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# The Neoliberal Arts

I recently spent a semester teaching writing at an elite liberal-arts college. At strategic points around the campus, in shades of yellow and green, banners displayed the following pair of texts. The first was attributed to the college's founder, which dates it to the 1920s. The second was extracted from the latest version of the institution's mission statement:

The paramount obligation of a college is to develop in its students the ability to think clearly and independently, and the ability to live confidently, courageously, and hopefully.

leadership  
service  
integrity  
creativity

Let us take a moment to compare these texts. The first thing to observe about the older one is that it is a sentence. It expresses an idea by placing concepts in relation to one another within the kind of structure that we call a syntax. It is, moreover, highly wrought: a parallel structure underscored by repetition, five adverbs balanced two against three.

A spatial structure, the sentence also suggests a temporal sequence. Thinking clearly, it wants us to recognize, leads to thinking independently. Thinking independently leads to living confidently. Living confidently leads to living courageously. Living courageously leads to living hopefully. And the entire chain begins with a college that recognizes it has an obligation to its students, an obligation to develop their abilities to think and live.

Finally, the sentence is attributed to an individual. It expresses her convictions and ideals. It announces that she is prepared to hold herself accountable for certain responsibilities.



"The Seismologist," an altered found photograph. All artwork by Julie Cockburn © The artist. Courtesy Flowers Gallery, London

The second text is not a sentence. It is four words floating in space, unconnected to one another or to any other concept. Four words — four slogans, really — whose meaning and function are left undefined, open to whatever interpretation the reader cares to project on them.

Four words, three of which — "leadership," "service," and "creativity" — are the loudest buzzwords in contemporary higher education. ("Integrity" is presumably intended as a synonym for the more familiar "character," which for colleges at this point means nothing more than not cheating.) The text is not the statement of an individual; it is the emanation of a bureaucracy. In this case, a literally anonymous bureaucracy: no one could tell me when this version of the institution's mission statement was formulated, or by whom. No one could even tell me who had decided to hang those banners all over campus. The sentence from the founder has also long been mounted on the college walls. The other words had just appeared, as if enunciated by the zeitgeist.

But the most important thing to note about the second text is what it doesn't talk about: thinking or learning. In what it both does and doesn't say, it therefore constitutes an apt reflection of the current state of higher education. College is

seldom about thinking or learning anymore. Everyone is running around trying to figure out what it is about. So far, they have come up with buzzwords, mainly those three.

( 2 of 8 )

This is education in the age of neoliberalism. Call it Reaganism or Thatcherism, economism or market fundamentalism, neoliberalism is an ideology that reduces all values to money values. The worth of a thing is the price of the thing. The worth of a person is the wealth of the person. Neoliberalism tells you that you are valuable exclusively in terms of your activity in the marketplace — in Wordsworth's phrase, your getting and spending.

The purpose of education in a neoliberal age is to produce producers. I published a book last year that said that, by and large, elite American universities no longer provide their students with a real education, one that addresses them as complete human beings rather than as future specialists — that enables them, as I put it, to build a self or (following Keats) to become a soul. Of all the responses the book aroused, the most dismaying was this: that so many individuals associated with those institutions said not, "Of course we provide our students with a real education," but rather, "What is this 'real education' nonsense, anyway?"

A representative example came from Steven Pinker, the Harvard psychologist:

Perhaps I am emblematic of everything that is wrong with elite American education, but I have no idea how to get my students to build a self or become a soul. It isn't taught in graduate school, and in the hundreds of faculty appointments and promotions I have participated in, we've never evaluated a candidate on how well he or she could accomplish it.

Pinker is correct. He *is* emblematic of everything that is wrong with elite American education. David Brooks, responding to both Pinker and myself, laid out the matter very clearly. College, he noted, has three potential purposes: the commercial (preparing to start a career), the cognitive (learning stuff, or better, learning how to think), and the moral (the purpose that is so mysterious to Pinker and his ilk). "Moral," here, does not mean learning right from wrong. It means developing the ability to make autonomous choices — to determine your own beliefs, independent of parents, peers, and society. To live confidently, courageously, and hopefully.

