

ALIENS, TRAITORS, AND ELITISTS: UNIVERSITY VALUES AND THE FACULTY

by Jack Russell Weinstein

My intent in this discussion is to offer a glimpse into our popular and political culture and to unpack some of the values inherent in our university system. Educational institutions evolve because of changes in our cultural relationship to knowledge. Only by understanding this relationship can we respond coherently to criticism aimed at the university and its population.

The university is the intersection of virtually all of our social commitments. It is the junction of the preservation of our past, the preparation for our future, and the participation in our present. In the absence of culture-wide coming-of-age rituals, it also introduces the young to adulthood, marking the end of an extended adolescence for our students.

University values are confused by the fact that the view from within *academe* is quite different than the view from without. As people who are committed to the university as both a workplace and a lifestyle, our understanding of our commitments are often shockingly different than those who do not see it as a natural, or even an honest, profession. Our students view their studies with a mix of suspicion and attraction. Even the best of them accept their role with the mixture of relish and reluctance

Jack Russell Weinstein is an assistant professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at the University of North Dakota, where he teaches courses in the history of philosophy and in social and political theory. His two books, On Adam Smith and On MacIntyre, are volumes in the Wadsworth Philosophers Series. He is currently developing a non-Kantian liberal theory based on Adam Smith's moral psychology and philosophy of education.

indicative of those standing on the edge of a society. Their parents contribute to this by seeing the academic period of development as a necessary but slightly lamentable stage. When the temporary becomes permanent, when the student absorbs the academic perspective as a component of their character, the parents rarely completely understand or fully approve.

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A student's choice of an academic career is viewed as either something of a scam or as something worthy of reverential awe. The academic life is not "normal." To be an intellectual is to be alien in some respect.

Consider the film *Good Will Hunting*. Will, the main character, is born with a photographic memory and an innate capacity for advanced mathematics. He is a genius. He lives in the working class neighborhood of South Boston and works as a janitor at MIT. His mathematical

skills are discovered when he solves an advanced mathematical problem left on the blackboard as a challenge for graduate students.

To avoid jail-time for a violent altercation, Will reluctantly accepts the tutelage of a world-famous math professor; he discovers, however, that he has already surpassed the professor's mathematical skills. As a second condition for probation, Will is forced to see a therapist, a brilliant psychologist who works out of a community college. The therapist helps Will to see his potential and his anger, and in the process, becomes the only elder figure in the film who can outsmart Will, both by seeing Will's manipulation during therapy for what it is, and by physically assaulting Will in his office. Through the therapist's care, audacity, and machismo, Will finally sees his own potential. After falling in love with a Harvard student, he turns down a prestigious job at a think tank, leaves his friends and his old neighborhood, and embarks on a cross-country road trip in pursuit of the woman he loves.

The film is a useful snapshot of the view that the non-academic world holds of academia. It is an anti-university and an anti-intellectual film. It is worth noting that the most talented and sympathetic academician is in a community college, and not at MIT. Merit is clearly not a criterion for success at the university level, according to the movie, and the most respectable work is done for the "lesser" students. Although the MIT professor has economic success, a palatial office, and prestige, we know he is

not deserving of his status because he repeatedly approaches his female students sexually—a ubiquitous act television and movies rely on to label most professors as inherently immoral—and because he can't motivate Will.

For our purposes, Will is the most illuminating character. Notice that he is born with his capacities—he never needs to develop them. Certainly, he reads. His apartment is full of books, and he can recognize and identify passages cited by others. But Will does not *study*. There is no sense of intellectual development, growth, or effort. His value is in his role as an already finished product, not in his growth potential. Students frequently echo this blindness to development in my lower level classes. For example, when faced with my assertion that philosophy is not simply just a matter of opinion, that there are clear criteria for correctness, my students express concern. They are afraid they will have to drop the course because they don't know how to do philosophy.

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My response is to tell them they are not *supposed* to know how to do philosophy to take the course. The purpose of school is to learn and to cultivate new skills. Unfortunately, they don't seem to find this argument convincing.

Compare Will's lack of development with a film series that represents the ultimate in personal development and intentional effort: *Rocky*. In each of the Rocky films, the boxer is faced with a physical challenge. He discovers that his current method of training fails him, and at a point of cinematic drama, he finds a new way of training and eventually overcomes his adversaries. The focus in these films is always on his effort, his betterment, and his growth. In each film, the spectator watches as Rocky *learns* self-discipline and as he develops respect for the insight of those boxers and trainers who have expertise. Rocky learns from each of them, even from his formal rival Apollo Creed. In contrast, Will never truly respects or learns from the MIT professor's expertise. The audience never does either. We are to understand that Will's pre-MIT life is a waste, but the waste is the result of sacrificing economic opportunities and a gift from God or nature, not the consequence of failing in a lifelong effort. It seems that attention to physical growth is admirable while attention to intellectual growth is not.

