

Books, Articles, and Items of Academic Interest: Compiled, with Commentary

Carol Iannone

Published online: 24 October 2007
© Springer Science + Business Media, LLC 2007

Upholding Liberal Education

In “Liberal Education Then and Now,” *Policy Review*, December 2006–January 2007, Peter Berkowitz sets forth John Stuart Mill’s view of liberal education as expounded in his “Inaugural Delivered to the University of St. Andrews on February 1st, 1867.” Berkowitz begins by offering a witty but accurate picture of the fragmentation of liberal studies in our own time:

Take two political science majors at almost any elite college or university: It is quite possible for them to graduate without ever having read the same book or studied the same materials. One student may meet his general distribution requirements by taking classes in geophysics and physiological psychology, the sociology of the urban poor and introduction to economics, and the American novel and Japanese history while concentrating on international relations inside political science and writing a thesis on the dilemmas of transnational governance. Another political science major may fulfill the university distribution requirements by studying biology and astronomy, the sociology of the American West and abnormal psychology, the feminist novel and history of American film while concentrating in comparative politics and writing a thesis on the challenge of integrating autonomous peoples in Canada and Australia. Both students will have learned much of interest but little in common.... For both will absorb the implicit teaching of the university curriculum, which is that there is nothing in particular that an educated person need know.

Berkowitz culls a number of lessons from Mill’s address, among them, that “liberal education aims to liberate the mind by furnishing it with literary, historical, scientific, and philosophical knowledge”; that liberal education must “provide not a

C. Iannone (✉)
Journal National Association of Scholars,
Princeton, New Jersey, USA
e-mail: yuanzhizhang@cuhk.edu.hk

smorgasbord of offerings but a shared content, because knowledge is cumulative and ideas have a history”; and that teachers must be guided by “the spirit of free and informed inquiry.”

Berkowitz quotes the lofty and inspiring conclusion of Mill’s address, as he sums up the chief benefit of liberal education:

Now is your opportunity for gaining a degree of insight into subjects larger and far more ennobling than the minutiae of a business or a profession, and for acquiring a facility of using your minds on all that concerns the higher interests of man, which you will carry with you into the occupations of active life, and which will prevent even the short intervals of time which that may leave you, from being altogether lost for noble purposes.... So, at least, it will be if in your early studies you have fixed your eyes upon the ultimate end from which those studies take their chief value—that of making you more effective combatants in the great fight which never ceases to rage between Good and Evil, and more equal to coping with the ever new problems which the changing course of human nature and human society present to be resolved.

Berkowitz’s welcome revival of Mill’s ideas on liberal education calls to mind one of the 19th century libertarian’s key contributions, the understanding that truth arises from the clash of ideas in the marketplace. One of the greatest of the injuries that political correctness has inflicted on the life of the mind in our time has been to freeze the natural give-and-take of debate that eventually allows good ideas to surface and bad ideas to sink.

Ruth Wisse exposes how far from true liberalism are today’s campuses in “Gliberalism: Universities Are among the Most Cynical Institutions in America,” the *Wall Street Journal’s* online *Opinion Journal*, 28 January 2007.

Let’s Get Substantive

Some interesting recent articles explain more fully the ideals of liberal democracy and participatory citizenship that form the American political system, but show no interest in the cultural basis through which these ideals must be conveyed.

Matthew Spalding’s “The Case for Patriotic Assimilation,” *The Insider*, Summer/Fall 2006, available at the Heritage Foundation website, posits that “an effective naturalization process would aim to create new citizens who would understand the principles of free government, speak a common language, reflect good character and civic virtue, and have a real stake in America’s economic success,” but that would otherwise leave new citizens free to retain their ancestral language and *culture*, as if America herself had no culture into which to assimilate. Ironically, however, in the discourse by Abraham Lincoln from which Spalding cites Lincoln’s famous idea—that those who identify with the proposition that all men are created equal, regardless of their ancestry, become “blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh” of the men who wrote the Declaration of Independence—the imagery derives from the Bible.

Also in this vein is “An Introduction to Citizenship for New Americans,” at the Claremont Institute website, posted 6 April 2006, by Thomas L. Krannawitter, who expands usefully on the idea of citizenship, but inserts a somewhat puzzling notion, that

“America places its destiny in the hands of its citizens, including new citizens, and they are free to make of America what they will.” He goes on to point out that the founding documents posit moral and political principles for our guidance; but then why say Americans “are free to make of America what they will”? Once again we see how defining America in terms of abstract ideas can become a gateway to multiculturalism.

