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DINESH D'SOUZA: *ILLIBERAL EDUCATION: THE POLITICS OF
RACE AND SEX ON CAMPUS.*

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Reform in higher education is not the exclusive province of countries formerly within the sphere of the former Soviet Union. In the United States reform-minded, even revolutionary, changes are well underway, perhaps already imbedded in, some universities. In fact, such changes are a part of the fabric of academic life in elite American universities, universities which reformers in central and Eastern Europe might be inclined to employ as models for carrying out their own agendas for change in higher education. Harvard, Stanford, Duke, Michigan, Yale, and the University of California at Berkeley. All are among the elite of the elite universities in the United States. Any educational reformer in Hungary, Poland, or Czechoslovakia could be excused for being automatically tempted to look to them for academic leadership. But if Dinesh D'Souza is even partially correct, such temptations ought to be universally resisted.

A native of India and a 1983 graduate of Dartmouth College, D'Souza is not far removed from his days as an American undergraduate. Despite his relative youth, he has already cultivated a deep interest in the condition of higher education in the United States—and a reputation for clear thinking in some very muddy ideological waters.

In prose that belies his evidence D'Souza reveals what ideology has wrought in the name of what was once “liberal education.” Calmly,

rationality, and yet without understatement, he assumes the pose of a Paul Revere in the past tense and without exclamation points: "The barbarians have arrived, the barbarians have arrived," he repeats and repeats.

And just who are these barbarians? Some are young. Others are not so young. Some wear T-shirts and angry faces. Others disguise themselves behind three-piece suits and nervous, if smiling, faces. Some occupy entire buildings. Others occupy over-sized desks. Some do not know any better; others should. And all claim to be well-intentioned to a fault.

The result of all these good intentions is an unspoken—and unlikely—alliance between highly organized cadres of self-styled campus "activists" and usually reactive ad hoc committees of university faculty and administrators, more than a few of whom were once themselves campus "activists" of another era, specifically the 1960s.

D'Souza finds no conspiracy in any of this. Thankfully, his mind refuses to work that way. But he does find policies in place with which he is in fundamental disagreement, as well as a lot of irony sprouting among the hardy ivy.

It is true that the American academy has become over-populated with "tenured radicals" (to borrow from the title of a recent book on the state of American higher education). It is also true that these radicals operate on the basis of political agendas that extend well beyond the walls of American universities. And it is finally the case that many of these radicals are either left-over from the 1960s or desire to revive some version of radicalism, whether Marxist, feminist or otherwise, for the 1990s.

In an irony that extends beyond D'Souza's purposes, it is both maddening and laughable to note that Marxism, having been expelled from the east, has found a haven in the academies of the west. If for no other reason than that, educational reformers in what was once the Soviet sphere ought to look elsewhere for models of openness and true intellectual exploration and diversity.

In D'Souza's field of vision it is both ironic and menacing that first amendment freedoms do not draw the radicals of the 1990s to the barricades with the same fervor that animated the radicals of the 1960s. Nearly thirty years ago California-Berkeley graduate student Mario Savio

and others of similar persuasion may have defined freedom of speech to mean the right to “talk dirty” in public. But they also advertised themselves as individuals who were quite seriously interested in the free and open exchange of ideas. At least that seemed to be the case when the “Free Speech Movement” was young and innocent—and (by today’s radical standards) foolish.

There will surely be conservatives (in the American sense of that term, meaning traditionalists and capitalists of all varieties, rather than unrepentant Marxists of the erstwhile Soviet variety), who will read this book, shudder at its contents, and agree with both its perspective and its program for reform. Those same conservatives, if that had at least reached adulthood and conservatism in time to, say, choose between Kennedy and Nixon, probably condemned the “Free Speech Movement” in its infancy. Now, however, they can lust for the “good old days” when American radicals were naïve enough to actually believe in the market place of ideas.

No doubt Dinesh D’Souza will be accused of pursuing a political—and conservative—agenda of his own. A former editor of the notorious (by leftist standards) *Dartmouth Review*, D’Souza is at least a “fellow traveler,” if not a “card-carrying” member of the American conservative movement. But *Illiberal Education* is not a latter-day Popular Front manifesto for the American right. He realizes that the battle he has entered into will inevitably be political, but his ultimate goal is the de-politicization of the American university. In that sense, his agenda is very similar to that of educational reformers in Central and Eastern Europe.

