

# Business as Usual

by Frank Brownlow

*"The effects of infantile instruction are, like those of syphilis, never completely cured."*  
—Robert Briffault



**Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus**  
by Dinesh D'Souza  
New York: The Free Press;  
319 pp., \$19.95

Shortly before Christmas last, I heard a college president say, gesturing toward a copy of Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals*, "That book is making my job very difficult." Evidently, the anti-academic barrage that began in earnest with Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* is having an effect. Here in Massachusetts another sign of the academic times is that Michael Dukakis, on his way out of the statehouse, stripped the state's universities of money with virtually no protest at all from the general public.

What began as a theme of the conservative press has been taken up by nearly everyone, and during the past year the folly, corruption, and

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sheer weirdness to be found in contemporary academic life have become stock topics of every kind of journalism. Academics now approach news magazines as if they were booby-trapped. A Smith College professor told me that when he read *Time's* last article on the subject, and found it did not mention Smith, he almost perspired with relief. Add to a hostile press the effects of a recession and a dwindling number of applicants, and it appears that these are hard times for academia.

*Illiberal Education*, therefore, appeared this past spring to a well-prepared audience. Much of its content, based on the reportage of the last few years, is familiar, its shock value dissipated. Most readers could make a fair guess at the contents from the title alone: preferential admission by race, represented by Berkeley's treatment of its Asian applicants; the dismantling of the humanities curriculum at Stanford; speech and thought police at Michigan, Harvard, and elsewhere; postmodernist criticism at Duke, and Afro-

centrism at Howard. Even many of the characters are familiar. Academic affairs have become such a topic of news that one continually reads D'Souza in the context of more up-to-date disclosures. For instance, allegations of financial corruption at Stanford provide a less idyllic background to the curriculum wars there than D'Souza describes. And D'Souza's amusing account of Stanley Fish, the cheery postmodernist entrepreneur of Duke, is enriched for the reader who knows about the professor's assault on the National Association of Scholars as racist, sexist, and homophobic—and as a threat to his own well-watered turf.

D'Souza's thesis is that America's campuses are the scene of a "victim's revolution" that aims to replace an older order described as white, male, elitist, Eurocentric, racist, *et cetera*, with a new one based on racial and cultural diversity, hospitable to the nonwhite, the female, and the homosexual. His book is mostly about the means by which the revolution's devotees advance the cause. Speech in any

way critical of women, homosexuals, and minorities is strongly disapproved. The major works of the European literary tradition are tolerated only as examples of "the discourse of oppression." Considerations of race and sex dominate admissions and appointments. And so it goes on, documented in detail by D'Souza, who makes it clear that his examples are representative, not exhaustive, and that for every case mentioned hundreds have gone unrecorded.

The result, according to D'Souza, is that where the revolution has succeeded, its effects are disastrous. Favoritism of minorities enrages the majority, and worsens relations between the races. Lowered standards of matriculation and graduation embitter supposed beneficiaries. The assault on academic standards in the name of politics demoralizes entire universities.

Is D'Souza right? The strength of his book is in its narration of detail and its presentation of individuals. Case by case he presents a picture of the American campus that would be profoundly depressing were it not for the hilarious procession of charlatans, buffoons, and poltroons that trots through his pages to cheer up the reader. Under the protection of race and sex, it seems, people talk and act quite without inhibition: for instance, a dean of minority affairs denounces dining-hall workers because the nostalgia behind their "back to the fifties party" indicates sympathy for a segregationist decade; a professor of business tells us that "all rules are unjust," and a historian renames his course "Cowpersons and Native Americans."

The book's weakness is its conceptual frame. If this is a victims' revolution, why does it proceed, as D'Souza says, quoting Donald Kagan at Yale, "from the top down"? Why, moreover, has it proved so profitable for the academic profession? The last decade has seen boom times in academia; immense sums have flowed from the government and the foundations into institutional and individual pockets, and in the humanities and social sciences much of it has financed various aspects of D'Souza's revolution. D'Souza does not explain this. As he says, the makeup of the nation's population is changing, as are its social habits; but there is no necessary rela-

tionship of cause and effect between the observation and the state of academic affairs that he describes.