More satisfactorily, Wilfred McClay, following Walter Berns, asserts that America combines “the customary and the propositional, the affective and the rational, the particular and the general. One should love one’s country both for what it is *and* because it embodies or aspires to the highest and finest ideals” and in fact, “the two are inseparable.” This is reassuring, but more attention is needed to what exactly “it is,” or, in other words, who exactly we are. “Is Conservatism Finished?” *Commentary*, February 2007.

A long and rather meandering article by Francis Fukuyama, “Identity and Migration,” *Prospect*, February 2007, nevertheless does gesture toward Samuel Huntington’s idea of the importance of national and cultural identity, and cautions:

If postmodern societies are to move towards a more serious discussion of identity, they will need to uncover those positive virtues that define what it means to be a member of the wider society. If they do not, they may be overwhelmed by people who are more sure about who they are.

Unfortunately, however, Fukuyama’s idea of “positive virtues” seems to come down once again to the bloodless abstractions that form only the procedural, not the substantive structure of Western democracy.

More Action on Affirmative Action

Fresh from his MCRI victory, Ward Connerly elaborates on the lessons learned in that battle, and prophesies the end of affirmative action altogether. “The Michigan Win: Lessons in a Victory over Racial Preferences,” *National Review Online*, 30 January 2007. But Heather Mac Donald, in “Elites to Anti-Affirmative Action Voters: Drop Dead,” *City Journal*, Winter 2007, quotes Richard Dynes, president of the University of California, who predicts that the state’s Proposition 209 will be repealed without so much as a lawsuit as Hispanics become more numerous in the population.

Beyond Sodom and Gomorrah

“First, Do Harm: How Campus Therapists Sabotage Their Patients,” by Sally Satel, *Weekly Standard*, 5 February 2007, is a review of *Unprotected: A Campus Psychiatrist Reveals How Political Correctness in Her Profession Endangers Every Student*, by Anonymous, M.D. (Sentinel, 2006). Satel observes:

In this sober exposé, Dr. A argues that the culture on campus—and in her profession—is so steeped in political correctness that it hamstring the ability of therapists to help college students. The doctor’s frustration steams off every page: “We ask about child abuse, but not last week’s hook-ups,” she laments. “We want to know how many cigarettes and coffees she’s had each day, but not how many

abortions in her past. We consider the stress caused by parental expectations and rising tuition, but neglect the anguish of herpes, the hazards of promiscuity, and the looming fertility issues for women who put their career first.”

Satel remarks that the field of “campus mental health appears to be yet another stage on which the ethos of the culture wars—victimology, diversity, hostility toward traditional sex roles and family values, and (selective) non-judgmentalism—is playing itself out.” Dr. A., who since the publication of her book has revealed herself as Miriam Grossman of UCLA, offers many graphic examples of her thesis, writes reviewer Satel. One such example is an explicit website sponsored by Columbia University’s Health Education Program, which provides advice such as “Phone Sex: Getting started,” “Politics of Group Sex,” and “how to clean a leather cat-o-nine tails between uses especially if it drew blood.”

God help us.

Is College Necessary?

Charles Murray writes a trio of articles outlining his current thinking on education in general and higher education in particular. He argues that, by definition, a large segment of the population will be below average, that not everyone has the aptitude to benefit from real college-level work, and that we should promote alternatives to college such as vocational education. Murray does admit, however, that at present the college degree is all but necessary as entrée into certain fields and certain kinds of employment. The articles all appear in *Opinion Journal*: “Intelligence in the Classroom,” 16 January 2007, “What’s Wrong with Vocational School?” 17 January 2007, and “Aztecs vs Greeks,” 18 January 2007. Regarding Murray’s argument that we must focus effort specifically on educating our most gifted and intelligent students, some of us must disagree. From an entry at *NRO*’s higher education blog, *Phi Beta Cons*, Carol Ianone, 20 January 2007:

I think the genius of America is that it is democratic, in that everyone to some extent or other can share in its culture—its civic culture, political culture, popular culture, literary culture, even some of its high culture. The idea of gaining an appreciation of our culture and a determination to defend it and improve it where needed, of developing a capacity to make good judgments and wise choices, of seeing oneself as part of a great enterprise in human history, of learning the importance of responsibility to others and of ethical behavior, all this is necessary for everyone, and something we at least have to hold out as a standard in education, even if we can’t succeed in all cases. I certainly agree that not everyone has to go to college, but a democracy depends not on the elites but on the people, in my view.

