Acad. Quest. (2009) 22:240–245
DOI 10.1007/s12129-009-9100-3

REVIEWS

Closed Minds? Politics and Ideology in American Universities, by Bruce L.R. Smith, Jeremy D. Mayer, and A. Lee Fritschler. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2008, 280 pp., $32.95 hardbound.

Closed Eyes

Glenn M. Ricketts

Published online: 1 April 2009

This book, with a title that parodies the late Allan Bloom's 1987 bestseller *The Closing of the American Mind*, purports to offer a definitive verdict on the long-running and frequently heated academic debate over the extent to which an ascendant left-liberal campus ideology adversely influences classroom instruction, faculty hiring, and student attitudes. Needless to say, many contributors to *Academic Questions* over the years have contended that it does, to the serious detriment of genuine liberal education, academic freedom, and campus civility. But the authors, all currently affiliated with the George Mason University School of Public Policy, reach the opposite conclusion in *Closed Minds? Politics and Ideology in American Universities*: there is no significant professorial ideological bias in the classroom, and students do not feel that their professors seek to "indoctrinate" them. In fact, not only do most professors eschew mixing politics with their teaching, but they are largely apolitical, detached professionals immersed in their special fields who have withdrawn from political debate or discussion, and focus in the main on achieving tenure or maintaining positive student evaluations. "To our surprise," Bruce L. R. Smith, Jeremy D. Mayer, and A. Lee Fritschler observe, "we found that, far from being saturated in politics, the universities generally have all but ignored what used to be called civics. Most professors, like most Americans, have an aversion to politics and find ways to avoid thinking about politics and political issues." Further, even though conservatives or traditionalists are indeed scarce on most campuses, the authors find no evidence that they are systematically excluded by faculty hiring committees, although they also note that some aspects of the process, such as affirmative action—"opportunity"

Glenn M. Ricketts is professor of political science at Raritan Valley Community College, North Branch, NJ 08876, and public affairs director of the National Association of Scholars, One Airport Place, Suite 7 & 8, Princeton, NJ 08540-1532; nas@nas.org.

hires directed at female or minority candidates—may place them at a disadvantage.

In common with a number of other recent empirical studies, this one affirms that the professoriate as a group is significantly more liberal than non-academic sectors: Democrats, for example, outnumber Republicans by a 9 to 1 ratio on some campuses. But even though students are also liberally inclined during their college years—if to a lesser extent than their professors—these attitudes are largely attributable to peer associations or pre-collegiate experiences, especially family background, rather than to the influence of their teachers.

This is a striking thesis, and the book has received enthusiastic, even gleeful notice in some quarters. "New research," wrote Maureen Downey admiringly, in "Professors Don't Pull Students to the Left," in the November 11, 2008, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution,* "contradicts the assertion that colleges are hotbeds of liberal indoctrination where professors turn malleable students into soy latte-sipping, Birkenstock-wearing, John Stewart-watching lefties." In "Professors' Liberalism Contagious? Maybe Not," published in the November 3, 2008, *New York Times,* Patricia Cohen, observed that an "article of faith" among "conservative critics of American universities" has been debunked. Skeptics, however, are not likely to be converted, in view of the astonishingly narrow, dubious base of evidence on which the book's principal findings rest. Most of the information on which the authors base their conclusions about faculty attitudes, for example, was culled from survey questionnaires given to a national sample of professors at 169 research universities, essentially asking them to evaluate themselves: Did they see bias in their own classrooms, or in those of colleagues? Did they believe that the lack of ideological diversity was a significant problem on their campuses? Did they believe that students were sometimes graded unfairly due to their political views? Did they believe that conservative job applicants faced discrimination due to ideological screening? In this particular instance, the authors seem not to have considered the implications of some of their own data.

In response to a question about the extent to which "strong preference" was given to liberal job candidates at their institutions, 36 percent of those identifying as "strongly conservative" answered affirmatively, while another 24 percent indicated that liberals received at least a "weak preference." This means that fully 50 percent of

respondents who were "strongly conservative" believe that the hiring process is weighted toward liberals in some measure, although the finding passed without comment from the authors. Not surprisingly, large majorities of those responding saw no difficulties, and a full 95 percent regarded themselves as "honest brokers" among diverse views in their classrooms, while similar proportions saw themselves as simply "professional." While such a survey may indeed provide interesting information about how a segment of the professoriate sees itself, one cannot but marvel that the authors seriously believe that it sufficiently disposes of the question of "bias" in college classrooms as they declare in their final chapter: "The idea that the elite universities are rife with leftist politics, or any politics for that matter, is at odds with the evidence. Students, for the most part, do not feel that professors have engaged in efforts to proselytize them or to use the classroom for partisan purposes. Professors, of course, do not believe, as our survey showed, that they act unprofessionally." College faculty, the reader must conclude, are not ideologically biased, because they have said that they are not.

Where else might anyone not convinced search for evidence of ideological imbalance? Nearly everywhere. Liberal ideological ascendancy on many campuses is an all-pervasive, omnipresent climate of opinion, a fact of nature, a feature of the landscape. It manifests itself ubiquitously: in specific courses, in student dormitory programs, in the ideologically skewed application essays prospective freshman are increasingly required to submit (e.g., how would you enhance "diversity" at our school?), in the undergraduate newspaper, in job postings that require a "proven commitment to diversity" from all applicants, in the invited commencement speakers, in the elastically defined speech codes whose mere presence chills free expression, in both the texts and general offerings of the bookstore, in the homogeneity of faculty discussion panels of contemporary controversies, in the professional associations to which most faculty belong, in extracurricular student organizations, and in nearly every other facet of life on campus, in or out of the classroom. University of Michigan president Mary Sue Coleman provided a cogent illustration of this enveloping phenomenon several years ago, when she addressed a "diversity summit" for her faculty and administrators. "[W]e must do better on the issue of campus climate," she exhorted them. "We must establish a climate that welcomes and celebrates diversity in

our classrooms, our services, our laboratories, and every setting, day and night."

