

Review of *Dogmatic Wisdom: How the Culture Wars Divert Education and Distract America*, by Russell Jacoby, (New York: Doubleday, 1994) 235 pages, index.

By T.E. Wilder

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The problems of university education are the problems of society. The debates about multiculturalism and other aspects of the Culture Wars therefore focus at the wrong place by directing attention primarily to the universities. Even worse, these debates are concerned with only the elite schools which very few students attend. Jacoby's solution, though he will not state it so plainly, is to impose socialism on the whole society. Then the university problems will be fixed too. Jacoby, at least on the surface, is not a follower of Gramsci but a more classical socialist. He wants to change economic arrangements in order to fix the cultural superstructure. Since the design of his book is to deflect the heat from the left-wing culture warriors, however, one cannot rule out a deeper Gramscian purpose.

Jacoby assumes a false-neutral stance throughout his book. He wants to seem to be correcting both sides in the culture wars. In fact, he fundamentally agrees in two ways with the left in its assaults on the traditions of (older) liberal education. First, Jacoby supports the social result they aim at. He takes it as given that a deracinated, socialist, anti-traditional society is the proper end of all policy, including educational policy. Second, the argument of his book mainly trivializes the culture upheld by the right in the culture wars, and thus agrees with the left which trivializes it as *culture* through reductionism to matters of race, class and gender using such methods as so-called critical theory and deconstruction.

Now for a sample of his rhetoric:

I do not pretend to command a direct line to reality or to the past. I do oppose litigating over property lines when the house is on fire. In the following chapters I call attention to the fire and explain why the “culture wars” are diversionary or misleading. Conservatives, liberals, and radicals argue over which books should be taught in schools; meanwhile few books are read, and a liberal education shatters under the weight of commercialism. Faculty and students dispute which words violate the rights of which groups; meanwhile society turns increasingly violent. Psychologists preach the virtues of a

healthy self-esteem; meanwhile the world of the self—education and jobs—collapses. Citizens wrangle over multiculturalism, arguing how, when, and if diverse cultures should be studied; meanwhile the irresistible power of advertising and television converts multiculturalism into a monoculture of clothes, music, and cars. (pp. xii-xiii)

I have marked points for comment. 1) Jacoby, in fact, devotes much space to setting us straight about the past. He is interested in past cultural crusades for social ends. His insinuation is that there is nothing new or radical about what the multiculturalists and the language police at the universities are doing—it is a traditional American thing. To Jacoby there is no difference between Noah Webster and his dictionary on the one hand, and the today's university administrator who wants to promote moral licence, especially homosexual experimentation, on the other.

Despite the fact that he chastises people such as Dinesh D'Souza for concentrating on a few elite schools instead of the mass of state and community colleges which typify American higher education, Jacoby also dwells on the history of the curriculum in America's elite universities, for it is there that the significant debates and developments took place that set the patterns that now dominate all the schools.

2) It is a favorite tactic of liberals to blame conservatives for obsession with minor matters while a serious crisis threatens society. The crisis demands that conservatives should simply let the liberals (who created the crisis in the first place) have their way. In this instance Jacoby wants to argue that because education is so ineffectual, conservatives should stop opposing the conversion of the universities into propaganda machines for socialism and perversion, and instead concentrate on making them efficient propaganda machines. What reason-able person could object?

3) Notice the typical socialist hatred of commerce. If only we could stop these foolish people from freely exchanging goods and services! If only the state could control everything they did! Then there would exist the truly great society!

4) Multiculturalism does not aim at promoting a multiplicity of cultures and peoples, but at recruiting support from non-western sources for eradicating Western culture to create the monocultural anthill of androgynous socialism.

Jacoby gives us the usual liberal nonsense that, since Nixon, politics, indeed society, has been dominated by conservatives. This despite the fact that the only president who approached conservatism, namely Ronald Reagan, was blocked in most of what he wanted to do, especially in education, and the left has continued to dominate Congress, most state governments, the large cities, the major news media, and educational institutions. For Jacoby, though, anything not socialist is conservative. Very little of what he names as conservative really is. It is impossible to say whether this is dishonesty, or simply typical liberal ignorance and arrogance. This stance lets him blame conservatives for all manner of liberal things.

Everything Jacoby advocates is based on simplistic and unquestioning acceptance of liberal platitudes. Two examples will illustrate this.