Having been denied power virtually anywhere else in American society, the left, especially the hard left, has taken refuge in the university. Having been willing to meet the enemy on his own ground, D’Souza has the decency—and the wit—to give his enemies a fair hearing—and sufficient rope with which to hang themselves.

His plan of action was to interview ordinary students and activists students, apolitical faculty and highly political faculty, weak-kneed administrators, well-intentioned administrators, and blatantly political administrators. Representatives from each category are provided enough printed space in which to state, unadorned, his or her case. D’Souza offers

probing questions and telling rejoinders, but no advocate of “illiberal education” should have reason to feel that his or her views were not liberally and fairly (and fatally?) aired.

The issues that D’Souza explores can be grouped as follows: the baneful effects of affirmative action admissions policies (at Berkeley), the battles over a core curriculum (at Stanford), efforts to limit on campus free speech (at Michigan), varieties of racism (at Michigan and Howard Universities), the impact of politicized faculty hiring (at Duke), and what he calls the “tyranny of the minority” (at Harvard).

Each chapter opens with an episode and expands to a history of the policy under review. Included within the history is a defense of the policy (in the words of its defenders) and a critique of the same (either by D’Souza or by an inhabitant of the academy, usually an undergraduate who willing to talk honestly with him, occasionally a similarly persuaded faculty member, and infrequently an incautious administrator).

For example, one Yat-pang Au was rejected for admission to the Berkeley class of 1991, despite test scores which placed him in the 98th percentile nationally and which ranked him higher than fifty percent of those freshmen who did manage to gain admission to Berkeley in the fall of 1987. What was the problem? Questionable recommendations? No. A dearth of extra-curricular activities or community service in his high school portfolio? No. The problem was race. Yat-pang Au was denied admission to the University of California-Berkeley because he is an Asian-American.

Now Berkeley is the jewel of the California state system. Historically, only excellent students qualify for admission. “Merit” is an abused term in American society, but Berkeley had always taken pride in adhering to the principle of merit admission. It still claims to do so, but “merit” at Berkeley today has a slightly different meaning and a thoroughly different result. Under the leadership of Chancellor Ira Heyman the university decided to use merit criteria to measure differences in academic preparation and test scores only *within* racial groups.

In sum, Au was a victim of an unpublicized, but nonetheless real, affirmative action quota system. Once again irony, or, in D’Souza’s view, “unjust irony,” intrudes. Quotas were initially established to increase the

number of blacks and Hispanics at Berkeley. But those same quotas have in effect restricted the number of Asian-Americans who are able to enter the university. Intended as instruments of inclusion, quotas at Berkeley have functioned as “instruments of exclusion.”

When confronted with evidence of discrimination (in a law suit brought by the Au family) Berkeley officials initially denied allegations about quotas. After nearly two years of dissembling Chancellor Heyman admitted to committing the ultimate American political sin: “insensitivity.” But he refused, no doubt in the name of sensitivity, to abandon the official university goal of racially proportional (to the general California population) representation in the Berkeley student body.

The individual story of Yat-pang Au did have a happy ending. He was admitted to the junior class in the fall of 1989, but only after great political and legal pressure from the Asian-American community of California.

However, too often there is no happy ending for the intended beneficiaries of affirmative action. In their scramble to recruit sufficient numbers of blacks and Hispanics, institutions such as Berkeley are forced to admit some students who are not prepared to compete with many of their classmates, especially those Asians and whites who ranked *even higher* than young Au. The result is a tragically high dropout rate among black and Hispanic students who are bright and ambitious, but who, for whatever reason, who were not ready for Berkeley-level competition and who would have been better served by attending a less demanding university.

Of course, Berkeley comes equipped with a full complement of remedial programs to assist students in need. But this often compounds the problem, notes D’Souza. Time invested in “catch-up” education is time away from the work at hand. As a result, such students often end up even further behind, thereby increasing their chances of failure rather than of success.

Despite the obvious deficiencies of affirmative action, Berkeley-style, D’Souza was easily able to find proponents of the system. One Melanie Lewis, a “vivacious” black undergraduate (with test scores markedly lower than Au’s) supports preferential treatment for blacks: “I am oppressed, I will always be oppressed. Yes, I came from a good family and an economically stable background. But my race was still deprived, and that will always live

with me.” Secure in her status as a permanent victim of American white racism, Lewis readily dismissed the plight of Yat-pang Au: “If I were him I wouldn’t want to come here. I wouldn’t fight so hard to go somewhere that didn’t want me.”

