

Educators and Bozos

By Roger Schultz

Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America, by Page Smith (N.Y.: Viking, 1990) 305 pages. Index.

Profscam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education, by Charles Sykes (N.Y.: St. Martins, 1988) 304 pp. Index. \$9.95.

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Last Christmas I had a pleasant cup of coffee at the Front Street Cafe with the proprietor, my friend Bozo (that's really what he goes by). He asked me how much work professors actually did. I told him that in addition to a 12 hour per week teaching load, I was required to prepare for classes, write quizzes and tests, correct them, grade papers and reviews, advise students, participate in faculty committees, and carry on a research and writing schedule. But Bozo wasn't impressed. I knew I had lost him from the way he kept shaking his head and muttering "only 12 hours". So I decided to try a different approach and have some fun. I pointed out that since the academic hour is only 50 minutes long, I really only taught 10 hours per week, not twelve. And I only had to do that for eight months per year, from August through April. And during those harrowing eight months, I had time off for Spring and Fall breaks and a month off a Christmas. At big state universities, I added, the professors only teach 6 hours (really 5) or 9 hours (really 7 1/2) per week. By the time I left the cafe, Bozo knew what was wrong with American higher education—nobody teaches anymore.

Charles Sykes and Page Smith concur with Bozo. Both highlight the failings of the modern university, focusing on how "research" and publishing, tenure, graduate education, and trendy curricula have destroyed teaching effectiveness. Both chronicle the institutionalized prejudices that are so inimical to academic freedom and threaten the future of education. If you have kids in college, know someone working in a university, or just like to gripe about higher education, these are books to read.

Sykes, who teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, has "fire in the belly" about this issue, and his *Profscam* is a powerful, focused, downright disturbing, but also entertaining book.

Universities, he notes, are no longer geared toward teaching. Classes are huge, professors are always on sabbatical, and when they do teach, it's only a few hours per week. Which is perhaps a good thing, since they are often lousy teachers. Sykes quotes H.L. Mencken

who noticed the penchant for dullness and obscurantism in a typical professor, whose “central aim is not to expose the truth clearly, but to exhibit his profundity—in brief, to stagger the sophomores and other professors.” Most of the actual teaching is left to Teaching Assistants and the other underlings of academia, non-tenured journeymen instructors. Professors who are committed to their students and teaching, Sykes charges, offering some depressing examples, often get run off because they make their incompetent colleagues look bad.

This bleak picture is fairly accurate, though I have a couple of qualifications. I have known excellent university teachers and scholars who truly cared about their students. Teaching Assistants in large universities, who carry a considerable portion of the teaching load, usually hold advanced degrees in their disciplines. And since they (at least the ones who speak English) know that securing a job upon graduation depends on their classroom performance, T.A.s often teach with exceptional vigor. But any student going to a major university to study under the professors who “write the books”, as one university advertisement promises, will be disappointed. They probably will never get into a class with a major professor and, if they do, will find him more concerned about writing his book than teaching.

A professor at a major midwestern university told me recently that he was required to teach two courses per semester (six hours—really five, but why quibble), but had 250 students in each course. In response to my query about reading and grading that many papers and exams, he explained that it was no trouble since he had three graduate students per class to do the paperwork. The professor was, in short, just a talking head. (This is not, however, necessarily a bad thing. Given the prevalence of leftist views among professors, we can be thankful that teaching competence is so pitifully low.)

The reason nobody teaches is that they are too concerned about publishing. Publishing guarantees tenure, promotion, professional recognition and self-esteem, and big bucks in research. A proliferation of narrowly defined, quasi-scholarly research journals in all the academic disciplines drives this new growth industry. As it turns out, nobody reads the stuff—not even the journals' editors. One clever researcher took journal articles, changed the authors' names, and resubmitted them to the journals that had published them. 92% of the editors and reviewers failed to recognize the resubmissions. The vast majority of the previously-published, resubmitted articles were refused because of “serious methodological flaws.” The real reason for rejection was that the editors did not know the reputations of the (new) authors. The publishing industry, despite claiming to have extensive, objective, impartial peer review, simply functions as a good-old-boy network which perpetuates the biases and shibboleths of academia.

