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Conservative voices needed in discourse

By [Bill Maxwell](#), Times correspondent

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In her recent article titled "Right On" in the *Nation*, New York University history professor Kim Phillips-Fein, asks: "Is the conservative movement dead?"

She writes that prior to Ronald Reagan's White House victory in 1980, scholars wrote hardly any serious books about conservatism. Sure, they produced works about McCarthyism, the John Birch Society and other far-right excesses, but most university historians ignored conservatism as an intellectual subject.

Echoing Phillips-Fein, Mark Lilla, a professor of humanities at Columbia University, argues in his recent article in the *Chronicle Review*, "Taking the Right Seriously: Conservatism is a tradition, not a pathology," that the conservative movement is not dead but on life support on the overwhelming majority of U.S. campuses. This is the case even though conservative ideas have up-ended American politics over the last three decades.

Why this perpetual shortage of scholarship on conservatism until quite recently?

"The right," Phillips-Fein says, "was seen as a relic of American history — a menagerie of resentful oddballs and misfits, fanatical preachers, eccentric racists and assorted cranks who rejected the New Deal and the Great Society."

A major result of this negative portrayal is that conservative professors are in short supply on U.S. campuses. Lilla contends that even as universities strive to increase the racial and ethnic diversity of their student populations, they spurn intellectual diversity among their professors.

"As it stands," Lilla says, "there is a far greater proportion of conservatives in the student body of typical colleges than on the faculty. A few leading thinkers on the right do teach at our top universities — but at some, like Columbia University, where I teach, not a single prominent conservative is to be found."

Earnest conservatives should assume some of the responsibility for their predicament, and here are four main reasons why:

First, they too often remain silent when extremists, sundry showmen and egomaniacs (Glenn Beck, Rush Limbaugh, et al.) hijack the issues and the discussions. The measured treatises regularly published by conservative think tanks such as the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute and the Hoover Institution get lost in the fog of rhetorical nonsense.

In a 1974 column for *Newsweek*, George Will summed up the second reason for conservatives' predicament: "They (conservatives) define themselves in terms of what they oppose." David Horowitz, for example, is correct when he argues that conservative professors are denied tenure and their books and ideas are ignored. But by defining himself in terms of what he opposes, he alienates the liberals he wants to convince.

As Lilla suggests, Ivy League administrators and professors are weary of listening to the likes of Horowitz.

The third reason the academy rejects conservatism is that as a group, conservatives resist change. Some may even suffer from metathesiophobia, fear of changes. Most of

our campuses, on the other hand, embrace change and new ideas. In her Sept. 6 essay for the *New York Times Book Review*, Harvard University president Drew Gilpin Faust captures the academy's esprit de corps: "Universities are meant to be producers not just of knowledge but also (often inconvenient) doubt. They are creative and unruly places, homes to a polyphony of voices."

Lilla identifies another, and fourth, reason for conservatism's crackup. Anti-intellectualism, he says, always has diminished the tradition that claims first-rate thinkers such as Edmund Burke, William F. Buckley Jr. and Irving Kristol. "Hopped up on Fox News," Lilla says, "too many young conservatives have become ignorant of the conservative intellectual tradition and incapable of engaging civilly with their adversaries."

Liberals in academe should not cheer too loudly. As matters stand, far too many primarily are listening to their own voices and writing about their own ideas and tradition. Such intellectual incest has never been good for a society over time, and it is not good now. We need diverse intellectual engagement.

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