

REVIEWS

What's Liberal about the Liberal Arts: Classroom Politics and "Bias" in Higher Education by Michael Bérubé. New York: W. W. Norton, 2006, 357 pp., \$26.95 hardbound.

[*Editor's Note*]: We present two reviews that differ in emphasis on, and approach to, this book and its author.

Overheated Rhetoric and Deception

Robert Weissberg

Michael Bérubé's *What's Liberal about the Liberal Arts: Classroom Politics and "Bias" in Higher Education* ostensibly refutes conservative critics (particularly his *bête noire*, David Horowitz) who insist that today's universities are awash in loony anti-American agitprop, absurd identity politics, anti-intellectualism, diversity mania, soft totalitarian indoctrination, grievance mongering, anti-Semitism disguised as "anti-Zionism" plus innumerable other off-the-wall corrosive predilections almost beyond cataloguing. In Bérubé's own words,

I have written this book not only to offer a reply to academe's conservative critics but offer curious readers a look into the classroom dynamics of undergraduate courses in contemporary courses in literature and culture, since these are some of the most maligned courses in the literature of conservative complain (20).

That conservative accusations rest on shelves of scholarly books, evidence from judicial proceedings, investigations by groups such as FIRE, several empirical studies of faculty ideological lopsidedness complemented by regular dramatic "professors gone wild" tales from students

themselves would seemingly render this goal hopeless. Still, he can certainly try, and this he does with notable enthusiasm.

Though his mission fails, it remains attention worthy insofar as it reveals the bag of tricks a left-leaning academic can marshal to "prove" conservative critics wrong. That fellow believers will certainly embrace this defense (the *New York Times*, for one, has already weighed in) further advises closer inspection. How, then, does Bérubé argue his case? While conceding occasional classroom abuses from a tiny handful oddly called "the Monty Python left" (I personally prefer "the Bush-is-Hitler crowd"), the short answer is: deception, mischaracterization and *ad hominem* attacks, occasionally peppered by non sequiturs. Actually, given the enormity of Bérubé's task, his rejoinder is surprisingly thin—a third, perhaps half, of these 296 pages of text consists of recycled lectures on American literature, and such musings have absolutely nothing to do with alleged classroom PC. Bérubé may be a superb college English teacher, but if there was ever an argument that professors should stick to their academic specialties, this is it.

Let's start with bait and switch. Though Bérubé initially talks about what transpires today in thousands of university classrooms, and this sweeping claim figures prominently on the dust jacket (including blurbs from distinguished scholars), he immediately backtracks and confesses that just about everything will be about *his* classroom, *his* lectures and, more crucially, *his* impeccable behavior when teaching irritable conservative students. This defense "I never—explicitly or implicitly—ask my students to agree with anything I say, in or out of class," (140)

occurs repeatedly and a handful of student comments reported on *ratemyprofessor.com* suggests honesty here. Still, this substitution violates truth-in-advertising laws and, to be frank, hints sloth on the part of those supplying blurbs and of Norton dust-jacket editors. Imagine Bérubé confronting a religious fundamentalist who claimed that since she personally never harassed gays, her co-believers were likewise innocent of homophobia.

Matters become a bit livelier when confronting antagonists. A few choice snippets must suffice. With zero empirical evidence he asserts that students complaining of radical proselytizing are just a national network of ill-prepared dolts favoring novel ways to bitch about deservedly low grades (38). Meanwhile, and again without a scintilla of evidence, he accuses “the radical right” (whose precise definition wanders about) as abhorring independence of thought, whether independent film-makers or independent judges (22). This is in contrast, of course, to liberal professors—“in the liberal arts corner of the campus, we believe in critical thinking even when it’s applied to us” (139). Conservatives rejecting heightened government regulation are also busy destroying the environment and undermining equal opportunity (287) as if this cliché about nefarious Republican bureaucrats absolved professors from the charge of gratuitously bashing Bush (earlier he blithely tells us that today’s right-wing critics of the academy hope to reverse the Progressive era, the New Deal, and the Great Society [p. 21]). And, if the surviving readers still don’t grasp The Great Satan, Bérubé declares that cultural conservatives are

the heirs of the people who spent decades demonizing African Americans and

immigrants, arguing chapter and verse that the Bible endorses slavery and the subjugation of women (288).

