom have signed fund-raising letters. It is significant to note that CISPES is organized on hundreds of college campuses across the nation.

**Strengthening the Hold.** Horowitz and Collier state that CISPES is "the representative organization of the post-Vietnam Left, a Left built on solidarities with Communist power." As an example of this solidarity, CISPES held a rally at the Washington Square Methodist Church in New York that featured spokesmen from the Hanoi regime and the Salvador guerrillas, followed by spokesmen from the American-based committees in solidarity with these and other Communist powers. The slogan of the rally? "Vietnam has won, El Salvador will win."

There have been many other sightings of the hard Left, from a "Marxist Scholars Conference" in Seattle to the professor at the University of Massachusetts who describes herself as "a midwife to help the socialist society that exists now, be born." The bottom line is that the hard Left is devoting money and cadre to strengthen its hold on the one redoubt left to it by the successful conservative counterattack of the 1970s and 1980s – and that redoubt is the American academy.

## **CONSERVATISM AND THE LIFE OF THE MIND**

In face of the relativism of desiccated liberalism and the nihilism of the militant Left, what is to be done? What do these developments in the academy signify for the 1990s, and how should organized conservatism respond?

As an initial matter, let me say that a Leftist surveying the contemporary political scene must be as disheartened by the present as we are watchful of the future. The conservative movement has grown strong and has had successes none of us would have projected twenty years ago.

But American conservatism's greatest success has been its own creation as a movement, a movement that came into being at a critical moment to strengthen the faltering institutions of the West against the hostile tides of the mid-twentieth century. Even when the foundations of those institutions began to crumble, our predecessors were on the spot to shore up the fragments and fashion an impregnable rubble. So before answering Lenin's question, "What is to be done?" we should look to the source of our own strength. And it began with ideas, with the life of the mind.

Most men of affairs, and especially politicians, have no idea that their own actions are a pantomime, with the words and music supplied by thinkers whose names they may

recognize, but can't quite place. For example, how many times have I heard some of my colleagues in the Reagan White House trace conservatism all the way back to 1964. Well, to bow to a proper flag in a proper place, the coming of political age of the conservative movement during the 1960s was in significant measure a result of Barry Goldwater's presidential campaign. That campaign laid the groundwork for the successes of the conservative movement during the 1970s both because it clearly defined the conservative political agenda and because it energized a whole generation of conservative activists. All this is true as far as it goes. But political phenomena are surface phenomena. They respond to deeper currents at the level of ideas. And the real story of the conservative revival in America begins considerably before 1964 and has more to do with intellectuals than politicians.

**Rise of Conservative Thought.** If, in Richard Weaver's phrase, ideas have consequences, there are also consequences from the lack of ideas. In the 1930s and 1940s, left-leaning academicians decisively influenced the intellectual scene — and, largely unopposed by ideas from conservative thinkers, left behind a legacy that dominated the political consensus in America for a generation. Hearnshaw once wrote, that "conservatives prefer to sit and think — or sometimes just to sit." Certainly conservative thinkers were sitting out the debate in the 1930s and '40s. Lionel Trilling could write in 1950 that liberalism was not only the dominant, but even the sole intellectual tradition in the United States. Trilling, however, didn't know what Disraeli knew — that prevailing opinions are the opinions of the generation that is passing. Even as Trilling was writing in 1950, Hayek, Weaver, and Buckley were beginning to be read, and by 1953, the recrudescence of conservative thought became self-conscious and overt with Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind*. That same year the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI) was founded and two years later *National Review* came along to stand athwart the twentieth century and shout, "Halt!" These mediating organizations began to help disseminate the works of the twenty-five or so major conservative thinkers who were writing seminal works of the mind.

By the time Senator Goldwater raised our tattered political standard from the dust, by the time my generation came of age, there was a defined body of conservative thought, which set out basic principles. In the seventies, conservatives began to address more adequately the particulars of public policy, and in the process out-organized the Left — a phenomenon that continues to amaze me. There seems to have been a spontaneous generation of public policy think tanks, publications, and PACs that helped to build practical policies on the bedrock of fundamental principles articulated in the 1950s and 1960s. Our negative critique of the welfare state and of an accommodationist foreign posture was complemented with affirmative policies that served well, among other things, the two presidential campaigns of Ronald Reagan.

**Setting the Stage.** It was not until the mid-seventies, then, that the movement achieved its current breadth. In 1970 there were about two hundred conservative writers and scholars that were regularly called upon by the public policy organizations. By 1978 not even an eight-volume catalogue compiled by The Heritage Foundation could purport to be a comprehensive listing.

All of this led to the conservative political victories of the 1980s, as Ronald Reagan himself is the first to acknowledge. But if our expectation is to solve every problem that flesh is heir to through political action, we will surely fail. Domestic perplexities persist after eight years of a Reagan Administration. The problems of our foreign adversaries present ever more tangled complications for American strategy. Nothing is more certain

than the ephemeral nature of political victories. In Eliot's phrase, there are no lost causes because there are no gained causes — and certainly, our cause is far from gained. So, even as we celebrate the current muscular revival of political conservatism, we must keep one eye averted from the moving ball of politics and fixed on permanent things. And after all, it is the permanent things that conservatism values, even though we speak of ourselves as an intellectual movement only forty or fifty years old.