In *Milliken v. Bradley* the Supreme Court overruled a district court's desegregation order that had directed Detroit to integrate by including the largely white suburbs outside city limits. "If only one of the concurring justices had accepted the opinions of the four dissenting judges ...an entire generation of black children in such cities as East Orange, Paterson, Detroit and East St. Louis might have had an opportunity for very different adult lives."¹

If only blacks could continue to persecute the whites they have driven from the cities they took over, how much richer their lives would be! How wicked of the conservatives to make blacks responsible for their own lives! The second example is Jacoby's faith in throwing money at problems and his belief in education as a panacea.

Across the nation the byword is "cutbacks": fewer teachers, courses, and funds. I visited East Los Angeles Community College, ...increasingly thousands of students cannot enroll in the courses they want and need, and they cannot afford to go elsewhere. "What do you think happens to the students we turn away?" asked an administrator. She answered her own question. "They end up on the streets, and then in jail. It would be cheaper to expand the college than the jails." (p. 193)

For Jacoby, the main reason students "graduate without having read John Locke, Adam Smith, or Thomas Jefferson" is not that they are denied the opportunity by Marxist professors, but because of the rise of business and technical programs in universities. "Of the million-odd bachelor's degrees awarded in 1991, some 250,000 were conferred in business, compared with 7,300 in philosophy and religion and 12,000 in foreign languages. These numbers speak volumes about liberal education today, but no-nonsense conservative critics are oblivious." (p. 9) What Jacoby does not emphasize is that all of these students must go through general education requirements that are supposed to give them some experience with major representative works and ideas of their culture. Increasingly this means running the gauntlet of Marxist or nihilist professors who hate western culture. The universities take public money with the claim that they offer necessary education and skills to the youth, then they make subjection to indoctrination the price of access to the professional training the students want as a basis for their careers. That this is the case does not perturb Jacoby, nor does he bother to consider by what right the universities do this.

Jacoby devotes much space to a consideration of the violations of free speech and academic freedom perpetrated by the left and reported by neo-con media. (He is not interested in digging up more examples.) He finds these to be rare and fairly minor. One

1 P. xv. He is quoting Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1992) p. 202.

interesting point is that he claims that he could only find speech codes (which penalize politically incorrect speech) on elite campuses and only in universities which possessed law schools. (This may well be true. At the University of Minnesota, of all the colleges the law school puts the heaviest ideological pressure on students. The law professors believe that lawyers wield enormous social power, and they want this power to be available in the future only to the left.)

Compared to the minor infractions of the left, in some cases hardly more than ostracism, he cites the McCarthyism of the days conservatives held power. “McCarthyism was orchestrated from above by government officials and agencies with fairly wide popular support. It had at its beck and call the full powers of government: investigators, subpoenas, state police, jail, and the electric chair. It used them all.” (p. 34) Of course it was old-fashioned liberals not conservatives that ran the universities in the 1940s and 1950s, and they were not frying Marxist professors for teaching the wrong thing in class. Naturally, if you engaged in espionage and treason, passing nuclear secrets to the Soviets, that was another matter. Jacoby apparently thinks these pursuits are protected by academic freedom. Note also the liberal moral equivalence argument. Engaging in propaganda to corrupt the youth in your charge with a view to erecting a totalitarian, genocidal government is no worse a crime than teaching Shakespeare. Thus those who persecuted the former are just as guilty as those who persecute the latter—more so, as the persecution was more severe.

The left does not have to engage in much persecution as long as it controls the curriculum. At the University of Minnesota, at the same time as the speech codes were being beaten back, the administration put into place the new even more politicized curriculum. “All undergraduate students will be required to meet diversified core requirements, consisting of courses in physical and biological sciences, history and social sciences, arts and humanities, and mathematical thinking. In addition, students must study 'designated themes of liberal education', which complement the diversified core curriculum. The themes are cultural diversity, international perspectives, environment, and citizenship and public ethics. Each theme 'focuses on an issue of compelling importance to the nation and the world.'” (*The Record*, Vol. 18, No. 2) The students *may* take elective courses in their cultural heritage within the limitations of what is offered in on a secular campus, and these *may* be taught by scholars, not ideologues. But all students *must* undergo ideological indoctrination.

This is typical of what colleges across the country are doing. It is Jacoby's self-appointed task to distract us from this development and its significance.