And this is only the mild stuff. Conservatives are a devious conspiratorial bunch, and their laments of academic wackiness are just a ruse. The true aim of these Bible-thumping Neanderthals, we are authoritatively assured, is to control professorial classroom speech so as to abolish reasoned discourse (a near exclusive liberal talent) and thus subvert democracy (24). Bérubé conjures up the possibility of creationist students suing innocent professors who teach Darwin in Biology (28) if arch villain Horowitz and his bumpkin Republican state legislator allies triumph. At least in his mind, a thin, university-based tweed line centered in the Humanities and Social Sciences is all that sustains the tottering-on-the-brink Enlightenment. Indeed, to disparage liberal professors—to suggest, for example, that at least some teachers relentlessly and inappropriately use the classroom as a bully pulpit, is “inimical to the ideal of a free society” (25). Think about this “logic” for moment—criticizing professors for dubious classroom conduct undermines free society.

Infusing this overheated rhetoric is a casual approach to factual accuracy. Conceivably, deconstructing texts is a progressively degenerative mental disease. Some instances are relatively minor, e.g., labeling the pre-1980 Illinois state legislative voting system as proportional representation when it was a multi-member district with cumulative voting system. Ditto for his confident characterization of Social Security as the single most regressive tax in American law (276)—many reputable economists would disagree, and Bérubé

offers no documentation (he also claims that privatization would impoverish the elderly).

Other glaring errors are more serious—he accuses the Republican House majority of rewriting chamber rules so Democrats cannot offer amendments, propose legislation, or challenge committee chairs (21). (No, this last sentence is not a misprint.) He chastises Republicans for attacking federal judges when most are GOP appointees (22). He should know that federal district judges do not decide cases by a majority vote of all judges, so a few Carter- or Clinton-appointed judges acting individually can still wreck havoc (and it's the philosophy that counts, not nomination pedigree). The English professor also insists that, recently, anti-terrorism laws are beyond legislative judicial oversight, an embarrassing misunderstanding of the constitutional "text." Even the dim-witted conservative barely passing American Government 101 could probably correct these errors. Interestingly, recent GOP success in weakening the Senate filibuster becomes a rollback for democracy by destroying minority rights, a view that Strom Thurmond would surely have seconded in his Dixiecrat heyday.

What about the conservative charge that contemporary universities are liberal strongholds? An old country lawyer saying advises a useful strategy: if you have the facts, argue facts; if you have the law, argue law; if you have neither the law nor the facts, confuse the issue. Bérubé has done his legal homework here. In some instances he flat-out denies the liberal domination allegation, artistically comparing liberal faculty and students to overwhelmingly outnumbered "hobos in

fingerless gloves trying to catch a little warmth in the night" (64) in a vast sea of hostile right-wingers. Even within the university, the boogeymen radical professors are far outnumbered by conservative faculty, many of whom conduct secret research and draw paychecks from the military/industrial complex. Add fellow traveler academics shilling for capitalism (63) plus all the frat boys hardwired toward blackface skits, and it's a wonder that liberal professors are not hiding in secure locations.

What about alleged outrages in places like women's studies or black studies, departments that would seemingly offer smoking gun proof of one-sided ideology mongering? Surely these are not hotbeds of dispassionate rational discourse. Bérubé aptly finesses these potentially embarrassing outcroppings (89). First, departments of education, cultural studies and other indisputable radical bastions, are *not* the entire university. Score one for factual accuracy. But, they may still propagate the radical faith to thousands of impressionable youngsters, so how can Bérubé, a confessed fan of the rational intellectual marketplace, defend this one-sided agitprop? The answer is uncomplicated, at least to those who think postmodern: since conservatives challenge the very existence of such places, they have no right to demand entrance to their inner sanctum, so ideological homogeneity is necessary for self-defense. This is a mind-boggling non sequitur. History buffs will surely recognize this logic: strident ideological purity, even if cracking a few eggs to make an omelet, is necessary to defend against treacherous enemies everywhere. Conservatives, then, should follow the lead of the advice given to Hamas: acknowledge their enemy's

right to exist, and everyone will live happily afterward.