“Carita,” a hand-embroidered found photograph

Only the commercial purpose now survives as a recognized value. Even the cognitive purpose, which one would think should be the center of a college education, is tolerated only insofar as it contributes to the commercial. Everybody knows that the percentage of students majoring in English has plummeted since the 1960s. But the percentage majoring in the physical sciences — physics, chemistry, geology, astronomy, and so forth — has fallen even more, by some 60 percent. As of 2013, only 1.5 percent of students graduated with a degree in one of those subjects, and only 1.1 percent in math. At most colleges, the lion’s share of undergraduates majors in vocational fields: business, communications, education, health. But even at elite institutions, the most popular majors are the practical, or, as Brooks might say, the commercial ones: economics, biology, engineering, and computer science.

It is not the humanities per se that are under attack. It is learning: learning for its own sake, curiosity for its own sake, ideas for their own sake. It is the liberal arts, but understood in their true meaning, as all of those fields in which knowledge is pursued as an end in itself, the sciences and social sciences included. History, sociology, and political-science majors endure the same kind of ritual hazing (“Oh, so you decided to go for the big bucks”) as do people who major in French or philosophy. Governor Rick Scott of Florida has singled out anthropology majors as something that his state does not need more of. Everybody talks about the STEM fields — science, technology, engineering, and math — but no one’s really interested

in science, and no one's really interested in math: interested in funding them, interested in having their kids or their constituents pursue careers in them. That leaves technology and engineering, which means (since the second is a subset of the first) it leaves technology.

( 3 of 8 )

As for the moral purpose, the notion that college might prepare you for life by inciting contemplation and reflection, it is typically dismissed, in my experience, with one of two historical arguments. The first attributes the idea to the 1960s. The hippies may have been into that sort of navel-gazing, but kids today are too wised-up to fall for it. The second relegates it to the nineteenth century. Liberal education was a luxury of the leisured class, the WASP aristocracy. When people from the rest of society began to go to college in the twentieth century, they went so that they could climb the economic ladder.

Needless to say, these criticisms cannot both be true, because they contradict each other. In fact, neither is true, though each contains a piece of truth. The moral purpose was important in the Sixties, and it was important in the nineteenth century. But it was also important between and before. It was important from the beginning of higher education in America. Most early American colleges were founded as church-affiliated institutions; molding students' character was their primary aim. That mission was largely secularized by the early twentieth century, but it was not abandoned. That is why we have, or had, Great Books courses and other humanities and "general education" sequences and requirements. That is why colleges established English departments, began to teach Shakespeare and Melville: precisely to create a liberal curriculum for students who didn't come from the WASP aristocracy and hadn't studied Greek and Latin in prep school.

“The Orthodontist,” a hand-embroidered found photograph with watercolor

As the country moved to mass higher education — from the land-grant acts of 1862 and 1890 and the establishment of women’s colleges and historically black colleges and universities to the G.I. Bill and the postwar explosion of state university systems — the idea of a liberal education was carried right along. The heyday of public higher ed, the 1960s, was the heyday of the liberal arts. If those middle- and working-class kids were going to college just to get a better job, why did so many of them major in English? Because they also wanted to learn, think, reflect, and grow. They wanted what the WASP aristocrats had, and the country was wise enough, or generous enough, or egalitarian enough, to let them have it.

( 4 of 8 )

A different version of the nineteenth-century argument was made by Joshua Rothman on *The New Yorker's* website. When I complain about the admissions process at elite colleges, which turns the whole of childhood and adolescence into a high-stakes, twelve-year sprint, what I’m really complaining about, he said, is modernity. We’re all going faster and faster, and have been for two hundred years. Students are no exception.

Rothman is wrong, but he is wrong in an illuminating way. Modernity is a condition of ever-increasing acceleration, but only, until recently, for adults. For the young, modernity means — or meant — something different. The modern age, in fact,

invented the notion of youth as an interval between childhood and adulthood, and it invented it as a time of unique privileges and obligations. From the Romantics, at the dawn of modernity, all the way through the 1970s, youth was understood to have a special role: to step outside the world and question it. To change it, with whatever opposition from adults. (Hence the association of youth and revolution, another modern institution.) As college became common as a stage of life — one that coincides with the beginning of youth — it naturally incorporated that idea. It was the time to think about the world as it existed, and the world that you wanted to make.

But we no longer have youth as it was imagined by modernity. Now we have youth as it was imagined by postmodernity — in other words, by neoliberalism. Students rarely get the chance to question and reflect anymore — not about their own lives, and certainly not about the world. Modernity understood itself as a condition of constant flux, which is why the historical mission of youth in every generation was to imagine a way forward to a different state. But moving forward to a different state is a possibility that neoliberalism excludes. Neoliberalism believes that we have reached the end of history, a steady-state condition of free-market capitalism that will go on replicating itself forever. The historical mission of youth is no longer desirable or even conceivable. The world is not going to change, so we don't need young people to imagine how it might.

