



# P.J. O'Rourke Does Not Like You or Your University

By Ted Scheinman

May 22, 2014

If recent college graduates wish to read a considered and funny takedown of the 21st-century American university system, here's a bit of advice: Avoid P.J. O'Rourke as you would a debt-collector or a poisonous toad.

After not having been invited to speak at the Rutgers commencement, O'Rourke has published a [strange and slipshod screed](#) against the Youth; against the intellectual ideals and practical benefits of higher education; against activism and protest, in any form; and, with curious insistence, against Beyoncé Knowles.

It pains me to respond, because now I have to reread what may be the silliest bit of anti-intellectualism O'Rourke has excreted to date.

In decades past, O'Rourke wrote actual humor, quite often in fact, not only in magazines and books but also (before/during his post-college pendulum swing from left to right) alongside the pinko wags of *National Lampoon*. Yet as his libertarianism has ripened into establishment conservatism, his wit has gone soft. Too often his latter-day pieces read like items from the *Daily Caller*, except with a few extra tetrasyllables. O'Rourke also holds the H.L. Mencken research fellowship at the Cato Institute—an undeserved blot on the Mencken family name; conservative humorists represent a rare species, and O'Rourke has achieved success largely on the strength of this exoticism. He has enjoyed the affirmative action that boosts so many writers of the American right, and as an alleged trafficker in irony he should by rights be very amused with this arrangement. (O'Rourke, a self-described caucasian, does not believe in affirmative action.) Elsewhere, you can find the writer as token conservative on the public radio weekly yuk-fest *Wait Wait ... Don't Tell Me!* O'Rourke assimilates with ease among that backslapping bunch, well known among discerning listeners as comedy's crematorium.

O'Rourke would no doubt cavil at my "establishment conservative" label, but how else to explain his deep bitterness toward the Rutgers students who staged a sit-in to prevent Condoleezza Rice from speaking at their commencement? After reminding students that their university is ranked 69th in the country "according to *U.S. News & World Report*," O'Rourke extols Rice's

survival of Jim Crow in Alabama, her skills at the piano, and (most vehemently) her tenure as Secretary of State:

She saw the job through to the end of the fraught and divisive George W. Bush presidency, making moral and ethical decisions of such a complex and contradictory nature that they would have baffled Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle (of whom I suppose, perhaps naively, you have heard) put together.

Hapless Rutgers students, for what is life without the Nicomachean Ethics? Hapless Socrates and Plato (those blitherers), for what *realpolitik* bona fides have they between them? O'Rourke's monolithic disdain toward anyone under 30 extends as well to anyone who might resent Rice's central involvement in a war that cost trillions and was peddled to a blinkered nation under the falsest of pretenses. Observing the Rutgers protests, O'Rourke marvels: "'Sit-in'? 'Teach-in'? What century is this?'"

Answer: It's the century after the one where sit-ins and teach-ins helped *end* Jim Crow. O'Rourke can lecture us about Jim Crow, or he can mock non-violent resistance, but to do both is pure intellectual laziness. Moreover, an awful lot of *actual* libertarians opposed the Iraq War, just as they execrated the Bush administration's prevarications, outright lies, offenses against humanity, and total absence of fiscal discipline. O'Rourke does not divulge what portion of Rutgers' anti-Rice protestors identify as libertarians, Ron Paulites, or independents.

This convenient, carefree version of political and cultural history is especially galling in light of the snide and boring generalities O'Rourke applies to the Youth:

1989 happens to be when the Berlin Wall fell. I know, I know, most of you weren't born, and you get your news from TMZ. A wall falling over can't be as interesting as Beyoncé's sister punching and kicking Jay Z in a New York hotel elevator. But that 1989 moment of "something there is that doesn't love a wall" (and I'll bet you a personal karaoke performance of Beyoncé's "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)" that you can't name the poet who wrote it) had interesting consequences. Stop taking selfies and Google "Berlin Wall" on the iPhones you're all fiddling with.

O'Rourke's performance here is thorough, as he name-checks a lot of things that were sort of popular five years ago; he neglects only to demand that all these kids decamp from his lawn. But soft!—O'Rourke offers curricular proposals of a more specific nature:

I have done research. And I have done mathematical analysis. College is, or once was, for smart people. Less-than-smart people do most of the hard and dangerous work, raise families, show decency and fair play, and possess the virtues of faith, hope, and charity. But somebody needs to be smart or what would happen to predatory hedge funds, evil political machinations, the entertainment industry's production of awful trash....