If one extends the book's journalistic focus beyond the few years it covers, then things presented as brand new look more familiar. The new illiberals regard the university as an agent of social and political change, but what is new about that? People who are grumbling now cheered thirty years ago when John Kennedy used the steps of the Michigan Union to announce the founding of the Peace Corps. Modifying the curriculum to suit different kinds of students also has a long history. Where else did all those creative writing courses come from, not to mention Freshman English itself? And if we are to talk about academic qualifications, how is the average self-ordained poet or novelist qualified to teach on a college campus?

Whatever aspect of the new illiberalism one considers, it has an academic history. Intolerance? There were once two notoriously conservative English professors at Michigan, and the liberal wits of that department treated them as pariahs: academic conservatives learned long ago the trick of self-censorship that their liberal colleagues are now complaining about.

Lowered standards? Preferential admissions for nonacademic reasons? They are not new. In the 70's, David Truman, president of Mount Holyoke, told faculty members worried about admissions that the high standards of the late 60's were abnormal. For a few years an oversupply of matriculants allowed colleges to be choosy. Now, as institutions struggle to maintain the high numbers of the 60's, things are back to normal, but with this difference: there is such a surplus of places that unqualified students are admitted everywhere (with catastrophically demoralizing effects on the high schools), and preferential admission is being given to members of racial minorities instead of alumni children and the offspring of Protestant clergymen. The minority population, however, is not the only source of unqualified students. It is not even the major one. It is merely the most visible, and the one that suffers most, from kindergarten up, from lowered standards.

Similarly, although the crackpot the-

ories and low standards associated with Black Studies and Women's Studies are fair game, it is hypocritical to treat them as an unprecedented attack on the academic citadel. As a professor of philosophy said when asked why her college, a famous one, had introduced Black Studies: "We let the social scientists in sixty years ago, and we haven't had a leg to stand on since." Complaints about bogus subjects, gut courses, and lowered standards come strangely from the beneficiaries of a system that rewards Freudian critics of literature, funds chairs in outdoor recreation, and always ensures a sufficiency of courses passable by the less than bright. Besides, there is nothing intrinsically fatuous about Black or Women's Studies; both are rewarding fields for scholars duly grounded in literature, philology, and history.

What is new is that this transference of privilege is mandated by the administrative managers, and affects just about every academic and administrative department. It has a totalitarian smell about it. Affirmative action committees have veto power over appointments, hence over curriculum and standards. As for the faculty involved in these power games, they are pawns, in some cases willing pawns, in others rich pawns, but pawns nonetheless. The involvement of a few genuine Marxists and radicals seems coincidental. But have the institutions themselves and the values they represent really changed? D'Souza's victims' revolution looks to me like an unusually virulent manifestation of the anti-intellectualism that has been endemic in higher education for a long time. The movement takes a left-wing direction because, ever since higher education became subordinate to state planning after the 1939-1945 war, left-wing sympathies have been profitable and conventional in academia. Unfortunately, the left is nature's wrecker: when these people walk down a street, the buildings fall down behind them. Yet even so, leftism in itself is not incompatible with high academic standards, and it remains to be seen whether the right-wing orchestra we hear tuning up in the wings will play a more spiritual kind of music.

The universities' anti-intellectualism makes them vulnerable to political and other influences, but it is not caused by them. The odd truth is that higher

education is not interested in high standards. Higher education occasionally tolerates and sometimes even rewards scholarship, intellectual curiosity, and good teaching, but only after more important things are taken care of. These include filling the beds, increasing the cash flow, and lobbying the legislature. Scholar-teachers are the sacred totems or icons of the system, to be trotted out for the edification of donors, parents, and the average faculty mem-