When reminded of the experience of James Meredith, who in 1962 required a panoply of U.S. federal marshals to secure his admission to a University of Mississippi “that didn’t want” him, Lewis praised the fortitude of Meredith, but missed the irony. In truth, James Meredith and Yat-pang Au are genuine victims of different versions of American racism. Melanie Lewis is not. In sum, D’Souza sees her as a living, if “unwitting” argument against affirmative action: because Lewis is convinced that she will always be oppressed, her socioeconomic background notwithstanding, no amount of preferential treatment could possibly benefit her—or relieve her of her self-imposed victimhood.

Despite the Sisyphean nature of their task, Berkeley administrators seem undaunted. One Bud Travers, a “dapper middle-aged senior official” and one of the “main architects of its admissions policies,” is not ready to surrender to fairness—and reality: certain minorities are entitled to preferential treatment because “Berkeley is a state school, and must serve the various constituencies in the state.” Democracy dictates that “all groups should be represented.” But does democracy dictate group treatment according to a preordained proportional scheme? Yes, because society must atone for “past and present discrimination.” The result is an Orwellian world of official discrimination undertaken in the name of avoiding discrimination.

D’Souza describes Travers as “uncomfortable” about denying slots to deserving Asian (and white) applicants, but in the end he is unbending: preferential treatment is his preference, because social justice must prevail over individual rights. D’Souza is rightly non-plussed. What could be more democratic than the ascendancy of individual merit and the assertion of individual rights over group rights?

Others question the democratic intent—and content—of standardized tests. An official of the NAACP told D’Souza that such instruments have been used “from the cradle to the grave to select, reject, stratify, classify, and sort people.” More specifically, the charge is advanced that the

questions themselves are loaded against black students. D'Souza is not convinced. In the first place, reliable evidence suggests that uniform national aptitude tests are the best predictors of college performance, especially in this era of high school "grade inflation." Secondly, attempts to make the individual questions "more comprehensible to blacks" inevitably result in stereotyping blacks as products of ghetto environments.

Finally, irony once again intrudes. National aptitude tests were introduced in the United States in the 1920s precisely because of discriminatory admissions policies. Jews, Catholics, and blacks, among others, complained of rejection by universities interested in admitting only WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) and well-to-do WASPs at that. To eliminate, or at least to tone down, such bias, the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) was developed and implemented.

D'Souza's reference to WASP favoritism leads to a single flaw in his argument and, no doubt, to the reason he used a public, rather than private, university to make what is generally a valid point. Private colleges and universities have long been accused—and properly so—of discriminating in favor of students who manage to qualify for admission through no merit of their own beyond accident of birth. Either children of wealth or children of alumni, they are the beneficiaries of an older, more genteel, form of preferential treatment. D'Souza is correct to elevate merit; but he is mistaken if he thinks—or pretends—that pure merit was once the sole yardstick for admission to all elite universities in the United States—public or private.

But the general insidiousness of "illiberal education" does not discriminate between public and private universities. Politicized curricula, official and unofficial codes of censorship, and racial segregation can be found at any of the universities on his select list. Here again irony pokes its way to the surface. This time, however, the irony is mine, not D'Souza's. Just as universities in Central and Eastern Europe begin the laborious, but necessary, process of de-politicizing everything from admissions policies to curricula to classroom and campus behavior, certain influential American universities move to politicize the same three areas of academic life.

More distressing than the conscious politicization on the part of individual faculty and students is the almost naive refusal of supposedly powerful administrators to see just what is going on under their collective noses. Their blindness, of course, is not total. They see what they want to see. And they see without possessing any vision whatsoever. At least that is true for the typical university administrator, who tends to be non-ideological and career-minded. Their expertise may once have been confined to scholarly pursuits. But their elevation to university administration has converted many of them into experts on either public relations or crisis management—or both. Rather than concede that they discriminate on the basis of race in admitting students, they either deny the charge—or disguise it as “affirmative action.” Rather than face accusations of, horrors, “insensitivity” or, horror of horrors, “racism,” they reveal themselves to be the most sensitive of racists.

D’Souza’s roguish gallery of university administrators fall into two general categories: radicalized former faculty members who pursue a political, usually feminist agenda; and professional bureaucrats who are constantly being pursued by campus radicals, whether students or faculty. It is the latter group which D’Souza estimates to be in the distinct majority.