All we need them to do, as Rothman rightly suggests, is to run faster and faster, so that by the time they finish college, they can make the leap into the rat race. Youth, now, is nothing more than a preliminary form of adulthood, and the quiet desperation of middle age has been imported backward into adolescence. (If Arthur Miller had been at work today, it would have been *Death of a Senior*.) And as everybody knows by now, it isn't just postmodern youth; it is also postmodern childhood — for children, too, increasingly are miniature adults, chasing endlessly for rank and status.

This is not inevitable. It is the result of choices we have made, driven by an ideology that we have allowed to impose itself upon us. "So you decided to go for the big bucks," "What are you going to do with that?": the thing I find so striking about those kinds of comments is not that people make them but that they seem to feel compelled to make them. It's as if we've all decided, by unspoken consent, to police our children's aspirations. The attitude hangs in the air, exerting its pressure on students and grown-ups alike. When an adult asks a college student what they're going to do with that, the question that we ought to ask is what's at stake for the adult.

( 5 of 8 )

I wrote a book about the problems with elite higher education in America, but what I've learned from the correspondence I've received over the past year is that it's not just *elite* higher education, not just *higher* education, and not just America. I still believe that the selective admissions process is a uniquely baleful institution with uniquely baleful consequences, that liberal-arts colleges are apt to do a better job of providing a real education than research universities, and that there is no necessary correlation between institutional prestige and educational quality. But the most important problems are everywhere, at every level: at small regional colleges and large state universities, at prep schools and public high schools, at grade schools and community colleges, in Canada, Britain, Korea, Brazil. They are everywhere

because neoliberalism is everywhere.

We see its shadow in the relentless focus on “basic skills” in K–12, as if knowledge were simply an assemblage of methods and facts. In the move to “informational” texts in English classes, as if the purpose of learning to read were to understand a memo. In our various testing regimes, as if all learning could be quantified. In the frenzy of the MOOCs, as if education were nothing more than information transfer. In the tables that rank colleges and majors by average starting salary, as if earning power were the only thing you got from school.

We see it in our president’s swipe, last year, at art-history majors. “I promise you,” said our intellectual in chief, “folks can make a lot more, potentially, with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art-history degree.” We see it in Governor Rick Scott’s proposal to charge liberal-arts majors higher tuition at Florida’s state universities. We see it, most spectacularly, in Governor Scott Walker’s attempt to rewrite the mission statement of the University of Wisconsin, one of the country’s great public systems. According to the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Walker “proposed striking language about public service and improving the human condition, and deleting the phrase: ‘Basic to every purpose of the system is the search for truth.’ ” The university’s mission would henceforth be to “meet the state’s workforce needs.”

( 6 of 8 )

A couple of years ago, I sat down with the newly appointed president of a top-ten liberal-arts college. He had come from a professional school (law, in his case), as so many college deans and presidents now seem to.

I started by telling him that I had just visited an upper-level class, and that no one there had been able to give me a decent definition of “leadership,” even though the college trumpeted the term at every opportunity. He declined to offer one himself. Instead, he said, a bit belligerently, “I’ve been here five months, and no one has been able to give me a satisfactory definition of ‘the liberal arts.’ ”

I offered the one I supplied above: those fields in which knowledge is pursued for its own sake. When you study the liberal arts, I added, what you’re mainly learning to do is make arguments.

“Scientists don’t make arguments,” he said (a statement that would’ve come as a surprise to the scientists on the faculty). “And what about painters? *They* don’t make arguments.”

I tried to explain the difference between the fine and the liberal arts (the latter are “arts” only by an accident of derivation) with little success. “So what do *you* think the college should be about?” I finally asked him.

“Leadership,” he said.

If college is seldom about thinking and learning anymore, that’s because very few people are interested in thinking and learning, students least of all. As Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa report in *Academically Adrift*, the number of hours per week that students spend studying for their classes has been falling steadily for decades and is now about half of what it was in 1961. And as anyone associated with a college can tell you, ambitious undergraduates devote the bulk of their time and energy, and



certainly of their passion, to extracurriculars. Pinker, in the response I mentioned, wonders why he finds himself addressing half-empty lecture halls. I can tell him why: because his students don't much care about the things he's trying to teach them.

