

The New York Times

Can I Go to Great Books Camp?

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December 3, 2016

Kate Havard is taking a break from American conservatism. “I’m not sure what’s happening with my party right now,” she said from Jerusalem, where she is studying Hebrew. “I need a timeout.” When she returns to her job in Washington at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, she’ll seek refuge among a small group of young conservatives who believe that studying the history of ideas helps them keep Donald J. Trump in perspective.

Ms. Havard, 26, said that before she left for Israel, “we’d get together once a week to have a political philosophy study group,” to discuss ancient authors like Xenophon instead of bashing Obamacare. Studying the deep roots of “conservative principles” helps allay the fear “that just because there’s a politician ascendant who totally disregards these things, that means the end of the conservative movement,” she told me. “You have to be hopeful.”

A small but growing number of young conservatives see themselves not only as engaged citizens, but as guardians of an ancient intellectual tradition. The members of Ms. Havard’s group were alumni of a seven-week crashcourse in political theory offered by the Hertog Foundation, the family foundation of the Wall Street financier Roger Hertog.

Attendees discuss authors like Aristotle, James Madison and Leo Strauss and hear lectures by scholars and policy experts. “Our curriculum represents what we think ought to be a high-level introduction to politics, one you rarely find in any political science department,” Peter Berkowitz, the program’s dean, told me.

The Hertog course is one of more than a dozen similar seminars sponsored by conservative and libertarian organizations around the country. Some last for months, others just a few days. Some recruit older participants, but most target college students and 20-somethings.

The syllabuses and faculty range from say, the secular Jewish milieu of Hertog to the libertarian Cato Institute to the Christian traditionalism of the John Jay Institute. But all these programs seek to correct the defects they see in mainstream higher education by stressing principles over pluralism, immersing students in the wisdom of old books and encouraging them to apply that wisdom to contemporary politics.

Liberals have their own activist workshops and reading groups, but these rarely instruct students in an intellectual tradition, a centuries-long canon of political philosophy. Why have philosophical summer schools become a vibrant subculture on the right, but only a feeble presence on the left? The disparity underscores a divide between conservatives and liberals over the best way to teach young people — and, among liberals, a certain squeamishness about the history of ideas.

Liberals, however, can't afford to dismiss Great Books as tools of white supremacy, or to disdain ideological training as the sort of unsavory thing that only conservatives and communists do. These are powerful tools for preparing the next generation of activists to succeed in the bewildering ideological landscape of the country that just elected Mr. Trump.

Since Brittany Corona graduated from Colorado Christian University in 2012, she has enrolled in several conservative study programs — the John Jay Institute's Fellows Program, the Claremont Institute's Publius Fellowship and the Young Conservatives Coalition Fellowship — and has attended conferences hosted by the Liberty Fund. All helped her see that “you can engage with the left in an academic way, to understand the roots of philosophical differences,” she told me. “So much of the problem with Fox and MSNBC is that everyone is talking past each other, and they don't understand their own philosophical positions.”

At the John Jay Institute's semester-long residential program, Ms. Corona lived with other fellows in a mansion outside Philadelphia, wrote papers every night, and wore a black academic robe to class (something the institute no longer requires). Fellows hosted dinners and teas for visiting scholars, politicians and businessmen. “The idea is that there is a way to restore mores and culture, how you comport yourself and offer hospitality and community,” she said.

The appeal here is aesthetic and psychological, not just intellectual. This is an embellished recreation of college life before the rise of the modern university in the mid-19th century — presumably without the fines for swearing or playing cards, student duels or frequent riots over inedible dining-hall food.

While other programs are not so all-consuming, they, too, whisk participants away from the dozing herds that fill university lecture halls and seat them at seminar tables with scholars and politicians. Most are free; some even come with a stipend. Acceptance means joining an elite vanguard, what the American Enterprise Institute calls “the next generation of leaders” or “a selective group of promising young conservatives,” as the Claremont Institute puts it.

These are safe spaces for conservatives who think little has changed since William F. Buckley scorned the “ne plus ultra relativism, idiot nihilism” and “hoax of academic freedom” at Yale in the 1950s. Participants pride themselves on civil disagreement — which is easy when there are rarely any liberals in the room.

Instead of mocking conservatives' ideological echo chambers and self-regarding fantasies, progressives should learn from them. For one thing, higher education should include a bit of self-regarding fantasy. It allows 20-year-olds to turn off their phones, try on the ideas of civilization's greatest minds, and practice interacting as adults. (Academic gowns aren't such a silly idea, either: They are a great equalizer. One may be a prince or a pauper underneath.)

At many universities, those “liberal professors” — whose nefarious influence these programs claim to counteract — hardly have time to indoctrinate unsuspecting undergraduates. They're too busy taking attendance in class, policing students' use of digital toys and fending off complaints about next week's outrageous assignment: a book (yes, read the whole thing!). We are witnessing the gradual high schoolization of the university.

These conservative seminars make an enormous impact simply by taking students seriously. “They're not at the children's table,” said Tom Palmer, who directs Cato University, a program

that mixes undergraduates with midcareer professionals and retirees. “No one pinches their cheeks and tells them how cute they are.”

There is another insight here: the power of teaching the canon. Most of these programs conceive of the canon far too narrowly, but the canon is an elite debating society that anyone can join. It shows students that the struggle for freedom and justice began long before the 1960s, and that this deep history lurks beneath today’s policy debates.

Unfortunately, at most universities, studying political philosophy has become a form of countercultural rebellion, a discipline marginalized by courses in supposedly practical subjects like business and communications. Campus activists may learn organizing strategies and the argot of identity politics, but few study the history of their own ideas.

A few years ago John Halpin, a fellow at the Center for American Progress, started the Progressive Studies Program. His reading list ran from early Progressive reformers to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Port Huron Statement on to President Obama’s Nobel acceptance speech. But he could afford to bring students together for only a day or two. Soon his resources dried up altogether. “It’s hard to get long-term funding for ideological training of this sort” from liberal donors, he told me. “We get a lot more support for demographic work.”

It’s not just the reek of dead white men that puts them off. In the spirit of the New Deal and the Great Society, many progressives think of themselves as empiricists, experimenters who follow the evidence wherever it leads. The left is “anti-philosophical, not as committed to the application of deductive philosophical ideas,” Mr. Halpin said. “If you look at the history of populism, progressivism and the New Deal, you see this level of experimentation and the social science mentality that denies there are foundations.”

Yet for all its relativism and wonkishness, the progressive tradition grew from firm ideological commitments: a faith in human equality and empathy; the rule of law; the scientific method. Progressives can find kindred spirits among classic conservative thinkers: Adam Smith on moral sentiments, Edmund Burke’s critique of imperial power. You can’t fully understand the theology of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. without grasping Augustine’s doctrine of original sin. But few young progressives read these authors. The hyperspecialized, careerist ethos of mainstream universities has served them just as poorly as it has conservatives.

If the Trump administration does what Mr. Trump has promised to do, it will smash conservative orthodoxies like free trade and the evils of government spending. It will embrace primitive nationalism over humanitarian ethics. Its enemies, conservative and liberal, will find themselves having to make principled cases for positions they thought were settled long ago.

“We’re in trouble,” Mr. Halpin said. “Large numbers of Americans don’t buy the underpinnings of the two major parties right now.” The paradox of the anti-ideological election of 2016 is that ideology is now more important than ever.