Will is born with something that the rest of us are not. He is different.

He is “other;” he is “alien.” It is, therefore, not surprising that the way in which he is discovered pays homage to alien existence in the most literal sense. He is discovered because he solves a problem on a blackboard in a public space. When no one is watching, he writes the answer on the board, then leaves. Will is discovered only when he solves a second puzzle, but not before the professor accuses him of writing “graffiti” and trespassing on others’ efforts.

The first use I know of this technique is in the 1951 film, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. A classic science fiction film, it tells the story of the alien, Klaatu, who comes to Earth to convince human beings that we must learn to live in peace. Made shortly after the end of World War II, in the beginning of the Cold War, its message is simple: We need someone inhuman to teach the inferior human race the ways of peace.

In the film, Klaatu discovers a complex equation on a blackboard representing a thorny and unsolved problem, and without permission, writes out the solution on the board for a scientist to discover. This both proves his alien status to the scientist and moves scientific knowledge forward tremendously. This same plot device is used in *Star Trek IV*, the second *Battlestar Galactica* television series, and, recently, in the film *K-Pax*. In each setting, the aliens use a variation of this same method to prove superior knowledge and to reaffirm their status as “other.”

Will Hunting’s act serves the same two purposes. His use of the blackboard is his way of asserting both his superiority and his difference. One



of the most liberating consequences of *Good Will Hunting* is that it forces upon the audience no moral injunction. If one is not born with superior intelligence, one does nothing wrong by neglecting it.

The concept of the intellectual as alien is not a modern phenomenon. For example, Plato's theory of Justice is based upon it. The philosopher-kings are born with gifts that separate them from the masses. They are so different that Plato has Socrates suggest the noble lie: the philosopher-kings are born with gold in their blood, whereas the masses are born with blood laced with bronze. Plato's theory of justice both emphasized the alien nature of the philosopher and released the masses from any form of academic pursuits. Liberated from self-governance, the masses are free to pursue their desires and their monetary goals.

It is not surprising, given this cultural background, that our students are interested in product not

process. When it comes to education, the measure becomes economic success. Intellectual knowledge has nothing to do with it.

American fear and suspicion of intellectual knowledge is evident in pop culture, political debates, and educational methods. George W. Bush made fun of Clinton's status as a Rhodes Scholar, and George H.W. Bush—as well as *Saturday Night Live*, for that matter—heaped abuse on Al Gore for his intellectual proclivities. However, no matter how well-developed American anti-intellectualism is on a “normal” day, it is that much more militant at moments of crises. The events of September 11 did much to exemplify America's anti-intellectual, anti-academic cultural assumptions.

Immediately following the attacks, the airwaves were full of examples of professors who were to be fired because of remarks made in class, at forums, and in other public venues. In almost every instance, those professors were criticized because they asserted some form of American culpability for the attacks. Some of these stories turned out to be gossip, and few professors have actually been fired on account of their comments, but the ubiquitous nature of even false accounts calls attention to academics' fear of their alien status.

For the most part, the critique of professorial response to the events of September 11 took the form of asserting that accusations of American culpability were simply a disguised form of blaming the victim. To claim

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any American responsibility for such an attack, the argument went, is to engage in improper criticism and ultimately, to be un-American. The professors who responded to the events of September 11 with history lessons and analyses of American participation in world affairs were deemed traitors, and, of course, traitors should be fired. These criticisms, I believe, arose from misunderstanding, and this misunderstanding grows out of the contemporary American suspicion of intellectual activity.

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In contemporary American life, the purpose of knowledge is overwhelmingly oriented toward economic or professional success or to scientific progress. The university has become a place for training—most students enter university to get a job after they graduate—and research money and opportunities disproportionately favor the sciences. A person who graduates with a marketable skill or who has contributed to the creation of an AIDS vaccine is in marked contrast to someone who studies biology because of a fascination for protozoa. To pursue knowledge for curiosity's sake is considered strange.

It is worth distinguishing between generic knowledge and intellectual knowledge. Generic knowledge refers to the broadest scope of awareness, ranging from simple mathematical truths to methods of cooking and baking. Intellectual knowledge involves knowledge as *techné*: the craft of thinking containing within it internal goods denoting objective standards of success and value. Thinking of knowledge as a *techné*, as a craft or skill, liberates us from relying on external goods for its value. In this understanding, knowledge can be valued as a good in itself because its complex nature gives us reason to pursue it for its own sake, and gives us understandable criteria with which to determine value. Of course, one can make mathematics and cooking objects of intellectual knowledge. To do so, one simply incorporates into the study some form of *contemplation*, or thought for its own sake. There is, of course, overlap between the two types of knowledge, and most scholars are interested in both. But it is worth noting how the dominant schemata of knowledge and the academic disciplines have evolved over time.