What about student complaining about liberal professors gone wild? These surely number into the hundreds (more likely thousands given student reluctance to complain publicly), but Bérubé effortlessly dismissed these charges. Has he conducted his own, far-reaching independent investigation? Hardly. Instead he reviews *three* such cases (27-37) and reports that *these* conservative out-rages over professorial behavior were unfounded—accusations were baseless or the classroom work was just dreadful. Leaving aside the inevitable “he say, she say” nature of these disputes, building a rejoinder on just three cases is risky business. Bérubé surely could have just reasonably advised skepticism toward high-profile media-grabbing “my professor hates me because of my beliefs” accusations, but to argue that three such instances damn all claims of ideological prejudice is clearly excessive.

Bérubé’s most serious rejoinder (Chapter 3) to conservative critics focuses on the claim that today’s academy systematically refuses to hire conservatives in the humanities and social sciences. Note well: Bérubé does not empirically refute this accusation; he merely insists that conservatives have not conclusively documented their charge. He features the Lichter/Rothman/Nevitte study of faculty ideology showing an overwhelming liberalism and, quite correctly, observes that these data by themselves fail to demonstrate hiring bias (and he can’t resist observing that far right-wing Scaife Foundation research support might have had tilted the survey’s outcome). What then follows is a *tour de force* stream-of-consciousness

mishmash of sloppy arguments, gratuitous asides, and bogus counter-claims touching on everything from how conservatives misconstrue affirmative action to the relatively low salaries of hard-working academics. This bogus “analysis” is, to be frank, indecipherable, let alone amenable to summary. This is postmodern deconstruction in its final meltdown stages and more than a bit frightening.

An obvious double standard regarding proof applies here. Bérubé has no qualms about insisting that since *he* respects conservative students, thousands of other liberal faculty must follow suit. Nor does he require any data to “prove” that right-wingers prefer theocracy over democracy. But, when it comes to establishing departmental ideological discrimination, only the highest scientific standard suffices. This is bizarre. Every academic lifer knows that this is an impossible-to-meet requirement—there is *always* some “respectable” reason for an ideologically motivated blackball, and countless first-hand accounts of destroyed careers by political vindictiveness can *always* be dismissed as angry-white-male sour grapes. Isn’t science wonderful when it delivers the right results?

Other examples of nonsense abound, but let us end on a kinder note. Bérubé is undoubtedly a passionate lecturer, probably a decent person, and judged by his accomplishments in a discipline notable for disappointing careers, a savvy careerist to boot. That he is a youngish white male, an admitted heterosexual family man (he occasionally mentions wife and children) yet further attests to his talents given the pressures on him to step aside in favor of historically under-utilized minority job applicants. All of

this makes Bérubé's rambling convoluted nonsense even more painful to read. He should know better, or at least those thanked in the Acknowledgment should know better or at least Norton editors should have known better. A thoughtful defense of today's liberal academic domination is possible, but *What's Liberal about the Liberal Arts* fails to supply it. If this is the sturdiest defense available, one might speculate that the liberal Ivory Tower might warrant an EPA inspection to check whether Horowitz and his allies have put mind altering chemicals in the water supply.

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“Liberal” as in “Liberal Education”?

Clifford Orwin

In this alternately engaging and enraging book, Michael Bérubé, a professor of English at Penn State, sets out to defend liberal education. In this he'll get no quarrel from me, nor, I suspect, from many readers of this journal. To defend liberal education, however, you have to know what it is. Bérubé, I fear, is too much of a liberal to know what liberal education is.

Liberal, as in education, is a very old usage of the term, liberal as in Al Gore, a relatively new one. Liberal as in education derives from the Latin *liberalis*: “worthy of a free man.” (You knew this already, but bear with me for Bérubé's sake.) The education worthy of a free man was that which

prepared him to exercise his freedom responsibly, in directing his own life and that of the society to which he belonged.

As for what sort of education this was, there used to be agreement on two points. First, that the desired end was the liberation of the student from the parochialism of the conventions (political and otherwise) of his own day. Second, that the best way to accomplish this was to expose him to the greatest achievements of human beings down through the ages. This was not (or not primarily) a matter of preserving a tradition (except of course for the “tradition” of liberal education itself). Rather it was to enable the student to decide what was and wasn't worth preserving in the traditions of his own time and place.

