

Let's Be Reasonable: A Conservative Case for Liberal Education, Jonathan Marks, Princeton University Press, 2021, pp. 221, \$27.95 hardcover.

Academic Freedom in Crisis: Punishment, Political Discrimination, and Self-Censorship, Eric Kaufmann, Center for the Study of Partisanship and Ideology, Report No. 2, March 1, 2021.

A Conservative Prof. Sees the Enemy . . . And It Is Us!

Seth Forman

It's no secret that conservatives have grown leery of higher education. It is, after all, around their necks that the chokehold placed on the free and open exchange of ideas by political conformity has too often been tightened. But Jonathan Marks is different. A self-identified conservative professor for almost thirty years, first at Carthage College and then at Ursinus College, Marks writes

of higher education that “the present is not as bad a time as the shouting of culture warriors . . . might lead us despairingly to believe.” (181) Striking the defiant tone of an election night concession speech, Marks writes that the university “is still a place where intellectual arguments carry weight” (176) and that it is “one of the only places one might happen upon a serious and sustained critique of a set of political ideas.” (110)

This is a confusing message for conservatives, most of whom have watched helplessly as the fanatical adherence to identity politics has usurped the moderating force of reason on campus. Surely, any book titled *Let's Be Reasonable: A Conservative Case for Liberal Education* would spotlight the speech codes, safe spaces, dismissals, cancellations, self-censorship, and other such symptoms of the Marxist-inspired ideologies that rule over American academe. Let's be reasonable? Three-quarters of all social science and humanities faculty surveyed in 2020 said they would not even “eat lunch” with a “gender-critical scholar” who opposes the idea of transwomen accessing women's shelters.¹

1 Eric Kaufmann, *Academic Freedom in Crisis: Punishment, Political Discrimination, and Self-Censorship*, CSPI Report No. 2, March 1, 2021.

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No. Marks acknowledges developments like these, in some cases skillfully dissecting their premises, exposing their stupidity, and conceding, like former Harvard University president Larry Summers, that there is “a great deal of absurd political correctness” at universities. But, Marks explains, the authoritarian episodes we hear about are not representative of campus life. They are hyped by conservative media outlets which “love a ‘Look, the campus lefties are at it again!’ story.” (2) For Marks, as again with Summers, what goes on at universities is “‘professors teach courses, students take courses, students aspire to graduate . . . they are educated.’ Anyone ‘who thinks that’s not the main thing going on on college campuses is making a mistake.” (2,3) You can take his word for it. Marks “regularly scan[s] the academic ocean” for the equivalent of left-wing “shark attacks” and finds, “Most days, there are no shark attacks.” (3)

Instead, Marks trains his fire at a group of incorrigible conservative critics who stand mostly outside of the university and who have declared the state of the universities bankrupt. These critics—he names names: Victor Davis Hanson, Michael Anton, Sohrab Ahmari, Glenn Reynolds, Roger Kimball among others—have variously suggested that some form of

structural change, probably emanating from outside of the universities, is needed if liberal education is ever to be restored. It is these conservatives and the large-scale changes they call for—typically budget cuts, performance-based funding, tying public aid to First Amendment fealty, more vocational pathways—that concern Marks most, and he sets out to limit their reach.

Marks wants “reasonable” conservatives to know there are “more people who think it’s possible and desirable to cultivate reason at universities than there are people who don’t.” (180) All that is needed is a little bit “more of this” and “less of that”—more working “to maintain a climate in which following the arguments and evidence where they lead is praiseworthy,” and less talk from conservatives who believe that “we’re in a crisis, that we’re about to lose, permanently, a war for the culture, and that, in this war, colleges are an enemy asset.” (172)

Thus, Marks situates himself on one side of an ongoing struggle between conservatives who believe they will never be afforded a respected place in the current academic environment and those, like Marks, who believe change can take place within existing frameworks and that, at any rate, the academy is far

more tolerant than conservative critics seem to think. This struggle came to the fore in 2016 with publication of *Passing on the Right* by Jon A. Shields and Joshua M. Dunn Sr., a study Marks quotes from liberally. Shields and Dunn argued that “the right-wing critique of the university is overdrawn”² and “conservatives can survive and even thrive in the liberal university.” Marks agrees, adding that “persuading conservatives of this is a goal near to my heart.” (xv)

The problem Marks faces is that there is a crisis in higher education, it is spilling out into the wider culture, and it isn’t only curmudgeonly conservatives who know it. A Pew Research Center survey from 2019 found that only half of all American adults think colleges and universities are having a positive effect on the country.³

The crisis stems primarily from the universities’ wholesale adoption of ideologies that repudiate reasoned argument, the study of Western civilization, and the belief in the possibility of discovering the truth. Conservatives have tried for decades to address this crisis, but nothing has stopped identity politics from spawning a political correctness that

demands intellectual uniformity and eviscerates the basis for the free exchange of ideas.

In the course of the year in which Marks’s book was written, the perception that colleges have become ideological echo chambers has received solid empirical backing. To cite only a few findings from the most comprehensive survey of professors and grad students to come along in a generation, published by the Center for the Study of Partisanship and Ideology (CSPI): 1. only 5 percent of American scholars in the social sciences and humanities identify as conservative and they are outnumbered by those on the left by a ratio of 14 to 1; 2. More American academics support than oppose curbs on speech associated with political correctness and mandatory race and gender quotas for reading lists; 3. Almost half of U.S. and Canadian academics would not hire a Trump supporter; 4. In the U.S., over a third of conservative academics and Ph.D. students have been threatened with disciplinary action for their views; 5. Among conservative academics 70 percent self-censor in teaching and research.⁴

2 Chris Sweeney, “How Liberal Professors Are Ruining College,” *Boston Magazine*, December 20, 2016.

3 Kim Parker, “The Growing Partisan Divide in Views of Higher Education,” Pew Research, January 30, 2019.

4 Eric Kaufmann, *Academic Freedom in Crisis: Punishment, Political Discrimination, and Self-Censorship*, CSPI Report No. 2, March 1, 2021. Summarized in Eric Kaufmann, “Academic Freedom is Withering,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 1, 2021.