No Child Left Behind 5 Years On

As the 5-year-old No Child Left Behind legislation comes before Congress for renewal, Fordham Foundation scholar Mike Petrilli reflects the shift that the

Foundation has undergone on the subject of NCLB. “Speaking personally,” writes Petrilli, “I’ve gradually and reluctantly come to the conclusion that NCLB as enacted is fundamentally flawed and probably beyond repair.” But he does offer some solutions: “In my opinion, the way forward starts with a more realistic assessment of what the federal government can reasonably hope to achieve in education.” Petrilli implies that there was too much micro-management on the part of the federal government. “It was worth trying, but experience has taught us that this approach suffers from too much hubris and humility at the same time. Instead of this muddle, the feds should adopt a simple, radical principle: “Do it yourself, or don’t do it at all.” This would entail “distributing funds to the neediest students, and collecting and publishing transparent information about the performance of U.S. schools.” But he pleads, “No more federal mandates on teacher quality. No more prescriptive ‘cascade of sanctions’ for failing schools. No more federal guarantee of school choice for children not being well-served.” Leave teacher quality, school choice, and decisions on failing schools to the states. “Is No Child Left Behind’s Birthday Worth Celebrating?” *The Education Gadfly*, 4 January 2007. These suggestions might well gladden the hearts of many traditionalists who have wanted to see more accountability in the public schools but who have been uneasy at the extent of federal oversight brought on by NCLB.

A response in the 26 January 2007 issue of *The Education Gadfly* from Andy Smarick of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools emphasizes the need for more choice in lower education.

On a related issue, see Andrew Wolf, “What India Has, We Once Had,” *New York Sun*, 22–24 December 2006. The National Center on Education and the Economy issued a study titled “Tough Choices, Tough Times: The Report of the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce.” Wolf comments: “The new commission, top-heavy with politicians, educrats, and the obligatory representative from Columbia Teachers College, wrings its collective hands over the fact that American students are not keeping up with those in Third World countries. They propose a dramatic top to bottom overhaul of the structure of the education system.” But, according to Wolf, “What the new commission doesn’t get is that the problem with American education is not its structure, but its content.” The Commission should ask how Third World countries with their meager resources manage to turn out so many graduates with high levels of achievement in math and science, while America does so dismally with the enormous resources we pour into education. Wolf’s solutions are simple, obvious, but worth repeating: “Teach children to read exclusively using the scientifically validated approaches of phonics and direct instruction, return to traditional math instruction, eliminate bilingual education for all but the oldest immigrant students, and reintegrate content learning into our classrooms.”

And, we would add, initiate a campaign to restore discipline and civility to our schools. A knowledgeable friend tells *B&A* that two programs available to the schools from independent vendors are very good, “Peace Builders” and “Connecting Conduct and Character.”

See also Diane Ravitch, “Why Teacher Unions Are Good for Teachers—and the Public,” *American Educator*, newsletter of the American Federation of Teachers, Winter 06-07.

The Great Tradition Lives On

Two new books work to restore the place of our great literary heritage in public awareness. *The Politically Incorrect Guide to English and American Literature*, by Elizabeth Kantor (Regnery, 2006), is aimed mainly at young people who have missed out on a real literary education and were fed fashionable, debunking theories instead. Kantor takes an enjoyable romp through selected key texts of each major literary period, and offers not only plentiful insights but also tools, tips, advice, and guidance for the budding literary reader. *The English Reader, What Every Literate Person Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press 2006), by Diane Ravitch and Michael Ravitch, is a reference book to have and to hold. Starting with Queen Elizabeth I and ending with Winston Churchill, the book includes important and favorite literary selections of the work of every major and many minor figures, as well as folk songs, hymns, speeches, and seminal essays, sometimes in excerpt. Short biographical introductions to each of the authors provide useful background and context. A jewel of a book—something to treasure.