The classical model of learning distinguished between natural philosophy, moral philosophy, and metaphysics, with natural philosophy including the sciences, as we understand them. In the Middle Ages this was adjusted to distinguish between Natural, Moral, and Mental

Philosophy (Kett, 2). These categories were then enhanced by the 17th century puritans, who divided studies into the arts and sciences. The “artes” referred to the seven “liberal arts” of the medieval universities: the *trivium*, the lower division studies of grammar, rhetoric, logic, and the *quadrivium*, the upper division studies of music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy. “Sciences” referred to the three medieval philosophies presented earlier: natural, moral, and mental (Kett, 2).

In the 18th century, the major disciplinary distinctions changed again, this time emphasizing the distinction between philosophy and literature. Literature represented knowledge acquired from written sources, including drama, verse, history, and a great deal of philosophy, as we understand it.

Philosophy, on the other hand, “while employing the written word, ...emphasized outdoor investigation of nature and the conduct of experiments” (Kett, 1). Philosophy as a discipline of empirical experimentation runs in sharp contrast to a more modern understanding of the subject.

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What is important here are not the particulars of the history of academic division, but rather that there is this history at all. Knowledge is organized by cultural need and worldview. Education in classical Greece and in 18th-century America was structured as it was because education was oriented toward development of character and *eudaimonia*: complete fulfillment or happiness. In this sense, happiness is neither pleasure nor a feeling but an activity. *Eudaimonia* is the completion of the human purpose and, by definition, the product of a virtuous life.

During these periods, character was of particular importance because the primary value of a person was determined through the person’s participation in public matters. To be a citizen was the highest good in both Athens and in Rome, just as being involved in self-governance was of the utmost importance in the early American republic. It is this kind of happiness that Jefferson had in mind when he wrote that we all have an inalienable right to its pursuit.

Under this conception, the prospect of a professor making political claims would be neither surprising nor unwelcome. But in contemporary America, the job-training aspect of the university has replaced its educating-for-citizenship role. It thus becomes misplaced for a professor to

respond personally to political matters, even in courses focused on politics. One result of the disappearance of the civic purpose of the university is that knowledge is not seen as a solution to political problems.

A response to those who accuse professors of blaming the victim or of being unpatriotic in their responses to the events of September 11 might be to discuss the services different professions can provide in times of crisis. For military personnel, the response to attacks might be to deploy. For

rescue workers, it might be to provide physical assistance. For professors, the response ought to be to offer an explanation, an analysis, and to suggest a policy-based solution. However, since intellectual knowledge is regarded as alien, professors were denied this role in the society, or at least criticized for their attempts to assume the role.

For the most part, professors who responded the way they did, did so because they thought that knowledge—intellectual knowledge—helped provide a better understanding of the situation. We believed that

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understanding would help students cope intellectually with the events. From the academic perspective, a *why* always helps people to cope with a *what*, and thinking about such things is just as important as bombing in retaliation, perhaps more so since retaliation is only permissible if it is morally justified.

Critics might respond by suggesting that students were in too fragile a Cstate to receive such information. The country was upset and students needed time to react. But here we face a confusion that is all too common in the modern university: education is not therapy. It can be, but it doesn't have to be. Why shouldn't the students be upset? The event was upsetting. Why shouldn't the students be faced with the actual history of the Middle East and the events that led to acts of war and terrorism? Are students not citizens in a democracy? Are they not voters and taxpayers who are being represented? Ought they not learn how and why to make difficult civic decisions on their own? We should not shield students from the realities of life or the burdens of responsibilities in the name of education. As Aristotle wrote in *Politics*: "Those who are learning are not at play, learning is accompanied by pain" (*Politics* 1339a29).

The cultural alienation from intellectual knowledge, and the conversion of certain educational practices into therapy, is, in many regards, the product of a more profound shift in our society: new understandings of

the meaning of equality and freedom and a culture-wide commitment to universal access to higher education—an important and positive commitment, I ought to add.

Equality is not necessarily paired with freedom. Aristotle, for example, regarded freedom as deliberative choice, but was quite opposed to the idea of the inherent equality of all people. Thomas Hobbes saw equality as the natural state of humanity, but saw freedom as detrimental to human happiness. It was only during the 18th century that Enlightenment thinkers began to pair the two, but Enlightenment writers assumed a fundamental human sameness that is now challenged, on one end of the political spectrum, by nationalism and racism, and, on the other end, by contemporary identity politics.

In today's society, equality and freedom are essentially intertwined. To be equal means to be as equally free as others to choose among competing options.

