

Breakdown in the Academy

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Peter Berkowitz on *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* by Louis Menand

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Louis Menand. *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University*. W.W. Norton & Company. 192 pages. \$24.95

The traditional aim of liberal education is the formation of individuals fit for freedom. Accordingly, liberal education has traditionally been particularly at home, indeed occupies a place of honor, in a liberal democracy, whose aim is to secure freedom for all its citizens. In the United States, the government recognizes its interest in liberally educated men and women by maintaining public universities, providing substantial tax exemptions for private colleges and universities, and by offering generous student loans and grants for both. While liberal education is not for everybody, the American system encourages those likely to occupy positions of preeminence and power to develop, before they pursue professional training, free and well-furnished minds.

As traditionally understood, liberal education fulfills its political mission by avoiding partisan politics. Indeed, by introducing students to the main bodies of human learning and to the cultural treasures of their own civilization and other civilizations, by refining students' powers of inquiry, analysis, and criticism, and by equipping students to think responsibly and for themselves, liberal education lays a claim to transcending politics.

To be sure, liberal education never transcends politics altogether, and not just because it is a perennial challenge for teachers and scholars to set aside their political predilections and pursue knowledge impartially. Particularly when it lives up to its own ideal, liberal education can't help but cultivate a special interest in individual freedom and a devotion to the ideas and institutions that support it. Valuable for its own sake, liberal education is also a capstone to the education for citizenship in a liberal democracy. By the same token, when it fails to live up to its own ideal, liberal education puts the liberal democracies that fund and protect it at risk, sending out into the world young men and women who are inclined to confuse the articulate restatement of their preferences and prejudices for reasoned argument, mistake trash for art and art for trash, neglect freedom's material and moral preconditions, miss the significance of contemporary events because they are unable to place them in historical context, and veer this way and that in conformity to the vagaries of public opinion.

Louis Menand recognizes that our colleges and universities are in a variety of ways betraying liberal education's promise. But he is not especially troubled by their condition or the consequences for the nation, in part because he does not adequately appreciate the

traditional dimensions of liberal education's promise.

A professor of English at Harvard University, a staff writer for the New Yorker, and author of *The Metaphysical Club*, a book about the history of pragmatism which was awarded the 2002 Pulitzer Prize in history, Menand provides a relaxed and supple analysis of the contemporary American university. Writing "as a historian," he focuses on the "backstory" of the social and economic forces that have shaped it. Notwithstanding his role as co-chair of the Task Force on General Education at Harvard — following a multi-year review, the task force, to whose members he dedicates his book, recently revamped Harvard's undergraduate core curriculum to great fanfare but with little more than cosmetic changes — he shuns the role of a "prescriptivist" in his book and only touches briefly and diffidently on "what higher education might be like if academics thought of their business differently."

That higher education should think of itself as a business is one of Menand's chief prescriptions. In his account, higher education in America is like a major industry whose golden era may be behind it but which, with proper appreciation of changing times and a few tweaks here and there, can continue to produce a useful and admired product. By treating the university as a business, and calling attention to some of the incentive structures built into faculty hiring, promotion, and tenuring as well as graduate student training and socialization into the profession, Menand succeeds in illuminating corners of academic life typically overlooked by academics themselves, not least by professors in the proliferating university programs and centers devoted to ethics and the professions which, for all their interest in the ethics of law, medicine, business, and journalism, somehow can't be stirred to explore the professional ethics of scholarship, teaching, and university governance.

At the same time, by focusing on social and economic forces and reducing the university to a business, Menand loses track of what distinguishes it. Higher education in America, as in any endeavor in which tens of billions of dollars are at stake, is certainly subject to formidable economic forces and powerful marketplace pressures. Yet the unusual good that liberal education in particular seeks to produce — men and women educated for freedom — sets it apart from those profit-maximizing activities that most people associate with the word business. Indeed, the university is indissolubly bound up with ideas about the meaning and purpose of individual freedom and the place of education in a liberal democracy. Menand's elision of liberal education's moral and political dimension certainly contributes to the calm and good cheer in which he writes about the state of higher education. But it warps his portrait of the university and limits the usefulness of his analysis.