Why should they, given the messages that they've received about their education? The college classroom does or ought to do one thing particularly well, which is to teach you to think analytically. That is why a rigorous college education requires you to be as smart as possible and to think as hard as possible, and why it's good at training people for those professions that demand the same: law, medicine, finance, consulting, science, and academia itself. Nor is it a coincidence that the first four of those (the four that also happen to be lucrative) are the top choices among graduates of the most selective schools.

But business, broadly speaking, does not require you to be as smart as possible or to think as hard as possible. It's good to be smart, and it's good to think hard, but you needn't be extremely smart or think extremely hard. Instead, you need a different set of skills: organizational skills, interpersonal skills — things that professors and their classes are certainly not very good at teaching.

As college is increasingly understood in terms of jobs and careers, and jobs and careers increasingly mean business, especially entrepreneurship, students have developed a parallel curriculum for themselves, a parallel college, where they can get the skills they think they really need. Those extracurriculars that students are deserting the classroom for are less and less what Pinker derides as "recreational" and more and more oriented toward future employment: entrepreneurial endeavors, nonprofit ventures, volunteerism. The big thing now on campuses — or rather, off them — is internships.

All this explains a new kind of unhappiness I sense among professors. There are a lot of things about being an academic that basically suck: the committee work, the petty politics, the endless slog for tenure and promotion, the relentless status competition. What makes it all worthwhile, for many people, is the vigorous intellectual dialogue you get to have with vibrant young minds. That kind of contact is becoming unusual. Not because students are dumber than they used to be, but because so few of them approach their studies with a sense of intellectual mission. College is a way, learning is a way, of getting somewhere else. Students will come to your office — rushing in from one activity, rushing off to the next — to find out what they need to do to get a better grade. Very few will seek you out to talk about ideas in an open-ended way. Many professors still do care deeply about thinking and learning. But they often find that they're the only ones.

They certainly cannot count on much support from their administrations. Now that the customer-service mentality has conquered academia, colleges are falling all over themselves to give their students what they think they think they want. Which means that administrators are trying to retrofit an institution that was designed to teach analytic skills — and, not incidentally, to provide young people with an opportunity to reflect on the big questions — for an age that wants a very different set of abilities. That is how the president of a top liberal-arts college can end up telling me that he's not interested in teaching students to make arguments but is interested in leadership. That is why, around the country, even as they cut departments, starve traditional fields, freeze professorial salaries, and turn their classrooms over to adjuncts, colleges and universities are establishing centers and

offices and institutes, and hiring coordinators and deanlets, and launching initiatives, and creating courses and programs, for the inculcation of leadership, the promotion of service, and the fostering of creativity. Like their students, they are busy constructing a parallel college. What will happen to the old one now is anybody's guess.

( 7 of 8 )

So what's so bad about leadership, service, and creativity? What's bad about them is that, as they're understood on campus and beyond, they are all encased in neoliberal assumptions. Neoliberalism, which dovetails perfectly with meritocracy, has generated a caste system: "winners and losers," "makers and takers," "the best and the brightest," the whole gospel of Ayn Rand and her *Übermenschen*. That's what "leadership" is finally about. There are leaders, and then there is everyone else: the led, presumably — the followers, the little people. Leaders get things done; leaders take command. When colleges promise to make their students leaders, they're telling them they're going to be in charge.

"Service" is what the winners engage in when they find themselves in a benevolent mood. Call it Clintonism, by analogy with Reaganism. Bill Clinton not only ratified the neoliberal consensus as president, he has extended its logic as a former president. Reaganism means the affluent have all the money, as well as all the power. Clintonism means they use their money and power, or a bit of it, to help the less fortunate — because the less fortunate (i.e., the losers) can't help themselves. Hence the Clinton Foundation, hence every philanthropic or altruistic endeavor on the part of highly privileged, highly credentialed, highly resourced elites, including all those nonprofits or socially conscious for-profits that college students start or dream of starting.

"Creativity," meanwhile, is basically a business concept, aligned with the other clichés that have come to us from the management schools by way of Silicon Valley: "disruption," "innovation," "transformation." "Creativity" is not about becoming an artist. No one wants you to become an artist. It's about devising "innovative" products, services, and techniques — "solutions," which imply that you already know the problem. "Creativity" means design thinking, in the terms articulated by the writer Amy Whitaker, not art thinking: getting from A to a predetermined B, not engaging in an open-ended exploratory process in the course of which you discover the B.

