

THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

The Chronicle Review

[Home](#) [Opinion & Ideas](#) [The Chronicle Review](#)

September 11, 2009

Taking the Right Seriously

Conservatism is a tradition, not a pathology

By Mark Lilla

This month the University of California at Berkeley opened a Center for the Comparative Study of Right-Wing Movements. The center is housed in the Institute for the Study of Social Change, which the university advertises online as an institution placing "issues of race, gender, and class at the center of the agenda," conducting "research with a conscience," and capitalizing on "Berkeley's history as the birthplace of transformative social movements." Needless to say, the center is not promoting conservatism. This is, as the university reminds us, Berkeley.

It's not even clear that the faculty members involved have figured out what terms like "right wing" and "conservative" might mean. The Web-site blurb introducing the center describes anti-Communism as the "transcendent" issue for the right for most of the 20th century, and says that since the end of the cold war, right-wing groups have "spun on to the political stage with centripetal energy," whatever that means. This statement does not inspire confidence. In fact, the right-wing political parties in Europe have much older pedigrees, going back to the 19th-century counterrevolution. So do American and British conservatism, which came onto the political scene at least a century before 1989. In his recent book, *The Conservatives: Ideas and Personalities Throughout American History* (Yale University Press), Patrick Allitt, a professor of history at Emory University, explores the full range of conservative concerns: states' rights, religion, the corruptions of urban life, immigration, the League of Nations, mass democracy, creationism, the New Deal, free markets, race, and so on.

It is a convenient left-wing dodge to reduce 20th-century American conservatism to cold-war politics, since it implies that conservative ideas are embedded in a world that no longer exists and never should have. In fact, in the 1930s American conservatives were far more obsessed with Franklin D. Roosevelt and his domestic legacy than with Joseph Stalin, and looked askance at all foreign entanglements, including the Second World War. The

anti-Communist cause was first conceived by cold-war liberals, not by conservatives.

And what of the Berkeley center's mission to encourage and nurture "comparative scholarship on right-wing movements both in the U.S. and abroad during the 20th and 21st centuries"? That could be a good thing. For instance, it would be useful to know something about the affinities between European right-wingers like Jean-Marie Le Pen, founder of the National Front in France, and David Duke, the American white supremacist and anti-Semite now living, as it happens, in Austria. But mainstream American conservatism, which pretty much is all there is to the American right, shares nothing meaningful with those protofascist figures. Our conservatives accept the legitimacy of constitutional self-government, even when they hate the legislation and court decisions resulting from it; they play by the rules. The same cannot be said of the European right, which has always been suspicious of parliamentary politics. One wonders whether "comparative study" in the Berkeley context presumes a continuous slippery slope running from conservatism down to violent far-right movements. It's a little like the Hoover Institution announcing a study "comparing" the Red Brigades with, say, Adlai Stevenson.

But beggars can't be choosers. The unfortunate fact is that American academics have until recently shown little curiosity about conservative ideas, even though those ideas have utterly transformed American (and British) politics over the past 30 years. A look at the online catalogs of our major universities confirms this: plenty of courses on identity politics and postcolonialism, nary a one on conservative political thought. Professors are expected to understand the subtle differences among gay, lesbian, and transgender studies, but I would wager that few can distinguish between the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation, and the Cato Institute, three think tanks that have a greater impact on Washington politics than the entire Ivy League.

Why is that? The former left-wing firebrand David Horowitz, whom the professors do know, has a simple answer: There is a concerted effort to keep conservative Ph.D.'s out of jobs, to deny tenure to those who get through, and to ignore conservative books and ideas. It is an old answer, dating back to the 1970s, when neoconservatives began writing about the "adversary culture" of intellectuals. Horowitz is an annoying man, and what's most annoying about him is that ... he has a point. Though we are no longer in the politically correct sauna of the 1980s and 1990s, and experiences vary from college to college, the picture he paints of the faculty and

curriculum in American universities remains embarrassingly accurate, and it is foolish to deny what we all see before us.

Over the past decade, our universities have made serious efforts to increase racial and ethnic diversity on the campus (economic diversity worries them less, for some reason). Well-paid deans work exclusively on the problem. But universities show not the slightest interest in intellectual diversity among faculty members. That wouldn't matter if teachers could be counted on to introduce students to their adversaries' books and views, but we know how rarely that happens. That's why political diversity on the faculty does matter. As it stands, 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.

Contra Horowitz, the blackballing of conservatives and conservative ideas is by now instinctive and habitual rather than self-conscious, reflecting intellectual provincialism more than ideological fervor. I recall being at a dinner in Paris in the late 1980s with a distinguished American historian of France who had gathered her graduate students for the evening. The conversation turned to book printing in the early modern era, which she was studying, and the practice of esoteric writing, which was more widespread than she had imagined. I mentioned that there was a classic book on this subject by Leo Strauss. She searched her mind for a moment—this was before the Iraq war made Strauss a household name—and then said, "But isn't he a conservative?" In a certain way he was, I said. Silence at the table. She smiled that smile meant to end discussion, and the conversation turned to more-pleasant topics.