"Knowledge," Menand asserts in the opening line of his book, "is our most important business." Everywhere you look — from making money, to gaining status and power, to cultivating manners and mores — knowledge is indeed critical. And though he doesn't pursue the implications, he takes notice of the liberal and democratic spirit in which we think about knowledge: "As a society, Americans are committed to the principle that the production of knowledge should be uninhibited and access to it should be universal." Accordingly, as a

society we invest heavily in higher education. In keeping with his reduction of education to business but in conflict with his recognition of the liberal and democratic lens through which Americans tend to view it, Menand declares that the return on our investment “is simply the production and dissemination of knowledge.”

As Menand sees it, one big problem, or one big cause of problems, in America’s vast empire of advanced education — “There are more than 4,000 institutions of higher learning in the United States, more than 18 million students, and more than 1 million faculty members” — is that faculty are too conservative. He does not mean that professors are conservative in the partisan political sense — he cites data that demonstrate that a substantial majority of today’s professors are left of center — but rather in the professional sense that they seek to preserve their discipline’s established ways and in the vulgar sense that they selfishly seek to protect their entrenched privilege. While eager to impose dramatic reforms on the rest of society, professors, he argues, demonstrate a decided preference for maintaining the status quo inside the university.

Contrary to Menand, conservatism, in the professional sense in which he intends it, is not a word that well describes faculty conduct in the post-1960s period in which he is particularly interested. Certainly many faculty members in the vulgar sense of conservatism have placed the protection of their narrow interests and the promotion of their political agendas ahead of the university’s larger interest in liberal education. This, however, has required them to undertake substantial changes at the university. And they have succeeded. Over the last 40 years, faculty have cooperated with administrators to gut academic requirements, institute speech codes and eviscerate due process protections in grievance procedures and disciplinary hearings, and greatly increase the number of administrators and expand their supervision of race relations and students’ sex lives. Against this tide of transformations, the university’s institutional structure offered little resistance. Moreover, today’s faculty refrain from reform not merely to protect their prerogatives and privileges but because they believe that the dramatic changes made in recent decades advance the progressive political goals to which they are devoted.

Menand seeks “to answer four questions about American higher education today.” And excellent questions they are:

Why is it so hard to institute a general education curriculum? Why did the humanities disciplines undergo a crisis of legitimation? Why has “interdisciplinarity” become a magic word? And why do professors all tend to have the same politics?

In keeping with his commitment to restrict his analysis to impersonal institutional and historical forces, he contends that

these issues are all fundamentally systemic — they arise from the way in which institutions of higher education sustain and reproduce themselves — and the most significant fact about American higher education as a system is that it is one hundred years old.

True, institutional developments launched 100 years ago of which Menand writes continue to shape the structure of higher education in America. But Menand skews his account by overlooking the impact that changing ideas about knowledge, freedom, and the university's mission over the last 40 years have had on university governance and liberal education and by neglecting the traditional understanding of liberal education which has roots that extend more than 100 years into the past and which go beyond the peculiarities of the American experience.

Consider Menand's examination of why it is hard to institute a general education requirement. He observes that "what the faculty chooses to require of everyone, is a reflection of its overall educational philosophy, even when the faculty chooses to require nothing." And he recognizes that neither the more common distribution model, which requires students to choose from each of the main divisions — the humanities, social sciences, and sciences — any two or three regularly offered departmental courses, nor the other major model, the core curriculum, which obliges students to take specially designed classes that reflect the faculty's views about basic knowledge, can claim much success. There are notable exceptions, such as Columbia's two-year great books sequence, which is mandatory for all undergraduates, and Yale's Directed Studies program, which enrolls a small, carefully selected group of freshman. But for the most part, general education programs at elite universities and elsewhere, certainly at Harvard (where I taught in the 1990s), tend to be regarded by students as incoherent or lax or both. Interestingly, Menand thinks that students are largely right. And he seeks to show that our professors' failure to craft coherent and compelling general education requirements does indeed stem from their overall education philosophy. However, contrary to conservative critics, that philosophy does not consist of novel and dubious ideas, contends Menand, but rather reflects professors' longstanding, high-minded, and strongly-felt determination to keep liberal education pure of practical considerations.

