

Dinesh D'Souza's examination of the phenomenon of 'political correctness' on college campuses and its detrimental results is reviewed by Eugene D. Genovese, Distinguished Scholar-in-Residence at the University Center in Georgia. Reprinted by permission of The New Republic, © 1991, The New Republic, Inc.

COUNTERTERRORISM IN THE ACADEMY

A Book Review

ILLIBERAL EDUCATION:
THE POLITICS OF RACE AND SEX ON CAMPUS By Dinesh D'Souza

Were today's universities the places of higher education that they jocularly pretend to be, we would have had a vigorous debate on the issues raised by Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind*. Instead, with some notable exceptions, the left settled for denunciations and the right for hosannas. Now we have another chance. Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education* recounts, in a manner both responsible and chilling, the atrocities that ravage our campuses. Whatever your politics, read it.

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A domestic policy adviser in the Reagan White House and a frequent contributor to *National Review* and other satanic organs, D'Souza speaks from the right. He also speaks for sanity, and, rare among right-wingers, he displays a deep appreciation of the travails of black students. Nothing comes through this powerful yet restrained book more clearly than its protest against the betrayal of black youth by the demagogues who claim to support them. D'Souza shows that blacks are paying the highest price for the degradation of our campuses and the prostitution of higher education. Thus he pointedly exposes what few right-wingers wish to notice: the increase in flagrantly racist assaults, physical and other, on black students.

The atrocities documented here include the silencing of professors accused of "insensitivity" because they dare to ask students to read racist material in appropriate courses. (By extension, a professor ought not to assign *Mein Kampf* in a course on Nazi Germany since it might offend the sensibilities of Jewish students.) And they include the repression of professors and students who take unpopular stands against quotas, affirmative action, busing, abortion, homosexuality, and much else.

Clearly, they have no right to present views offensive to those who accept the reigning pieties in universities committed to "diversity." D'Souza's account makes stomach-turning reading. And I have a suspicion that he is pulling his punches, lest he be accused of exaggeration.

As one who saw his professors fired during the McCarthy era, and who had to fight, as a pro-Communist Marxist, for his own right to teach, I fear that our conservative colleagues are today facing a new McCarthyism, in some ways more effective and vicious than the old. Are conservatives only getting, then, a dose of their own medicine? In fact, they are not. The right did not rule our campuses during the McCarthy era. Most of the purges of those years were conducted by administrators and faculties who loudly proclaimed their own liberalism—by the same kind of people, that is, who are enforcing "political correctness" today. Yet few of the culprits were then, or are now, "liberals."

The principled liberals on our campuses constitute about the same proportion of the center as principled people do of the left and the right. All political camps have principled people, careerists, and thugs. D'Souza seems to appreciate this distinction. He largely avoids liberal-bashing and appeals instead to honest people across the spectrum to stand up for the principles that they profess in common. He warns of the few who have a totalitarian agenda, but wisely he concentrates his fire on those who appease them.

In these matters, as in others, Harvard, led by Derek Bok, strives mightily to be No.1. Harvard seems determined to lead in high comedy, too, though Stephan Thernstrom and other members of its faculty who have been savaged for political incorrectness in the classroom may be forgiven if they do not appreciate the humor. To wit: dining hall workers held a "Back to the Fifties Party," and a dean denounced them for being nostalgic about a decade in which segregation still prevailed. A professor assigned a film in which a black maid appeared, and he was forced to cancel its screening, since blacks should not be shown in such jobs. A new president at Radcliffe declined to identify herself as a feminist, and local feminists, disgracing an admirable cause, denounced her for

"doing violence to herself."

