

The Modern Academy's Embrace of Relativism

1989

INTRODUCTION

The Progressive and liberal revolutions against the Founding call for the replacement of politics by administration and the denial of individual natural rights in favor of the will of society and government. These massive developments require the cooperation of the universities. Thus it is fitting that Progressive Woodrow Wilson, the first President to openly attack the Founding, was a distinguished professor of political science and a president of the American Political Science Association. Both FDR's New Deal and LBJ's Great Society required the involvement of intellectuals, especially social scientists. This tendency of academics to justify radical and not just Progressive politics is particularly marked in the humanities, where outrageousness seems to know no boundaries. But at the end of the outrageousness is the sad banality of old men (and women) turning over rocks.

In 1989 the American Council of Learned Societies, which describes itself as "the preeminent representative of American scholarship in the humanities and related social sciences," published an essay entitled "Speaking for the Humanities." Six distinguished

professors of the humanities at prestigious universities defend their definition of the humanities against attacks by, among others, Allan Bloom, Lynne Cheney, and William Bennett. Beginning with the entirely sensible premise that "We should not equate truth with our own political ideology..." their plea becomes a demand for a thoroughgoing nihilism in the teaching of the humanities. They go well beyond the Progressives and Liberal rejection of natural rights and dismiss any notion of truth altogether.

Skepticism and self-examination have been an essential part of Western civilization since Socrates. But these professors transform these healthy qualities into a dogmatic skepticism that denies the possibility of real knowledge. They attack claims to "objectivity and disinterest." They maintain that "the consensus of most of the dominant theories [of today] is that all thought does, indeed, develop from particular standpoints, perspectives, interests..." In other words, there is no escaping one's biases (and there is a "consensus" about this). In fact, "A system of thought [must be] alert to the way interests generate thought and ideological

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assumptions govern the most self-evident truth...”—including, especially, that essential American self-evident truth of human equality.

“At its best, contemporary humanistic thinking does not peddle ideology, but rather attempts to sensitize us to the presence of ideology in our work, and to its capacity to delude us into promoting as universal values that in fact belong to one nation, one social class, one sect” (emphasis added). Of course if one assumes that thinking seeks “values,” then there can be no seri-

ous arguing about values, any more than there can be about tastes. The most important questions yield only various subjective answers—akin to the search for the next exotic restaurant.

The contemporary academy is a kind of hall of mirrors where vanities reflect each other. The attempt to transcend “objectivity and disinterest” leads to a soft despotism of vanities, aroused sporadically to mock the claims of free men and women.

“Speaking for the Humanities” A Statement from prominent academics

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[...]

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of modern thought, even for many humanities professors and certainly for society at large, is its challenge to the positivist ideal of objectivity and disinterest. For that ideal is at the root of modern Western thought; it has been essential to the development of science, the West’s most distinctive intellectual contribution to world culture. Many of those who attack the humanities disciplines mistakenly believe that ideal also to be at the heart of the principles that underlie democracy—the belief that members of a society can act against their own self-interest, recognizing a larger social good. For many, the ideal of objectivity and disinterest, which would seem to be concerned primarily with knowledge, is an issue of profound moral significance.

[...]

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[...]

We should not equate truth with our own political ideology. Even within that ideology there is likely to be further questioning by different groups with very different understandings of democracy. All parties believe that the truth is on their ideological side. “Objectivity” and “disinterest” are often the means by which the equation of truth and particular ideological positions can be disguised, even from those who unequivocally believe in the possibility of objectivity and disinterest.

[...]

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[...]

The full paper can be read online at http://archives.acls.org/op/7_Speaking_for_Humanities.htm.