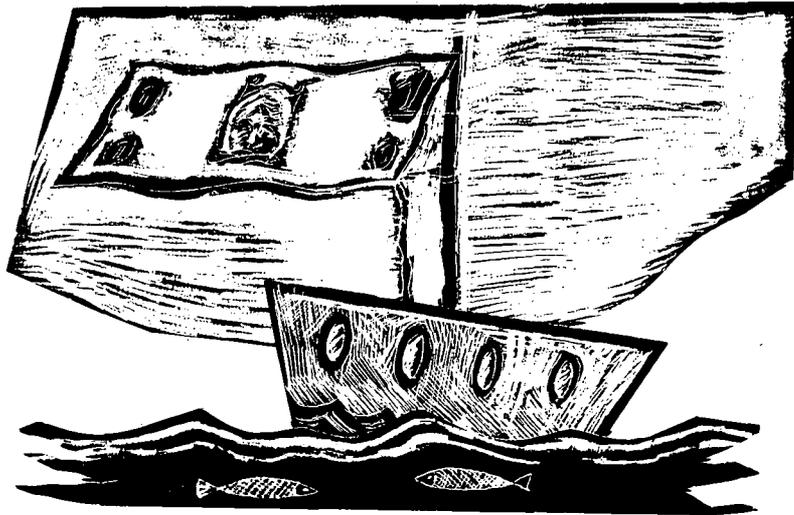
ber. The university's real interests lie elsewhere. I learned this from a distinguished papyrologist in the classics department of a major university. This man, who ate many a reluctant but free meal in the process of being paraded before the dean's guests, was recommended for a distinguished professorship just before he retired. Had it come ten or fifteen years earlier, he said, it would have meant a great deal; as it was, he knew pretty well where his work

stood in the university's scheme of priorities.

Higher education in America has become a system of virtually uniform institutions serving a mass clientele, and increasingly devoted to the proposition that a perfect world is one made safe, comfortable, and profitable for mediocrity. The subversion of educational standards is dangerous to America's long-run prosperity and happiness, but it is essential to the short-run prosperity of higher education. One could even argue that institutions that spend at most about 25-30 percent of their cash flow on education are not really schools at all: they are holding companies, phone companies, real-estate investment companies, hotels, social service agencies, research and fundraising offices. In that context, "affirmative action" is the latest and most powerful of a series of weapons deployed in higher education's war on intelligence and integrity; "cultural diversity" is an economic concept that defines one aspect of the future the universities think they are investing in. One of D'Souza's most engaging characters, Vice-provost Gillis of Duke, more or less told him so; but D'Souza seems not to have taken him seriously.

For some five years, under cover of doing good to the world's wounded, the myriad nerds of academe have been enjoying sweet revenge for every injury inflicted on their fragile self-esteem by the very idea of academic distinction. Now there are signs—the success of D'Souza's book is one of them—that this latest campaign to subvert academic standards is overreaching itself. One should not, however, expect an academic renaissance: intellectual subversion has more forms than one, and the denizens of academe are gifted inventors of them. Meanwhile, rhetoric upon the place of the humanities in the curriculum is less useful in grasping the significance of D'Souza's data than some apothegms of the marketplace, such as, "If you subsidize a thing, you're going to get it." D'Souza's cast of characters consists mostly of people whom America has rewarded well with prestige and money. Someone is satisfied. But then, as someone else said, "No one ever went broke underestimating the taste of the American people," and contemporary academia spends its days in that kind of estimation. ◊

## BRIEF MENTIONS



### WHAT HAS GOVERNMENT DONE TO OUR MONEY?

by Murray N. Rothbard

Auburn, Alabama: Ludwig von Mises Institute; 119 pp., \$5.00

Murray Rothbard, according to his enemies, is no economist, because he is not a rigorous scientist. Rothbard ought to take that as a compliment. Whatever else economics is, it is not the "dismal science." It is not a science at all, except in the sense that all forms of systematic humane learning (*e.g.*, theology, grammar) are sciences, and its practitioners are for the most part conceited optimists, whose ignorance of history, literature, and philosophy render them incapable of learning anything even from their own experience. An argument with an economist usually begins with the "layman" saying something obvious about the uniqueness of mother love or the importance of wilderness, only to have the economist shoot back with something about different people "maximizing utility" in different ways—as if such statements actually meant something. Economists are like sheep dogs: they are very good at handling their assigned tasks, so long as they never get the idea that they're in charge. When a dog makes that mistake, he begins to eat the sheep.

Murray Rothbard is no rogue economist, subordinating human concerns to economic calculation. He has always been a historian and, above all, a moralist whose obsession with human liberty has made him enemies across the political spectrum. His little book on money, first published in 1963, provides a clear and entertaining account of money and banking from the perspective of the Austrian school, as well as a nutshell history of American monetary policy. Rothbard is learned but never pedantic, simple without ever trivializing his complicated subject. The book has converted many of the most skeptical readers to the doctrine of hard money and ought to be put in the hands of every present and potential voter in the United States. If that sounds too much like coercion, then order the book.

—Thomas Fleming