On this view, an education that was liberal in the political or journalistic sense would *ipso facto* fail to qualify as liberal in the educational one—as would one that was conservative or radical in the political sense. Any such education would mire students in current prejudices, not only not helping them to, but actually hindering them from, rising to a longer, deeper view.

At some point, however, political liberals who were also engaged in the business of liberal education began to confuse the two meanings. This confusion became evident in American universities in the fifties and sixties. When I began Cornell University as a freshman in 1964, something like 98.6 percent of the faculty of arts and science were liberals (give or take a tenth of one per cent). Those to the right or left of liberalism were marginal, to say the least, with the exception of Allan Bloom and Walter Berns, whose forcefulness and eloquence defied marginalization.

All of these liberals favored liberal education. Living as they did in ignorance of the great wave of feminism and other -isms about to sweep them away, none of them was given to casting aspersions on dead white males. Instead they transformed them into liberals. They unwittingly took it for granted that the great figures of Western literature had been progressive and forward looking, and therefore liberals *avant la lettre*. Shakespeare, Milton, even Dante and Cervantes, all were taught as forerunners of liberalism. If humanities professors then still affirmed the “canon” of liberal education, it was largely on the premise that its study encouraged liberalism in the political sense. And of course in their hands it did.

Autres temps, autres moeurs, but, then again, *plus ça change*.... For all the vicissitudes of both liberalism and so-called liberal education these forty years, liberals continue to confuse the two disparate senses of liberal. There is a crucial difference, however. Formerly the liberality/liberalism of the homonymous education was understood primarily in terms of substance (and so it was the substance, i.e., the great authors studied, who required interpretation as somehow liberal in the political sense). Now, however, it’s understood primarily as a matter of style or (to use a more highfalutin term) of “temper” or “temperament.” Consider, for example, the laudatory bromide gracing Bérubé’s inside jacket flap.

Michael Bérubé reminds us, with insight, wisdom, and good humor, why a liberal temperament—intellectually open, seriously self-reflective, and critically minded—should always be at the heart of the academic experience.

This from the general secretary of the American Association of University Professors, an organization that is liberal as in pressure group rather than liberal as in education. Now nobody would deny that intellectual openness, self-reflectiveness, and a critical mind are much to be desired in a teacher. The problem arises with the identification of these as constituting a “liberal temperament.” Even this would be unexceptionable, so long as we keep clearly in mind that “liberal” as in temperament and as in education mean something very different from “liberal” as in liberal political views. Bérubé, however, confounds the two, and so ends up defending liberal education as an enterprise dominated by political liberals. He hopes to win us over to what goes on in liberal-dominated humanities faculties.

Bérubé’s approach is highly anecdotal, relying on his own experience teaching American literature at large state universities. His accounts of his courses make for surprisingly good reading. I’m persuaded that he is a fine teacher whose students are lucky to have him: fair, patient, and imaginative, devoted to the students and to his subject. He even persuaded me that I want to read *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. In fact he convinced me of many neat things.

Even so, I remain unpersuaded by his overall argument. I don’t believe that his classroom is typical of those presided over by political liberals: exceptional teachers (liberal or otherwise) will always remain exceptions. Nor does he engage the most thoughtful critics of the “liberal” version of liberal education.

To hear Bérubé tell it, this “liberal” version is embattled and beleaguered today. This is due, first, to the alleged

domination of the broader American society by conservatives, and, second, to the unprincipled, ill-informed, and politically motivated attacks of conservatives who wish to bring liberal education to its knees in submission to their ideological reign of terror.

We all enjoy presenting ourselves as beleaguered, but this instance of victimology is a peculiarly unconvincing one. For conservatives neither dominate society at large (as Bérubé himself admits in his final chapter), nor do they pose any threat whatsoever to the pervasive liberal hegemony on campus.

Bérubé does offer some examples of attempted interference from the right in the internal affairs of universities. Even if we grant him his claim that these have been mean-spirited and ill-informed, they also emerge from his account as strikingly ineffective. The old McCarthyism claimed many victims; this alleged new one, apparently none. It may have impugned some teachers and programs, but hasn't taken a single scalp or ruined a single reputation. When colleagues are assaulted from the right, universities close ranks around them.