Sykes also documents the ideological corruption of the university. He takes on current fads, such as political correctness and deconstruction, and describes the slant of the curricula in the humanities, social sciences, and “hard” sciences. And he describes the fate of those who dissent, from junior faculty members to editors of student newspapers, such as *The Dartmouth Review*.

While it lacks the zeal of Sykes' book, *Killing the Spirit* will be just as effective. A Ph.D.

from Harvard, emeritus professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and an award winning author, whose works include the multi-volume *People's History of America*, Page Smith is an insider, which makes his criticisms of education powerful.

Killing the Spirit is filled with horror stories which document institutional biases and serve as graphic examples of the narrow-mindedness of academia. Smith was initially denied acceptance in graduate school, for example, because Harvard professors didn't like his Dartmouth mentor, Eugene Rosenstock-Huessy. Rosenstock-Huessy had originally been booted from Harvard because wasn't 'pink' enough. Political correctness is nothing new.

Smith is clearly disgusted with this “academic fundamentalism” which denigrates teaching, encourages silly research, destroys disciplines, cozies up to the military-industrial complex, and revels in big-time sports. Higher education “has never been higher”; there are more students, more professors, more money, more research, more publications than ever before. The focus of the book is on big, elite universities which, though comprising only 25% of the colleges in the country, enroll 75% of students and are responsible for “poisoning the springs of academic freedom in the United States.”

Killing the Spirit includes a lengthy discussion of the evolution of higher education in America. Universities were rooted in the evolution of a Democratic-Secular order, the financial backing of the robber barons, the German model of education and “research”, the largess of the federal government beginning with the Morrill Acts, and the fixation with graduate education. The historical section, because of Smith's expertise, is especially strong.

Smith stresses the hidden agenda behind early higher education. Many professors, usually heretical refugees from the church, wanted to use schools as a vehicle for the social-political-economic transformation of the country. Others saw education in religious terms, as they preached the doctrine of “salvation by education”. As one zealous educator put it, “Through truth we would redeem the world. I was initiated into a new order; the order of scholars whose teaching had changed me, would change the world. This was the priesthood of my service.”

Smith warms to his topic as he moves into the Sixties. The vacuous spirit and relativism of that decade and the behavioral approach to social thought, he argues, became the *rigor mortis* of post-modernism. Smith is really an advocate of old-fashioned liberal education, and despises what he sees today. He holds to traditional, Western, liberal values, and believes that they are best taught in the warm, nurturing environment of liberal arts colleges, for which he has special affection.

He has only scorn for the sacred cows of modern universities. Ph.D.s from Harvard (Smith's alma mater) are “overrated”—all it takes is “patience”. Doctoral language requirements are foolish; they are only a genuflection in direction of German scholarship. (Smith admits he forgot his German right away) Tenure doesn't mean much. Young scholars—who need it—never have it, and it is often used to protect the incompetent.

Most interesting is Smith's irreverent attitude toward "Publish or Perish". He notes that some of his most successful works were ones that supposedly objective reviewers claimed would set the profession back "twenty years". The behind-the-scenes stories of politics in university departments, journals, and publishing houses makes for fascinating reading.

They say it is easier to smell a bad egg than to lay a good one. And that's one of the problems with Smith's book. Smith is concerned that modern education has forgotten religious and spiritual values—hence his title, "Killing the Spirit". He laments the passing of America's traditional "Christian-Classical Consciousness" and agrees with William James that we should "see all things in God, and refer all things to Him". Yet his recommendations, in "Reviving the Spirit" are amorphous and mushy. Smith hopes that there will be a "new consciousness" synthesizing "the Classical Christian (thesis) and the Secular Democratic (antithesis)", but says: "I dare not presume to say just what form this new consciousness will take. I am confident that it must include the enduring elements of both traditions, powerfully reanimated and enthusiastically reconstructed." If Smith thinks this Hegelian goblety-gook is going to revive education, he is sadly mistaken. And when this constitutes the best that a putative educational reformer can suggest, we are in big trouble.

The real problem with higher education is a dearth of the Spirit. It's true that in today's universities there is little actual teaching; on this, Sykes and Smith are right. But the real problem is more foundational. American education has forgotten its soul, and has been cut off from the spiritual legacy of its Christian heritage. That's the problem. And unless we recognize that, there will be nothing left to revive. And Bozo could have told them that.