He traces this concern with purity to 1869, when Charles Eliot became president of Harvard University. As part of his effort to professionalize professional and graduate education, Eliot made undergraduate or liberal education a prerequisite. This allowed professional and graduate schools to focus on practical training, and permitted liberal education to concentrate on the teaching of knowledge for its own sake. Owing to Harvard's influence, the identification of liberal education with the disinterested pursuit and transmission of knowledge spread through higher education in America. According to Menand — though contrary to what he observes at several other stages of his argument — professors are still trained in this spirit and still resist the subordination of teaching and scholarship to utilitarian calculations of any sort.

So it is understandable, Menand suggests, that they have been halfhearted in support of general education requirements, which arose in the 20th century, he shows, to serve very practical interests. Columbia and Harvard were leaders. At Columbia, the earliest version of Literature Humanities (Lit Hum), a yearlong survey of Western literature required of all freshmen, was first taught in 1920; its original aim was to provide students who were the children of immigrants with a common culture. Columbia's other famous core course, Contemporary Civilization (cc), a yearlong survey of Western moral and political thought required of all sophomores, descends from a class developed during World War I called War Aims, the explicit purpose of which was to present and defend American and Allied civilization.

Harvard began to fashion its first general education requirement during World War II. According to its 1945 report, *General Education in a Free Society*, the challenge was to better acquaint students with the enduring ideas that shaped and distinguished America, provide in the classroom a "binding experience," and so make students better citizens and more able to resist totalitarianism's lure. It required all students to take a great books course in the humanities, a great books course in the social sciences, and a course in the natural sciences. Harvard dropped its general education curriculum in the mid-1960s and replaced it in the late 1970s with the inaptly named Core Curriculum, which renounced the goal of teaching students a core or common body of knowledge, and instead sought to expose students to a variety of methods of inquiry. In 2007, the faculty approved the new general education program proposed by the task force Menand co-chaired. It too, like the Core Curriculum it replaced, renounced the idea of a core or common body of knowledge. Also like the Core Curriculum it seeks to be relevant to students' life beyond college. In contrast to the core, it aims to promote interdisciplinary study by requiring students to take one course in each of eight specially constructed categories that cut across traditional academic departments.

These general education requirements, and the numerous variations at college and universities across the country, present for professors, according to Menand, a conflict with their professional quest for knowledge for its own sake. While he regards it as mistaken for professors to suppose that lack of practical benefits is a defining feature of disinterested knowledge, he contends that understanding the grip of this mistake on the academic mind goes a long way to explaining the inability of faculties over the course of many decades to construct coherent and compelling general education requirements.

Correcting the mistake, he believes, is crucial to winning faculty support for improving general education programs. The correction, Menand counsels, does not consist in abandoning attachment to disinterested historical and theoretical knowledge but in developing a better appreciation of its practical benefits. Such knowledge frees minds, he argues, by exposing the arbitrariness of common assumptions and inherited arrangements. And study of law, business, economics, architecture, education, engineering, health, and technology from a historical and theoretical point of view can shed light on "matters that

everyone has to deal with in life, and knowing something about them is important to being able to participate effectively in the political process.” Concerning the benefits, practical or theoretical, of knowledge of the history of the West, the principles of American government, great literary works, leading ideas about morals and politics, the variety of world religions, and the study of foreign languages, he says little.

Although his restrained endorsement of the utility of disinterested knowledge is a step in the right direction, Menand’s conveniently truncated history passes by the deeper roots in the very idea of liberal education of a general education requirement. It also fails to address the most powerful causes of professors’ repudiation of it.