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The Harvard administration more or less upheld Thernstrom's academic freedom; it did not fire him for having introduced pro-slavery and racist documents in his course on "The Peopling of America," which he co-taught with the distinguished historian, Bernard Bailyn. Significantly, the students who complained about Thernstrom's "racial insensitivity" did not bother to confront him, as academic protocol, not to mention common courtesy, would require. Instead, they took their complaint to the administration and the press. In the event, the dean of the college, without mentioning Thernstrom by name, gravely announced his stern disapproval of "prejudice, harassment, and discrimination," and warned professors to watch their mouths lest they offend the sensibilities of their students. In effect, the Harvard administration acknowledged Thernstrom's right to behave in a manner that embarrassed the university and ought to make him ashamed of himself. No doubt Bok and most of his deans disapprove of the excesses that accompany the struggle for diversity, sensitivity, and a radiant future for the peoples. They are merely doing their best to create an atmosphere in which professors who value their reputations and their perquisites learn to censor themselves.

The manner in which some of the administrators of our universities choose to fight racial discrimination is marvelous to behold. Having decided that a democratic admissions policy required roughly proportionate representation of blacks, Hispanics, and whites, the University of California, Berkeley, coolly discriminated against Asians. Nearly 30 percent of the Asian high school graduates from California qualified for admission to Berkeley, compared with about 15 percent of the whites, 6 percent of the Hispanics, and 4 percent of the blacks. Yet according to Berkeley's own weighted index, blacks were admitted with scores of 4800 out of 8000, whereas whites needed at least 7000. Asians needed 7000 just to have a 50 percent chance of admission.

But Asian students, as is well known, offend the sensibilities of true egalitarians and democrats by displaying a passion for hard work, and by having strong and supportive families. Could America have been built if it had relied on such perverse people? Or, more precisely, it must have relied on such people, which would explain its emergence as a racist, sexist, homophobic, imperialist country. Either way, a sensitive person must see that the fight against racism

demands the exclusion of Asians in favor of people with safer credentials. How could we demonstrate that Asians are no better motivated or self-disciplined than the rest of us if we let them demonstrate that they are? And if we let them demonstrate that they are better motivated, how could we ever be sure that they are not also smarter?

The Asian community counter-attacked and forced Berkeley to modify its policies. Still, three trifles must be noted. First, the administrators, with little or no protest from the faculty, repeatedly lied about their discriminatory policy until they were caught red-handed, and then they solemnly announced that they were shocked to learn of their own "insensitivity" to Asians. Second, nobody has yet explained how, if discrimination against Asians were necessary to fight white racism (never mind the blatant imbecility of the proposition), the university could eliminate such discrimination without succumbing to precisely that white racism. Third, how could the university now admit more Asians without further reducing the quota for white students, including deserving poor and working-class white students.

To right old wrongs, our leading universities are now trying to buy black students and professors, of whom there are demonstrably not enough qualified ones to go around, even in Afro-American history. In consequence, they accept some who could not compete on merit, but who might do well at a university of second rank; and the universities of the second rank accept those who belong in universities of the third rank; and the universities of the third rank accept available warm bodies. At all levels, many black students who cannot compete receive passing grades while being treated with contempt. And so frustration, resentment, and anger build among them, and among the white students, too, who have been shunted aside to facilitate this charade. The dropout rate for black students would rank as a scandal, if anything any longer ranked as a scandal.

"...the alarming assault on Western civilization — on the civilization, not just the courses on civilization."

At all levels, moreover, qualified black students and professors are made to look like charity cases. A number of blacks today rank among the finest American historians in the country, and many are honored for their achievements. But those well-deserved honors often stick in the craw of their recipients, who can never be sure that the honors are not merely awarded to fill quotas. And if mature and accomplished professors suffer from this outrage, how must gifted black students feel about their situation?

Does affirmative action, then, undermine academic standards? Not necessarily, according to D'Souza, who sharply attacks its present form, and offers an alternative to which we shall return. Affirmative action cannot explain the decline in academic standards, which began well before it. The damning indictment of the long-practiced discrimination against women and blacks, moreover, properly focused on the lowering of academic standards made inevitable by a talent pool restricted to white males. By insisting that qualified women and blacks be given due consideration, affirmative action properly implemented ought to replace mediocre professors with superior ones.