This freedom entered the university only late in the 19th century with the widespread adoption of the “elective principle”—the new permission given to students to choose their own course of study. The academic major is also a new phenomenon in universities, appearing at Harvard as late as 1909. (Kimball, 17) Educational choice is itself the product of shifts in university purpose, leading eventually to the new place of professional programs in the university. The combination of vocational and civic training led universities to the mixture of major and “general education” courses that is so familiar to us. This was supposed to provide all students with choice in subject matter and a common foundation—the best of both worlds. Instead, it resulted in curricular confusion and frustrated students.

With the disappearance of the classical justification for the liberal arts, students justly feel that general education requirements are arbitrary—and of course they are, since arbitrary means without justification. Granted, many students understand that general knowledge may be important to have, but they often don't understand why, and this alienates them from the academic process even more. There is some abstract sense that a person ought to be “well-rounded,” but why that is so, few students, or professors, can explain.

America's commitment to capitalism far exceeds its commitment to civic-republicanism. As our 50-percent voter turnout suggests, Americans

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are much more committed to personal economic development than political participation. And in response, the role of civic education is virtually non-existent in the university.

Of course, half of our citizens do participate in the political process, and many more are involved in social groups that contribute greatly to the betterment of their communities. But today we are taught that political participation is based upon personal need, not on the public good that lay at the core of Greek and Roman cultures. Americans are told to

vote for the person who best represents their own interests, and that leads to a relativism of political judgment that requires no general education background. A person does not need an anthropology class to tell them how to choose between a pro-life or pro-choice candidate. Or so, at least, most believe.

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The Enlightenment commitment to equal access to universal human knowledge has melted into the modern commitment to the uni-

versal equality of all opinions, and a university professor who suggests otherwise is criticized for self-importance and elitism. This is Nietzsche and Sartre divorced from their claims of personal responsibility. For the existentialists, the flipside of absolute freedom was absolute responsibility. Since agents are completely free to value all actions as they see fit, all responsibilities rest on them and no one else. Modern relativism, on the other hand, is stripped of this responsibility, permitting freedom but rejecting personal accountability as well—at least in matters of knowledge. Students, or anyone, for that matter, are thus free to expound on their beliefs, but are not often called upon to be held accountable for the ramifications for their beliefs.

Equality and universal access to education, noble and important goals, have been confused with equality of opinion and universal epistemic authority. In other words, the political commitment to ensuring that all people have a right to equal opportunities in the realm of education is now understood by some to mean that each person's answers are of the same value as every other person's. The Enlightenment thinkers thought that each person, given education and training, had equal access to the truth, but they never would have suggested that all answers are equally truthful.

Given the belief that all opinions are of equal worth, the criteria for retaining students can no longer be that one has something important to

teach—importance is in the eye of the beholder. Rather, students are retained when the teacher is entertaining and the students' desires are met. The educational values that assume happiness is an activity of human fulfillment have been replaced by the university values that assume happiness is simply pleasure and instant gratification.

The capitalist model of human behavior has restructured academic choice, and our goal has become simply to satisfy our students, not to provide them with an education. We see this most graphically in the student evaluation forms that absurdly ask D students and A students alike to rank their professor's command of the subject matter, as if the students are *born* with the capability to do so.

In the modern university, knowledge has become something that can be evaluated without knowledge. It has become subservient to desires, needs, and whim. The consumer model of educational satisfaction confuses pleasure with success, and the value of the class becomes the grade, not the information or skills developed. Quality of education becomes a subjective matter, and knowledge becomes arbitrary.


Our educational institutions and our student decisions regarding those institutions are subservient to the cultural messages regarding the value of knowledge. The less knowledge is valued, the more education becomes a free-for-all. In the absence of objective criteria for good education, the professor that criticizes American policy around September 11 becomes an elitist. In the absence of moral and political right and wrong, the professor that speaks critically of his or her country becomes a traitor. In the absence of human intellectual authority, those who claim to know something others do not become Alien.

Finally, in the absence of cultural justification of education as a good-in-itself, universities become subject only to the marketplace, and access to large sums of money replaces governance. Those with the most money can manipulate institutional policy and governing bodies according to their whim and their distorted moral system. Consumer satisfaction will always result from economic windfalls, even if the source of that windfall runs counter to the human dignity implicit in the original purpose of liberal education. Money replaces moral authority and pleasure consumes the human good.

Is there a way out of this scenario? There are countless ways out, and

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with the collective intelligence of the academic mind, if the renegotiation of the university is regarded as legitimately important, then great strides can be made.

The preconditions for this restructuring, however, must be a more precise delineation between the market and the academy, and, even more importantly, the reaffirmation of the place of intellectual knowledge in the university and in society at large. This need not mean the rejection of pluralism or the return to an exclusive and falsely definitive point of view. It only demands assent to the proposition that just because there may be more than one right answer does not mean that there aren't any wrong ones. 

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