According to Menand, “General education is not a ghost from the past. It is a twentieth-century phenomenon, and it is, in some respects, the most modern part of the modern university.” Actually, general education has a venerable history. What is novel in the last 100 years or so is the idea that general education can be hived off from the rest of liberal education. Had Menand pursued the history of liberal education more assiduously, had he consulted such classic writings on the mission of the university as John Stuart Mill’s Inaugural Address to students in his capacity as rector of St. Andrews University in 1867, or John Henry Newman’s *The Idea of a University* (1852 and 1858), or Thomas Jefferson’s thoughts on the importance of higher education and the contribution that the University of Virginia would make to the republic, he would have been reminded that liberal education is general education. Its traditional aim has been to provide students with a solid grounding in the chief areas of human learning and to cultivate the virtues of reasoned inquiry. And it has traditionally prized such knowledge and such virtues both for their own sake and because they prepare students to become self-governing citizens.

Study of law, business, economics, architecture, education, engineering, health, and technology from a historical and theoretical point of view can shed light on “matters that everyone has to deal with in life . . .”

Moreover, Menand provides no empirical evidence, systematic or anecdotal, to sustain his contention that the chief obstacle to instituting a general education requirement is professors’ desire to keep their pursuit of knowledge pure. Candid conversations with his colleagues at Harvard and beyond the banks of the Charles River would reveal, I believe, that other and quite different factors present more salient obstacles to general education at Harvard and throughout the nation.

For starters, significant numbers of professors in the humanities and social sciences believe that teaching and scholarship ought not be for their own sake but should serve the practical end of promoting social justice — as Menand himself observes when he considers the popular appeal of interdisciplinary studies. Usually the favored vision of social justice purports to be universal and uncontroversial but in fact embodies a debatable interpretation of history and a progressive political agenda. In addition, today’s faculty members tend to

assign a low priority to teaching and, if they must be in the classroom, prefer to teach classes that concentrate on their area of hyper-specialization. And faculty members are eager to show solicitude for students' desire to pick their own classes and construct their own curricula because administrations dole out faculty positions to departments based on overall enrollments, and faculty members believe that by watering down or eliminating requirements they will draw students and thereby increase faculty positions. However, the most important factor conspiring against a solid and sustainable general education requirement is rooted in educational philosophy but has nothing to do with keeping teaching and learning pure of practical benefits: Many professors doubt or deny that there is any desirable breadth of learning or basic knowledge that it is the university's job to teach.

Not that professors come right out and say that, at least in the context of discussions of curricular reform. Menand reports that "Academics are not often called upon to articulate a philosophy of higher education, so whatever differences they may have about the ultimate purpose of what they do when they teach undergraduates are rarely on the table." Oddly, this state of affairs does not strike him as strange or alarming. To be sure, other professions don't depend on theoretical accounts of their mission. Plumbers don't need a philosophy of water and pipes to fix faucets, and pilots don't need a theory of flying to get airplanes safely to their destination. But a philosophy of education, one that involves a reasoned appreciation of our interest as human beings and free citizens in cultivating our minds, is crucial to constructing a coherent and compelling liberal education.

And so it goes with the other excellent questions Menand takes up. In each case, he connects interesting features of higher education's institutional history to contemporary problems in university research and teaching. And in each case his answers obscure the source and severity of the challenges that our universities face.

For example, he argues that the humanities' post-1960s crisis of legitimacy was caused in the first place by a salutary questioning of disciplinary boundaries. The entrance in significant numbers of women and minorities into the field and a similar increase of women and minorities among students was accompanied by a new interest in multiculturalism and in how scholarship and teaching could serve the less well-off, advance community, and promote citizenship. This, however, explains ferment in the humanities and not crisis. It also contradicts Menand's assertion that the university is professionally conservative. More jarring still, Menand's contention that professors are imbued with a commitment to the disinterested pursuit of knowledge cannot be squared with reliable reports from the front lines of the academic world. As Stanley Fish, distinguished literary critic, former dean at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and New York Times blogger observed last year in *Save the World on Your Own Time*, many professors have come to see inculcating correct political opinions as a vital part of their pedagogical mission. The biggest cause of the crisis of legitimacy in the humanities, however, is one on which Menand never focuses: Significant numbers of humanities professors use the classroom and their scholarship not merely to explore but to dogmatically promulgate extreme ideas that undermine the assumptions on which liberal

education rests — the West as the root of all evil, the study of foreign cultures as an act of imperial aggression that fatally distorts what it sets out to understand, human nature as a fiction and all values as relative.