**Reasserting Immutable Truths.** American conservatism dates back to the 1940s only in the sense of a set of particular people who reasserted truths as old as creation and immemorial values that have been sustained through four thousand years of Judeo-Christian civilization. And the task of our generation, with the conspicuous help of organized conservatism, must be in part an attempt to put these immutable truths into the lexicon of our time in history. For, as Whittaker Chambers wrote in the last sentence of his last letter to Bill Buckley, "Each age finds its own language for an eternal meaning."

If this does not completely answer the question, "What is to be done?" at least it points to where we must begin. We must begin, as we did once before with the life of the mind in the academy; we must begin at the level of ideas that move the generations to choose liberty over security, to choose civic virtue over license, to choose the funded wisdom of mankind we call tradition over the armed doctrine of ideology. Frankly, it is to do what I can to encourage these choices that I have come to work for ISI as its President, and it is why Heritage Foundation President Ed Feulner has come on board as ISI's Chairman. As the Reagan era draws to a close, these moves reflect a considered judgment that the key to the future of conservatism lies in the academy.

## **THE RECOVERY OF THE ACADEMY**

We must thus provide resources and guidance to an elite which can take up anew the task of enculturation. Through its journals, lectures, seminars, books, and fellowships, this is what ISI has done successfully for thirty-six years. The coming of age of such elites has provided the current leadership of the conservative revival.

But we should add a major new component to our strategy: the conservative movement is now mature enough to sustain a counteroffensive on that last Leftist redoubt, the college campus. In addition to saving a remnant that renews the font of conservative ideas, we are now strong enough to establish a contemporary presence for conservatism on campus, and contest the Left on its own turf. We plan to do this by greatly expanding the ISI field effort, its network of campus-based programming.

At the outset I discussed factors working against us: academic relativism and the reappearance of the militant Left. But there are also factors present that offer an opportunity for recovery.

**First**, there is now in place on the campus a generation of young faculty members, many of whom are products of the ISI program, who are conservative or open to conservatism. They constitute a new network that can be instrumental in achieving a penetration in depth on the campus.

**Second**, the recent prominence of conservatism in the public arena has conferred a new respectability upon conservative thought within the academy. And in concert with the personal popularity of Ronald Reagan, there is a greater interest in conservatism on the

part of the young. For example, in a UCLA/American Council on Education survey, 22 percent of entering freshmen said they are conservatives – the highest ever.

**Third** is the political failure of liberalism. Not only did liberalism fail to produce while in power, the very word liberal has become an epithet of derision in national politics.

**Fourth**, students resist establishments. Students, after all, are of an age when they test themselves by probing the legitimacy of the authority that holds them. On campus these authorities are professors who offer the Leftist conformity of “politically correct” poses; or student governments which collect mandatory fees to fund activities in which the student has no say; or assorted deanlets who herd freshmen into required political indoctrination courses and who silence non-conforming free speech. Let the revolution come.

**Fifth**, a conservative intellectual infrastructure now exists that was but a dream in 1964. Scholars, books, journals, centers, reprints, tapes, fellowships, and similar resources are now available in abundance to provide intellectual substance for a developing conservatism. The plentitude is so great that the main problem is organizing what is available and bringing it to bear where needed.

## A CONCLUDING UNSCIENTIFIC POSTSCRIPT

Finally, let me posit a favorable circumstance that I cannot prove, but that I firmly believe exists (I believe; therefore I posit). It is this: the student of quality is attracted by superior ideas. Burke, at the moment of his most bitter parliamentary defeat, still had the confidence in the young to say: “I attest the rising generation.” Put yourself in the place of an undergraduate of keen mind and superior preparation – a student who likes to read and dispute and flex the muscles of his mind. What does the Left offer him? Turgid Marxist tracts. The straightjacket of the closed system. The politically correct jargon of a welter of splintered interest groups. A false compassion that is but thinly disguised lust for power in the people’s name, but without the people’s participation.

And what do the conservators of the great tradition offer him? They offer a rich and various story that Kirk has called a tale of five cities.

*Jerusalem*, of the prophets of monotheism and of the Incarnation.

And *Athens*, the birthplace of democracy and of that school of philosophy to which all other philosophical inquiries are a series of footnotes.

And *Rome*, of the stern republican fathers of the rule of law.

And *London*, the mother of parliaments and of the chartered rights of Englishmen.

And *Philadelphia*, where two hundred years ago our fathers proved that good government could be preserved from the eventual corruption of power by dividing power against itself.

And we offer not just analysis of history, but *allegiance* born of a love of the truths that the great tradition embodies. That which has made our lives rich we wish to share freely with that student whose life of the mind is before him. We offer him our hands to boost him onto the shoulders of the giants of the West. And from there he will see farther than any of us.

Let us believe with the abiding faith of Burke, that the best of the new generation will clasp our proffered hands – and that they themselves, in good time, will offer theirs to those who follow.