Leadership, service, and creativity do not seek fundamental change (remember, fundamental change is out in neoliberalism); they seek technological or technocratic change within a static social framework, within a market framework. Which is really too bad, because the biggest challenges we face — climate change, resource depletion, the disappearance of work in the face of automation — will require nothing less than fundamental change, a new organization of society. If there was ever a time that we needed young people to imagine a different world, that time is now.

( 8 of 8 )

We have always been, in the United States, what Lionel Trilling called a business civilization. But we have also always had a range of counterbalancing institutions, countercultural institutions, to advance a different set of values: the churches, the arts, the democratic tradition itself. When the pendulum has swung too far in one

direction (and it's always the same direction), new institutions or movements have emerged, or old ones have renewed their mission. Education in general, and higher education in particular, has always been one of those institutions. But now the market has become so powerful that it's swallowing the very things that are supposed to keep it in check. Artists are becoming "creatives." Journalism has become "the media." Government is bought and paid for. The prosperity gospel has arisen as one of the most prominent movements in American Christianity. And colleges and universities are acting like businesses, and in the service of businesses.

What is to be done? Those very same WASP aristocrats — enough of them, at least, including several presidents of Harvard and Yale — when facing the failure of their own class in the form of the Great Depression, succeeded in superseding themselves and creating a new system, the meritocracy we live with now. But I'm not sure we possess the moral resources to do the same. The WASPs had been taught that leadership meant putting the collective good ahead of your own. But meritocracy means looking out for number one, and neoliberalism doesn't believe in the collective. As Margaret Thatcher famously said about society, "There's no such thing. There are individual men and women, and there are families." As for elite university presidents, they are little more these days than lackeys of the plutocracy, with all the moral stature of the butler in a country house.

Neoliberalism disarms us in another sense as well. For all its rhetoric of freedom and individual initiative, the culture of the market is exceptionally good at inculcating a sense of helplessness. So much of the language around college today, and so much of the negative response to my suggestion that students ought to worry less about pursuing wealth and more about constructing a sense of purpose for themselves, presumes that young people are the passive objects of economic forces. That they have no agency, no options. That they have to do what the market tells them. A Princeton student literally made this argument to me: If the market is incentivizing me to go to Wall Street, he said, then who am I to argue?

I have also had the pleasure, over the past year, of hearing from a lot of people who are pushing back against the dictates of neoliberal education: starting high schools, starting colleges, creating alternatives to high school and college, making documentaries, launching nonprofits, parenting in different ways, conducting their lives in different ways. I welcome these efforts, but none of them address the fundamental problem, which is that we no longer believe in public solutions. We only believe in market solutions, or at least private-sector solutions: one-at-a-time solutions, individual solutions.

The worst thing about "leadership," the notion that society should be run by highly trained elites, is that it has usurped the place of "citizenship," the notion that society should be run by everyone together. Not coincidentally, citizenship — the creation of an informed populace for the sake of maintaining a free society, a self-governing society — was long the guiding principle of education in the United States. To escape from neoliberal education, we must escape from neoliberalism. If that sounds impossible, bear in mind that neoliberalism itself would have sounded impossible as recently as the 1970s. As late as 1976, the prospect of a Reagan presidency was played for laughs on network television.

Instead of treating higher education as a commodity, we need to treat it as a right. Instead of seeing it in terms of market purposes, we need to see it once again in terms of intellectual and moral purposes. That means resurrecting one of the great

achievements of postwar American society: high-quality, low- or no-cost mass public higher education. An end to the artificial scarcity of educational resources. An end to the idea that students must compete for the privilege of going to a decent college, and that they then must pay for it.

Already, improbably, we have begun to make that move: in the president's call in January for free community college, in the plan introduced in April by a group of Democratic senators and representatives to enable students to graduate from college without debt, in a proposal put forth by Senator Bernie Sanders for a tax on Wall Street transactions that would make four-year public institutions free for all. Over the past several years, the minimum wage has been placed near the top of the nation's agenda, already with some notable successes. Now the same is happening with college costs and college access.

But it isn't happening by itself. Young people, it turns out, are not helpless in the face of the market, especially not if they act together. Nor are they necessarily content to accept the place that neoliberalism has assigned them. We appear to have entered a renewed era of student activism, driven, as genuine political engagement always is, not by upper-class "concern" but by felt, concrete needs: for economic opportunity, for racial justice, for a habitable future. Educational institutions — reactive, defensive, often all but rudderless — are not offering much assistance with this project, and I don't believe that students have much hope that they will. The real sense of helplessness, it seems, belongs to colleges and universities themselves.

Sent from my iPad