This reality leaves Marks in the unenviable position of defending universities that are now rigidly policed and largely devoid of viewpoint diversity. At almost every turn, Marks strains credulity to downplay the size and scope of the political monoculture that has seized higher education. Comparing the percentage of faculty on the left with those on the right, for example, Marks reports, “At all institutions surveyed, that disparity is 59.8 percent to 40.2 percent.” At another point Marks insists that life on campus for conservatives is, in fact, rather pleasant. He “can think of only one colleague over two decades who has treated me unprofessionally for political reasons.” (33)

Now, the CSPI study cited above was released after *Let’s Be Reasonable* went to press, but one needn’t consult a survey to know the basic parameters of the left-right ideological imbalance of college faculty: it is not 60-40. And while it’s wonderful that Marks works with such agreeable colleagues, even left-leaning faculty suggest they are less hospitable than Marks lets on. Only 14 percent of all faculty say that a Trump supporter would feel comfortable expressing his views to colleagues.⁵

Still, Marks is convinced that there exists a large pool of people in higher education committed to liberal education and the exercise of free thought—a silent majority, as it were. But the evidence of Marks’s own experience leaves one less than assured that, even with Marks’s coaxing, the silent majority will rise up—or that it even exists.

At a curriculum meeting attended by faculty and students, a student suggests that the text used for a course Marks teaches doesn’t do enough to convince students that they exist within a “systemically racist system.” Marks rightly objects, telling the student that it is not the job of teachers to “cram our point of view through the clenched jaws of our students,” after which a white faculty member exclaims that Marks’s position is a “symptom of white anxiety.” To Marks’s dismay, no other faculty member intervenes in his defense and, after an awkward pause, another faculty member changes the subject.

Remarkably, Marks concludes that this incident “doesn’t suggest that left-wing ideologues run our campuses. . . . I wasn’t frogmarched out of my office the next day and packed off to reeducation camp, or even unfriended on Facebook.” (40-41)

5 Eric Kaufmann, “Academic Freedom Is Withering,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 28, 2021.

Maybe so. But in this context, Marks's insistence that the majority of his colleagues reject the notion that "our mission is to indoctrinate our students," (41) seems strangely beside the point. What practical difference does it make how many professors say they believe in liberal education if colleges have become such tyrannical systems of intimidation that these professors are struck dumb in the face of a student wielding leftist maxims like "systemic racism"?

Needless to say, this episode does nothing to strengthen Marks's argument that necessary reforms will come from within. What it does do is provide anecdotal support for the CSPI finding that roughly half of all faculty either support ousting academics with "controversial" viewpoints or are conflicted enough to do nothing to stop such a campaign.⁶ According to study author Eric Kaufmann, "This helps explain why there isn't enough internal pressure to protect academic freedom."⁷

It is frustrating that Marks allows his vendetta against the "unreasonable" conservatives to subvert his otherwise eloquent defense of liberal education. Marks is an astute and committed educator, the kind of professor young undergraduates remember and

benefit from long after they graduate. He teaches courses grounded in Great Books and in the belief that all students have and can use the ability to reason. Marks makes a provocative case that aiming for "reasonableness" is an even more important goal of liberal education than "critical thinking." (It is only with reason, not critical thinking, that people hold up their own opinions to rational scrutiny.) On civic education, Marks argues for taking the "Enlightenment gamble" that an education directed toward shaping reasonable people would lead students to "give to the regime and its opinions a central and respected place." (103) And while Marks curiously avoids any discussion of the pernicious rise of Critical Theory or the punitive diversity regime, his dogged fight against the Boycott, Divest, and Sanction movement is inspiring.

It is also not clear why Marks decided that now is the time to bundle a powerful case for liberal education with a sneering screed against some of the most highly regarded conservative voices, several of whom pioneered the fight against higher education's radicalization.

As of this writing, there appears no serious structural threat to universities and their current mode of

⁶ Kaufmann, Figure 5. Source: Online mailout survey, August 2020.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

operation. Initially, some conservative reformers were hopeful that the Covid-19 pandemic shutdowns would force colleges and universities into a period of austerity and discipline, closing superfluous campuses and allowing budget cuts to some of the frivolous, non-instructional diversity bureaucracy that has driven up costs, threatened academic standards, and quashed intellectual debate. Instead, universities received nearly \$60 billion in higher education relief funds in 2020 and are set to receive an additional \$40 billion in bailouts in 2021. This has allowed colleges across the country to not only continue spending recklessly on administrative expansion but, in the wake of the George Floyd killing, to double-down on their hostility to viewpoint diversity, primarily through a new diversity hiring spree, replete with often mandated “antiracism” training.⁸ As Heather Mac Donald wryly noted after the Floyd killing, “Anyone who thought that the intellectual conformity on college campuses could not get worse lacked imagination.”⁹

All of which brings to mind a question for Marks: if an unprecedented pandemic and historic year-long campus shutdown can't impede

academia's romp through the stifling intellectual ghettos of left-wing orthodoxy, is it so unreasonable to believe that bolder, more aggressive action is needed or that a little “more of this” and “less of that” won't quite do the trick?

8 Neetu Arnold, “The Trouble with Faculty Hiring Booms in a Politicized Time,” James G. Martin Center, April 30, 2021.

9 Heather Mac Donald, “Conformity to a Lie,” *City Journal* (Summer 2020).