No such solidarity can be presumed by professors hounded for views deemed illiberal. As chronicled in numerous books, including that of the thoroughly liberal Richard Bernstein (*Dictatorship of Virtue*, 1994), universities have a dismal record of protecting colleagues so tarred. Indeed they have a lengthy one of persecuting them themselves.

Bérubé knows this. Indeed, as he relates, he himself was once the subject of such an inquest, conducted without his being so much as informed of it, on a preposterous charge of racism. He voices

his indignation, implying that every true liberal would share it. Surely it must have dawned on him, however, that his case was not isolated but typical. It's not true liberals who run universities, but actual ones. And, these, especially when massed in bureaucracies charged with policing "offensive" or "insensitive" opinions, prove no more tolerant than anyone else. They'll defend to the death our right to be spared opinions they disagree with.

I don't mean to inculcate Bérubé in this regard, only to suggest that his presentation of the issue of academic freedom is one-sided. He insists that in his own classroom students are free to think and say whatever they wish, and that while he doesn't conceal his own views, neither does he browbeat students who don't share them. Instead he engages them in genuine dialogue with an eye to enabling them to clarify their own positions. In the end, this is the ground of the claim that the education that he offers is "liberal," as it is of the claim that such a liberal education is good. Conservatives accuse liberal-dominated education of "bias"; Bérubé wants to persuade it that his classroom (like those of other "true" liberals) is free of it.

Liberalism thus emerges as the ideology that precludes the inculcation of ideology or the bias that precludes the transmission of bias. This is a neat solution rhetorically, whatever we think of its relation to reality. In fact, however, Bérubé's version of liberalism is inseparable from his postmodernism, and it is to a defense of the latter that he devotes the longest and strongest chapter of his book

At the core of postmodernism lies antifoundationalism or the repudiation

of the correspondence theory of truth. The postmodernist avoids the *gaucheness* of claiming that his doctrine is true in the old sense—i.e., that, unlike previous “foundationalist” theories of truth, it really does correspond to reality. No, the postmodernist says, I am a pragmatist when it comes to truth. My understanding is no better grounded than any other, it just works better, as I do hope you’ll come to agree.

Bérubé considers a number of famous debates, including that between the neo-rationalist Habermas and the postmodernist Lyotard. He tries to ring every change on the strengths and weaknesses of the postmodernist enterprise as opposed to Enlightenment rationalism. Throughout, his discussion is clear, moderate and illuminating. And if, as he claims, he has truly been able to enlist his students in these discussions, he is a masterful teacher.

Bérubé’s students, he tells us, tend to resist antifoundationalism as subversive of decent morality. They doubt that we can live except by precepts that we hold to be firmly grounded in the world. He may view this position as naïve, but those who have held it include Plato, Augustine, Pascal, Rousseau, Kant, and other not wholly unthoughtful persons. For my part, I doubt the logical coherence of being a pragmatist all the way down. Take, for instance, Bérubé’s claim that he promotes antifoundationalism only because it is on balance more “useful” than its alternative. Yet antifoundationalism could be more useful than its alternative only if it were truer, only, that is, inasmuch as it met the very correspondence criterion of truth that it rejects. Say that, contrary to the antifoundationalist claim, and, as Plato and most Penn State juniors agree, there

are moral truths that transcend social convention. In that case how could one claim that the most useful approach is to treat those truths as if they were mere social conventions?

At the end of the day, postmodernism appeals to professors like Bérubé at least in part because it supports their liberal agenda. While they may in all good faith eschew political indoctrination, they do initiate their students into the political implications of postmodernism. This is why, as they see it, a “liberal” education must be a postmodernist one: not an education in the permanent human alternatives as liberal education once aspired to be, but one that rejects the very notion of such alternatives, thus vindicating current liberalism. This is why Bérubé offers no discussion of what should be the first question of all: the proper *content* of a liberal education, the curriculum most suitable for liberating students from the heavy hand of current opinion. Liberal education isn’t about what you read, but about reading whatever you read postmodernistically. (Oddly enough, the older notion makes a cameo appearance on the final page of the book, but that is much too little, too late.)

Postmodernist education is inevitably “presentist” and therefore parochial and illiberal. As fine a teacher as Bérubé is, there’s no evidence that he grasps this trap

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