As we see, O'Rourke is moving toward the "not everyone deserves college" argument but gets distracted:

What constitutes a “college education”?

You need to study history, so that it doesn’t come around again and, per Santayana, bite you in the Ukraine. You’re thinking, “Santayana—historically great guitar player.”

(Historically, Santana was really just OK.)

You need literature and the arts so you can read something longer than a Beyoncé tweet and throw Bartok into the iPod mix and hear what Jay Z is up against experimenting with music.

O’Rourke’s got me there. Had I clicked on a Beyoncé tweet instead of a Daily Beast tweet, I would never have had to read his piece. Also, while Jay Z acknowledges a deep debt to Bartok, his real anxiety of influence begins with Sibelius.

A language or two is requisite. Preferably Latin and Greek to let you comprehend where our civilization came from. And to let you comprehend whether you are heir to that civilization or spouting hot air about it.

Hey! *Heir* and *air*—that counts as wordplay, on a slow day. Plus, they’re both Latinate words (*aer*; *heres*)! Perhaps O’Rourke speaks Latin. If not, he’s more of a hypocrite than I thought; thus far, he has [declined my challenge](#) to a contest in this area of study. While he flinches from a critical disquisition on Propertius, or on Cato (either the Elder or Younger would do, though \$10 says O’Rourke has forgotten the difference), the man offers a single bold solution to the college debt crisis:

You could hold classes in the Moose Lodge or at the Y. Classes would be large. So was the agora where Socrates taught. But there’s no free WiFi in the Moose Lodge. And this kind of college education sounds like work. Which is something you’ll be looking hard for, starting tomorrow. Go Forth and Fail.

The agora! That sainted place of ancient learning, where anyone (anyone!) could mingle and pick up a bit of the Socratic method—unless you were a slave, or incredibly poor, or a woman, or one of the many Athenians who thought Socrates was [batshit crazy](#). One almost senses a measure of regret, as though O’Rourke wishes he could burn his B.A. from Miami University and M.A. from Johns Hopkins and re-educate himself along these wonderfully populist principles.

But then, Socrates is the bloke who (O’Rourke assures us) couldn’t have told a Sunni from a Shi’ite, which aligns the Athenian more or less with Secretary Rice’s former boss. O’Rourke spends a lot of time calculating the costs of a four-year college education but very little time assessing the practical and moral benefits. If he has indeed read his Aristotle, O’Rourke will remember his Nichomachean Ethics:

The man who has been educated in a subject is a good judge of that subject, and the man who has received an all-round education is a good judge in general.

At the University of North Carolina, I teach between 40 and 60 undergraduate students each year. I have taught them Catullus, Shakespeare, Jonathan Swift, Samuel Johnson, Jane Austen, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Flannery O'Connor, and James Joyce, as well as a handful of classes in journalistic writing. My students are curious, bright, and literate, and not once have I caught them peeking at TMZ. I have seen former students graduate into prestigious jobs, elite and well-funded graduate programs, and worthy non-profits. The college debt crisis is indeed serious—but to use it as one would a knife, to twist its blade in the hope of demoralizing young graduates and inducing cackles from veterans of the Reagan administration, this is hardly serious, or meaningful, or funny. O'Rourke has offered us the gallows but not the humor, the misstated problem and its ludicrous solution. Amplifying his remarks in an [interview](#) with NewsMax, O'Rourke fingers the 1960s:

The real losers wound up in academia and the long march through academia, and all this '60s gibberish lives on on our campuses.... Americans, your people are being taught by lunatics, especially in the softer subjects like history of film and stuff.

While it's true that "the History of Film and Stuff" remains a politically radioactive department on many campuses, the "lunatics" are not the people trying to get their kids to read Andrew Marvell or Mary Wollstonecraft or Émile Durkheim or even Milton Friedman. (OK, a few of us are lunatics, yes.) No, the dunces and enemies to American education are the thoughtless, reflexive ideologues who blame everything on the academy and "multiculturalism"—teen pregnancy rates, the decline of manufacturing, the fact that the milk's gone bad. Alexander Pope wrote a wonderful and very funny poem called the *Dunciad*, which O'Rourke should revisit and consider to what extent he resembles Cibber or Tibbald.

Or, given his avowed affection for the dead languages, he can simply remember Catullus 16: [Pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo](#). Yes, P.J., I'm talking to you.