Unfortunately, D'Souza sidesteps this larger issue. Still, it will emerge quickly if his book receives the attention it deserves. The decline in academic standards has proceeded in tandem with the radical egalitarian conviction that everyone is fit for, and has a right to, a college education. As a consequence of this conviction, even our finest colleges have had to struggle constantly to do more than teach at the high school level, since most of their students are certainly unprepared and probably unqualified. We have transformed our colleges from places of higher learning into places for the technical training of poorly prepared young men and women who need a degree to get a job in a college-crazed society. An example: the "democratization" of the history curriculum has led to the abolition of required courses in Western Civilization and in American history, of the introductory courses that serve as prerequisites for ostensibly advanced courses later on, say, the Civil War. Which means that every course must be reduced to an introductory course, since the professor cannot assume that his students know the difference between John C. Calhoun and Henry Clay, or know about Nullification and the Wilmot Proviso, or about anything else for that matter.

D'Souza recognizes as ghastly the conditions that are keeping blacks off the fabled "level playing field," but he sensibly insists that universities cannot do much to correct those conditions without pointlessly ruining themselves. Still, D'Souza himself continues to preach "equality of opportunity," even though conservatives like Richard Weaver and M.E. Bradford, not to mention a few liberals, have exploded it as a cruel hoax. If, as should be obvious, some people, black or white, begin with less cultural advantage, less preparation, and less talent than others, "equality of opportunity" can only result in the perpetuation of the initial levels of inequality.

The problems posed by D'Souza range well beyond the horror stories and lead directly to the essential purposes of liberal education, and to the alarming assault on Western civilization—on the civilization, not just on the courses on civilization. D'Souza, a man of color born in India, is no mindless

celebrant of Western virtues and values. He advocates a curriculum that includes attention to the rest of the world. And he argues well that those who denigrate the Western also denigrate the non-Western: they have no interest in teaching the *Analecets*, the Ramayana, or the Koran, but prefer instead to peddle what usually turns out to be little more than recent non-Western versions of their favorite radical Western ideologies.

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The point deserves passing over. It is almost always the case that those who denigrate Western civilization do not tolerate those who teach the entire truth about Asia and Africa, about Hinduism and Islam, which have also had a history of racism, sexism, class exploitation, imperialism, and murderous violence. It does not occur to them (or does it?) that they thereby rob their Asian and African American students of a chance to learn the specifics and complexities, of the history of their own forebears. They leave their Asian and African American students bereft of a full appreciation of the glory and the shame, the virtue and the vice, that go into the making of everything human.

The campaign for "political correctness" invites ugly tactics that could never be sustained, however, without the complicity of the very administrators and the very faculty members at whom they are directed. At Stanford, students seized the office of President Donald Kennedy, making demands, some constructive and some preposterous. Kennedy bravely announced: "The university will not negotiate on issues of substance in response to unlawful coercion." The next day, under unlawful coercion, he entered into negotiations, and he caved in to the demands. (Come to think of it, did he mean that he might negotiate on issues of procedure under unlawful coercion? Did he mean to endorse lawful coercion? Never mind: we don't expect university presidents to speak English these days.)

Administrators capitulate to terrorists primarily because they are damage control experts obsessed with the smart move. When terrorists threaten to trash them as racists, sexists, homophobes, and enemies of the people, the smart move is to capitulate, for the administrators have nothing to lose save honor; and since the postculturalists on their faculties have nicely deconstructed honor, they need pay it no mind. Who could blame administrators for not wanting to face demonstrators who denounce them as criminals?

Besides, the national academic establishments and most of the media will commend them for their statesmanship in defusing confrontation, for opening new lines of communication, for showing compassion and sensitivity.

A university president who negotiates with storm troopers who have occupied any part of his campus, much less his own office, should be fired. But first we must do our best to save all such quivering-time-servers from themselves. To that end I offer the Law of Liberation through Counterterrorism: *In every such political struggle, honorable men and women can defeat terrorism only by unleashing counterterrorism against cowardly administrators and their complicit faculty.* Of course, we must obey this law in a humane spirit, for the purpose of liberating these benighted souls is to realize their own inner wills. Like loving parents, we must accept the disagreeable duty to inflict excruciating pain on ourselves by whipping our errant children for their own good.