Similarly, Menand argues that interdisciplinary study or “interdisciplinarity” has become fashionable because it satisfies some of the typical academic’s desire to escape the dictates of inherited forms and methods and think outside the box. He shrewdly observes, though, that interdisciplinarity has its limits: contrary to its intention, it provides a “scholarly and pedagogical ratification of disciplinarity” by suggesting not that disciplinary boundaries are arbitrary and counterproductive but that more disciplines must be brought to bear on more questions. Unfortunately, Menand allows this excellent point to distract from a much larger problem, which is that owing to the lack of a decent general education, many faculty members and graduate students today lack the grounding in languages, literature, history, economics, politics, the sciences, philosophy, and religion that, whether one or several disciplines are employed, is necessary to conduct their inquiries responsibly.

And concerning why professors all seem to have the same politics, Menand misses an opportunity. He briefly mentions several of the reasons commonly put forward at universities by left-of-center academics to explain “why academics are significantly more liberal than the rest of the population”: There is a high correlation between educational attainment and left-of-center political views; trained to question the status quo, professors are unlikely to hold conservative views, which counsel resistance to change; right-wing intellectuals have foundations and can enter politics while left-wing intellectuals have only the university; and conservatives find work in the private sector more rewarding. Perhaps it was because he found these explanations lame or internally contradictory — if left-liberals are inclined to question the status quo why don’t they question the progressive status quo on campus? — that he does not pursue them. Menand does honorably, if delicately, observe that data from a recent comprehensive survey of professors’ political views point to “the emergence of an ethos in which there is less aversion to weighing political views in evaluating merit than might have been the case thirty or forty years ago.” But he abruptly drops this promising avenue of inquiry.

The best explanation for homogeneity, he suggests, has to do with embarrassing features of graduate education. About half of humanities students never complete the Ph.D.; of those who do, half require more than nine years of study; and only about half who earn a Ph.D. obtain the tenure track teaching positions for which they originally entered graduate school. The numbers for graduate students in the social sciences are not much different. Here it would have been instructive for Menand to have undertaken a study of university incentives, as it would show, I suspect, that if professors weren’t so dependent on a plentiful supply of cheap graduate student labor to correct papers, teach sections, and do faculty research, they could eliminate the interminable-Ph.D. overnight by capping years in the program at five or six.

Instead, Menand inconclusively suggests that the astounding amount of time it takes to earn a Ph.D. along with a weak job market drive away nonconforming or conservative students. This is unsatisfying because it doesn't explain why left-liberal students would not be put off by the same off-putting factors. Nor does Menand investigate another factor explaining the dearth of conservatives in the academy, a factor made plausible by the conformity of thought and the increased propensity to permit political factors to influence decisions about merit at our universities that he himself reports. In these circumstances, it is quite possible that individuals interested in perspectives and ideas deemed conservative are systematically discouraged from university careers by confronting at every stage — undergraduate, graduate, and, for those who survive, in the faculty ranks — expressions, both subtle and flagrant, of disapproval and disgust from professors who assiduously seek to produce students and secure colleagues who reflexively affirm the approved sentiments and ideas about both methods of inquiry and partisan politics. This hypothesis, too, is subject to empirical research and skillful reporting.

Whatever the cause, Menand recognizes that intellectual and political conformity undercut our universities' ability to perform their job:

Students who go to graduate school already talk the talk and they learn to walk the walk as well. There is less ferment from the bottom than is healthy in a field of intellectual inquiry. Liberalism needs conservatism, and orthodoxy needs heterodoxy, if only in order to keep it on its toes.

The lack of sympathy for this fundamental tenet of the liberal tradition at our colleges and universities is a measure of the urgency of reform.

Reform should take into account the social and economic forces that impinge upon the university. But due attention to such forces should not distract from other and more significant forces shaping the culture of higher education and university governance. In the end, the major sources of resistance to reform are, on the part of many professors and administrators, indifference to or hostility to the principles and practice of liberal education. An effective reorganization of administration, faculty, and student incentives must be guided by the understanding that the university's responsibility is not only to produce and disseminate knowledge but also to educate for freedom.

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