I have experienced similar reactions throughout my academic career. In the early 1980s, I helped edit the neoconservative public-policy journal *The Public Interest*, and though I haven't considered myself a conservative for at least two decades, many academics I meet are astonished to learn this little fact. Some are rendered speechless. Others ask, "Are you still a neoconservative?," by which they mean, "Are you still beating your country?"

All this understandably drives conservatives crazy. But what can be done about it? David Horowitz inclines toward witch-hunting, which he practiced with malicious skill in his book *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America* (Regnery, 2006). Horowitz makes hay (and money) by affirming conservatives' longstanding conviction that the university is a hostile place best

avoided. He apparently doesn't see how his campaign hurts the larger conservative cause, since it gives students one more reason not to pursue graduate studies and actually become professors. My brightest conservative students, brought up on hair-raising tales of political correctness, dismiss academic careers out of hand because they are certain of not being hired or getting tenure. And I can't say I blame them. Even as an ex-conservative, I was lucky to have passed through the eyes of those two needles.

The late Paul Lyons, a professor at Richard Stockton College of New Jersey until his death, in January, recognized the problem but proposed something far more radical than anything David Horowitz has considered. And that was to persuade his liberal colleagues to teach courses on conservative political thought. Lyons was an American historian who wrote about the 60s and made no secret of his liberal politics or his loathing of Reagan and post-Reagan conservatism. But he was also disturbed by how few colleges offer courses on conservatism, treating it as a "pathology" rather than a serious political tradition, and by reports from his conservative students that "most of their liberal professors blow their comments off." So he not only posted a course on American conservative thought in 2006 but also kept a diary about his teaching experience. That diary has now been published, along with some of his own essays, in *American Conservatism: Thinking It, Teaching It* (Vanderbilt University Press).

The diary is fascinating and reassuring, at least about our students. Lyons's class was split almost evenly between liberal and conservative students, who had no trouble arguing with each other. They seemed to understand what thin-skinned professors wish to forget: that intellectual engagement is not for crybabies. The students had loud debates over Reagan's legacy, Bush's foreign policy, religious freedom, abortion, even the "war on Christmas"—and nobody broke into tears or ran to the dean to complain. And the more the students argued, the more they came to respect one another. According to Lyons, students learned that that conservative guy was no longer just the predictable gun nut or religious fanatic. And the conservative students learned that they had to make real arguments, not rely on clichés and sound bites recycled from Fox News.

There were many surprises as the students examined the history of conservatism. The biggest one, for both Lyons and me, was how attractive all the students found Whittaker Chambers and how much they enjoyed his cold-war memoir, *Witness*. Who knew? If anything, the liberal students were more enthusiastic because they

saw Chambers as an idealist participating in a cosmic battle between good and evil, which is how they saw themselves. Apparently it never occurred to them that conservatives, too, could be idealists. Even Lyons caught the bug, admitting that before reading *Witness* he had considered Chambers a "degenerate," but now saw him as a "compelling if sad figure." It turns out a book can change your mind. Again, who knew?

The course was wide-ranging and gave the students a good sense of the various strands of conservatism. They read selections from Burke, Maistre, Hayek, Buckley, Ayn Rand, Irving Kristol, Allan Bloom, and many others, including Lyons's personal favorite, Peter Viereck. (Now, answer honestly, dear reader of *The Chronicle Review*: How many of these authors have you yourself read?) Lyons also invited to class a young colleague, who had recently won tenure and was rumored to be a conservative, to talk about living as an ideological minority in the university. She told them how hard it had been and why she had kept her politics hidden until she got tenure. Apparently she had had a sharp political argument with one of her senior colleagues shortly after she was hired, and he told her that unless she moderated her ideological views, she would never get tenure. Whether this was a prediction or a threat was unclear, so she took a vow of silence. Lyons was appalled.

Paul Lyons clearly loved his students and must have been a wonderful teacher. We should be grateful for his modest book, which has lessons for everyone. It reminds liberal academics of just how narrow-minded and conservative (in the nonpolitical sense) they are in their hiring and teaching, and how much they have to learn if they want to understand the political world we live in.

There are lessons for conservatives, too. Anti-intellectualism has always dogged conservative tradition (you betcha!), and figures like David Horowitz, who stoke the hysteria, only contribute to the dumbing down. Hopped up on Fox News, too many young conservatives have become ignorant of the conservative intellectual tradition and incapable of engaging civilly with their adversaries. The truth is that a former student of Paul Lyons probably has a greater chance of becoming a serious conservative thinker than a follower of Horowitz does.

So, in the end, I give my ex-conservative blessing to the Center for the Comparative Study of Right-Wing Movements and wish it a long life. If nothing else, it will get professors and students to discuss ideas and read books that until now have been relegated to the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*. That's a start. And who knows,

maybe Berkeley will even begin hiring conservative professors, if only to preserve its reputation as "the birthplace of transformative social movements."

Mark Lilla is a professor of humanities at Columbia University.

Copyright 2009. All Rights reserved

The Chronicle of Higher Education 1255 Twenty-Third St, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037