After all, our campus heroes do not wish to face demonstrators of another kind: those who, closer to the truth, trash them as front men for a new McCarthyism, as hypocrites who preach diversity and practice totalitarianism, as cowards, whores, and rogues. Let us, then, drive into their brains the terrifying recognition that counterterrorists will (figuratively) draw their blood for every concession made to terrorists; that administrators who deftly avoid calls for their ouster from the one side will face such calls from the other side; that, whatever they do, they will suffer hard blows; and that, despite every smart move known to God and man, they will find no place to hide from any war that the terrorists unleash. All, again, for their own good. By raising the price of sleaziness as high as the price of a staunch defense of their campuses, we shall liberate administrators to stand on their own professed principles, secure in the knowledge that they have nothing left to lose.

The surrender of the administrators is not hard to understand, at least in one respect. Who wants to be accused of insensitivity? The answer is, those who recognize "sensitivity" as a code word for the promulgation of a demagogic political program. At Brooklyn College, which I attended in the late 1940s, everyone took for granted that students ought to challenge their professors and each other. Professors acted as if they were paid to assault their students' sensibilities, to offend their most cherished values. The classroom was an ideological war zone. And self-respecting students returned the blows. In this way we had a chance to acquire a first-rate education, that is, to learn to sustain ourselves in combat against dedicated but overworked professors who lacked the time and the "tolerance" to worry about our "feelings."

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seize every opportunity to offend the sensibilities of his students is insulting and cheating them."

I learned my lessons well, and so I routinely assign books that contradict the point of view presented in my own classroom. I insist only that students challenge my point of view in accordance with the canons of (Southern) courtesy, and in obedience to a rule: lay down plausible premises, argue logically, appeal to evidence. If they say things that offend others, the offended ones are invited to reply, fiercely, but in accordance with the same courtesy and in obedience to the same rule. I know no other way to show students, white or black, male or female, the respect that ought to be shown in a place of intellectual and ideological contention. Thus I submit the First Law of College Teaching: *Any professor who, subject to the restraints of common sense and common decency, does not seize every opportunity to offend the sensibilities of his students is insulting and cheating them, and is no college professor at all.*

Illiberal Education pays much less attention to gender than to race, and displays less knowledge of the issues, the personalities, and the circumstances of women's studies in this country. Yet a larger problem affects D'Souza's treatment of both race and gender: he falls into the trap of condemning black studies and women's studies programs out of hand. D'Souza simply ignores the record of the best of those programs in enriching the college curriculum. He acknowledges excellent scholarship in black studies, but he wrongly asserts that it emanates from scholars in traditional departments. His assertion is anyway beside the point.

The demand for separate programs arose because the traditional departments were ignoring, and even condemning, significant subject matter. In this respect, the history of these programs does not differ markedly from the history of area studies, religious studies, Jewish studies, or film studies, some of which also arose in response to political pressures. In principle, we should emphatically welcome black studies and women's studies programs or departments as a legitimate means of promoting scholarship about valuable subjects long and stupidly ignored. In practice, moreover, some of these programs have functioned admirably, as have such centers for the promotion of scholarship as the Carter Woodson Center at the University of Virginia, which offers scholars in black studies an opportunity to pursue their research in an institution that upholds high standards and is open to diverse viewpoints. I very much doubt that D'Souza's blanket condemnation of these academic innovations would apply, after careful investigation, to the women's studies program at

Emory University, say, or to a number of other black studies and women's studies programs.

If many such programs have little intellectual merit and are principally engaged in political indoctrination, there are exceptions, and they prove that the result is not fated. D'Souza is right to charge that the culpable programs arose from the cynicism (not to mention the racism and the sexism) of administrations and faculties that refused to hold them to the proper academic standards. As a result, large numbers of excellent professors in black studies programs and women's studies programs have been left to the mercies of campus politicians who are uninterested in academic standards and hostile to academic freedom.