Indoctrination, moreover, need not and usually does not come from table-pounding exhibitionists like the University of Colorado's Ward Churchill, even though he is probably not as rare as the authors seem to suggest. In an online "readers' comment" on Patricia Cohen's *Times* article mentioned above, as one undergraduate student indicates, professorial classroom influence can be substantial without being overt:

> the subject material of the course in addition to the assigned texts can have an indirect, but substantial impact upon students. Moreover, this impact is also even more interesting in that students may be unaware of its influence over their ideas. For example, if my professor in my Israeli and Palestinian conflict class only assigns readings of the Palestinian perspective of the conflict even if he does not express a necessarily Palestinian position, then I may be unknowingly influence [*sic*] in such a view. Too bad the researchers did not elucidate how they measured professors' impact upon students.

In any case, whoever looks will have absolutely no trouble seeing many, many courses, programs—even entire schools—that are not at all subtle or indirect about their ideological proclivities. There are one-text, one-issue freshman writing seminars (where any student uses the inclusive "he" at his peril); "multicultural" ethnic studies programs, which combine group identity and political advocacy; teacher education programs that mandate adherence to specific notions of "social justice" and "equity"; and upper-division English department courses devoted to an examination of the Iraq war, to cite but a few examples. For unabashed ideological tendentiousness and straightforward, often steel-fisted indoctrination, however, exhibit A undoubtedly comes to us from women's studies, now a permanent and baleful presence throughout the academy, from research universities to community colleges. Many of these programs, in the description of Wellesley classicist Mary Lefkowitz, "have been transformed into political pressure groups or religious cults."

One would be interested to know Smith, Mayer, and Fritschler's take on a much larger book, *Professing Feminism: Education and Indoctrination in Women's Studies* (second edition, Lexington Books, 2003), in which Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge describe a surreal world where ideology is the only reality, and

adherence to detached, objective inquiry is often seen as an obstacle to political advocacy. "Feminism," as Pamela L. Caughie described it in "Impassioned Teaching" in the July-August 2007 *Academe Online*:

> is a mode of analysis, a set of values, and a political movement. In teaching its students its history, its forms, and its impact, I am teaching them to think and write as feminists. I want to convince my students of the value of feminist analysis and the importance of feminist praxis….I feel I am doing my job well when students become practitioners of feminist analysis and committed to feminist politics.

One might have thought *Professing Feminism* worth considering, since Patai and Koertge write from the unique vantage point of founders-turned-refugees, forced to flee when an eagerly envisaged new academic discipline rapidly morphed into an aggressive, doctrinaire political movement. The authors of *Closed Minds?* however, take no notice of this book or a number of others that examine professorial politics from an "inside" perspective. Instead, they attribute allegations of classroom indoctrination exclusively to external "conservative critics," such as activist David Horowitz, who emerges as a disproportionately influential instigator and mischief-maker. At all events, given the singularly narrow focus of the authors' research efforts, their finding of a politically withdrawn, ideologically neutral professoriate seems virtually foreordained.

Readers unconvinced by the book's central thesis, however, may be very surprised by its concluding chapter, where the authors offer a number of observations and recommendations curiously unremarked by otherwise favorable reviewers. In the first place, they do not endorse the academic status quo. Even if there is no evidence of classroom bias, they argue, conservative or traditional ideas are largely absent from most elite campuses, and they urge that their liberal colleagues—without necessarily instituting affirmative action policies—consciously devise ways of increasing the number of faculty who might espouse them. "Diversity of ideas," they correctly note, "is the most important diversity of all for the university's intellectual vitality." They also call for the return of civil debate of contentious public issues on campus, and the reestablishment of "etiquette, civility and restraint—the elements of a fruitful dialogue," a recommendation that one hopes will be taken seriously by faculty of all political persuasions. Most attractive, however, are the authors' proposals

for the restoration of "civic education," a prominent component of the undergraduate curriculum in the colleges and universities of the nineteenth century now wholly absent from the experience of most students. Unacquainted with the constitutional and civic institutions under which they will live as adults, such students are as a result unprepared for citizenship.

Although they do not call for a uniform national "civics" curriculum, the authors offer these general suggestions, which, on the face of it, could entail an extensive overhaul of established curricula:

> Students today both want and would benefit from the opportunity to study, among other aspects of a liberal education, the great Western classics, the major religious traditions, constitutional history, and the ethical challenges involved in their future profession....Princeton's Madison Center offers lectures and highly popular programs in constitutionalism that are very much what we have mind when we ask for courses to strengthen citizenship.

Here again, however, our authors baffle the reader by placing these otherwise enticing ideas on the table without any reference to the ideologically lopsided "civic education" programs already entrenched in many academic precincts. These include "service learning" and "civic engagement," which often mix academic credit and political advocacy, and the rapidly growing "sustainability" programs, through which freshman dormitories have been transformed into Orwellian indoctrination centers. Where will their own starkly contrasting proposals fit in? In any case, one certainly hopes that Smith, Mayer, and Fritschler will be resolute in promoting the kind of "civic education" outlined above. It will be interesting indeed to see how they fare in a frequently hostile academic ideological climate which escapes notice in their own book.

Editor's Note: A version of this review, amplified with informative footnotes, is available on www.nas.org.