I know of no women's studies program that has a conservative or anti-feminist faculty member, although I know of at least one such program that would like to. The problem is not only that many programs are run by professors who, supported by administrators, apply ideological standards in the recruitment of faculty. The problem is also that professors of a more conservative disposition whose work includes subject matter appropriate to women's studies normally want nothing to do with programs that they view as inescapably political. Accepting exclusion, they do not fight for their right to participate and to teach from their own point of view.

When has a conservative or an anti-feminist professor applied for a job in a women's studies program? Such an applicant would be rejected in most places. But if that is the case, then the issue of "discrimination" ought to be joined precisely on grounds of a commitment to "diversity." No university should tolerate a program or a department of any kind that applies political and ideological criteria in hiring and promotions (as many history departments now do). I do not underestimate the magnitude of the task that faces those who would fight this battle. Still, if principled liberals and leftists do inhabit our campuses, as we must hope that they do, then surely they can be rallied to the defense of the academic freedom of their conservative colleagues.

In discussing present trends, D'Souza presents two explanations that, while not mutually exclusive, coexist uneasily. He excoriates administrators for succumbing to pressure from those who have sectarian agendas, but he also argues that administrators are imposing their own ideological agendas. He shows that "a revolution from above" is occurring at such leading universities as Harvard, Berkeley, Stanford, and Wisconsin, and that it is spreading; but the burden of his evidence suggests that the greater problem remains the general capitulation to destructive political pressures.

The capitulation has some high-minded alibis. D'Souza mentions them, but he does not probe adequately. The principal alibi stresses the moral

imperative of submission to the will of "the community" which is necessary, it is claimed, for the maintenance of a democratic society. The university, this song goes, has no right to exist as an ivory tower, oblivious to the needs and aspirations of a democratic people. None can object, of course, when the choice is posed so starkly, though it might be recalled that Southern universities long justified segregation as an accommodation to the prevailing sentiments of their communities. To pose it so starkly, however, is to talk nonsense.

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Intellectual work in general, and higher education in particular, depend upon academic freedom, which depends upon a wide swath of autonomy, of detachment, for the university. The university must be ready, therefore, to stand against the community, and to protect those who challenge the attitudes and sensibilities that prevail in the community. Neither academic freedom nor the autonomy of the university should be defended as absolutes. Some measure of accommodation to the larger society is always necessary and proper, and the gray area will always be a battleground. Still, a university worthy of the name must, so far as practicable, recognize its duty to protect those who defy the political consensus of the moment.

That is, it must recognize itself as an institution in constant and principled tension with the community in which it resides. When the New Left of the 1960s demanded that universities become responsive to the community, it ironically advanced the work begun by its Establishment enemies. Long before the hysterical response to Sputnik, the universities had been under pressure to serve the interests of communities attuned to the government and big business. All that the New Left did was to redefine "community" to suit its own ideas and interests. Like its enemies, it insisted on an engaged academy and poured contempt on the ideal of the university as an autonomous institution.

D'Souza's book contains telling quotations from campus zealots on the problem of "politicization." The universities have always been political, they argue. Indeed, everything has a political dimension—and so the only issue is what kind of politics are to be imposed. There is a grain of truth here, but carried to its logical conclusion it would transform every institution into an instrument of political correctness. And that, to speak precisely, is totalitarianism.

D'Souza makes too many concessions to democratic and egalitarian dogmas for my taste. He responds to these arguments weakly, by arguing that the politicization of the universities is leading to their domination by coalitions of ideological minorities. No doubt it is. But the danger would be even greater if the universities were to succumb to an ideological majority. The hard truth is that academic freedom—the real work of scholarship—requires a willingness to set limits to the claims of democracy. It requires a strong dose of hierarchical authority within institutions that must be able to defy a democratic consensus. Sooner or later we shall have to face this fact, or be defeated by those who seek the total politicization of our campuses.

D'Souza ends his book constructively, with three proposals to promote academic standards and academic freedom and simultaneously to do justice to genuinely disadvantaged youth. His first, and most significant, is his call for "non-racial affirmative action." With this idea, he risks the ire of many on the right. He notes that the rising tide of white racism among students is being fueled by discrimination against qualified white students in favor of less qualified black students who receive financial support despite coming from affluent families. Recognizing that most qualified black students, like many qualified white students, need financial support, he proposes to subsidize according to a combination of demonstrated merit and need. An advocate of "individualism," D'Souza insists that his program promotes "equality of opportunity" and rejects categorization by group. Surely he jests. For his program implies a collectivism that merely replaces "race" with "class." At least it promises to attack racial injustice, since the correlation of race and lower class among blacks is, as he takes pains to show, strikingly high.

His second proposal is for "choice without separation." It's not exactly clear what this slogan means. It originates in a critique of black separatism that I find sadly wrongheaded. D'Souza, fearful of ghettoization and the institutionalization of racial oppression in a new form, seems alarmed at the very idea of separate black professional and extra-curricular organizations. He lashes out, therefore, at everything that hints of black separatism, of any kind of separatism. But he is uncritically assimilating the black experience in America to the general "ethnic" experience, and he is thereby missing its uniqueness. Blacks did not bring a distinct culture from Africa as, say, Italian-Americans or Polish-Americans did from their homelands; they forged a new and powerful culture of their own. Afro-American culture has grown out of a forced emigration from Africa, out of resistance to slavery, and out of enforced segregation, and for those reasons it has imparted to many black people a sense of being "a nation within a nation," to invoke a term that dates from early colonial times and

was popularized by W.E.B. DuBois. The attendant problems of analysis, not to mention politics, are extraordinarily complex. And for just that reason they ought long ago to have been made the center of discussion on our campuses, in and out of black studies programs.

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D'Souza's third proposal offers an intriguing curriculum reform that would expose students "to the basic issues of equality and human difference, through a carefully chosen set of classic texts that deal powerfully with those issues." Briefly, he aims at grounding American students in the Western experience that has constituted the foundation of our society and culture, but in a way that promotes comparison and contrast with the civilizations of the rest of the world and appreciates their contribution to our own national development. This proposal is unobjectionable, but it is not very original. In fact, an increasing number of principled professors are promoting "World Civilization" in the manner D'Souza recommends—that is, by introducing African, Asian, and Latin American cultural studies without denigrating Western Civilization.

Illiberal Education invites cooperation in a common effort in defense of the campus. Occasionally D'Souza descends into biased and irritating attacks on the left and center, with sweeping and one-sided characterizations of Marxism and Marxists, liberalism and liberals. (He does not do justice to the literary critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr. or the historian Linda Kerber, among others.) Yet on the whole he makes a good effort to be fair, to focus on issues, to avoid *ad hominem* attacks, and to check his own political passions. He acknowledges, however grudgingly, the commitment of certain Marxists, feminists, proponents of black studies, and others to academic freedom and to scholarly integrity. This book could open a salutary national debate. But the cause it champions will go down, unless it is supported by a substantial portion of the left and center.

For this is not an issue only of the right, not least for a practical reason: there are not nearly enough conservatives on our campuses to do more than fight a rearguard action. Indeed, the predicament of the right should give many on the left a sense of déjà vu, and a good laugh. Opposition to campus atrocities attracts two kinds of right-wingers: those who defend academic freedom and academic standards on

principle, and those interested in using the issue as a "transmission belt" for recruitment into their "movement." The former, I mean the principled defenders of the academy, understand that they must cooperate with those whom they oppose on other issues. The latter, I mean the sectarians, do everything possible to identify the academic cause with their own partisan politics and slander all liberals and lefties as complicit in the new wave of campus barbarism. Looking beyond the immediate struggle, they fear nothing so much as the dissolution of the reigning isms, and the redrawing of political lines in a manner that brings together the healthiest elements of long-warring political camps.

The sectarians are correct to fear the consecration of the campuses to a vigorous political debate under conditions of real mutual respect and genuine academic freedom. Such a debate would undermine all the sectarianisms. It would encourage new political formations to meet the challenges of the new era. And so it should: the defense of academic freedom requires an all-out counterattack by a coalition that cuts across all the lines of politics, race and gender. It is time to close the ranks.

— Eugene D. Genovese