Two examples of their power ought to make his point. In response to undergraduate humor with a clearly racist tone the University of Michigan developed a broad censorship code which definitely abridged the first amendment in the name of eliminating not only racist, sexist, and homophobic speech, but gestures as well. D’Souza is not about to condone racially or sexually derogatory language, humorously intended or not. But he does dismiss much of it as sophomoric, documents that some of it has been created by “persecuted” minorities in search of a platform, and decrees that a lot of it is traceable to policies of preferential treatment themselves.

Here D’Souza is on very controversial ground. Citing polling evidence which suggests white racism has decreased in the general culture, he concludes that instances of such racism on American campuses are primarily a reaction to official policies of reverse racism. Liberals have a slightly different explanation: Ronald Reagan. Offering a version of the

“devil made me do it” excuse, they contend that the presence of this conservative in the White House unleashed a mini-torrent of long suppressed, but suddenly sanctioned, racism. D’Souza is not convinced. Why, he wonders, have northern campuses been the scene of most of the racial incidents of recent years? Is the liberal north a myth? No, in fact it is to blame. Liberal administrators who practice reverse racism through discriminatory admissions and the sanctioning of black student unions are to blame. So are those administrators who resort to a double standard when it comes to handling racial incidents on campus: white action, violent or otherwise, against blacks is prosecuted; black action, violent or otherwise, against whites is either ignored or covered up.

Who is correct, D’Souza or his liberal critics? The question is a tricky one, and its resolution is ultimately unquantifiable. But the impressionistic evidence does favor D’Souza. It seems less likely that a reservoir of pent-up white racism was released by Ronald Reagan than that individual students on individual campuses are quite aware of—and angrily responding to—the reality around them. To be sure, D’Souza does not deny that white racism exists in the hearts and souls of countless American students. But he refuses to flinch from the presence of black racism on American campuses (even though its apologists insist that only white people can be racists, because only white people hold power in America). And he wants to force countless university administrators to concede that their racially-inspired (if more “sensitive”) decisions have resulted first, in reverse racism, second, in a white backlash, and finally, in more racially divided universities than might otherwise have been the case.

A second example of administrative cowardice—and of racism masquerading as sensitivity—concerns Harvard University. On February 9, 1988, social historian Stephan Thernstrom was “absolutely stunned” to learn that he stood accused of “racial insensitivity.” Though a proponent of traditional liberalism and of the new social history (which is the history of common people, rather than their kings or presidents), Thernstrom could not be labeled even the mildest of neo-conservatives. What, then, was the charge against him. In a class on the history of American ethnic groups he had allegedly argued that Jim Crow laws (which imposed formal racial

segregation in the late 19th century) were “beneficial.” What was worse, he had “read aloud from white plantation journals” that painted a “benevolent” picture of slavery.

At stake in the ensuing war of words, therefore, was not just the reputation of a single professor, but the health of academic freedom in American higher education. And a brief war there was. But it was one from which the administration of Harvard University fled. Left to fight essentially alone, Professor Thernstrom charged his student accusers with behaving as “McCarthyites of the left.” Just as Senator Joseph McCarthy had had a chilling effect on American dissent in the early 1950s, so were these students intent on limiting free expression in the late 1980s. Granted, in his heyday Senator McCarthy was a much more powerful figure than these unelected undergraduates, but the desire to intimate by innuendo and outright falsehood was distressingly the same. The drive to enforce an acceptable orthodoxy was also quite similar. And so was the ideological motive, even if this time its practitioners happened to reside on the left wing of the political spectrum.

Thernstrom did plead guilty to quoting from planters’ journals: “It is essential for young people to hear what justifications the slave owners supplied for their actions.” He also conceded that he had discussed the segregation legislation in question, but maintained that he had “simply described the effects of these laws and (had) to assume that it (was) the content of the laws that the students found hurtful.”

The result of the entire episode was neither the dismissal nor the resignation of Professor Thernstrom. Harvard did not lose a valued and productive faculty member. But Harvard and its students are poorer nonetheless. Stephan Thernstrom has decided not to teach his academic specialty for the foreseeable future: “It just isn’t worth it. Professors who teach race issues encounter such a culture of hostility, among some students, that some of these questions are simply not teachable anymore, at least not in an honest, critical way.”

On reflection, Thernstrom harbors no ill-will against his student accusers. But he remains angry with his university’s administration: “I felt like a rape victim, and yet the silence of the administration seemed to give

the benefit of the doubt to the students who attacked me...I could not even defend myself, because the charge of racism or racial insensitivity is ultimately unanswerable.”

Exactly what did the Harvard administration do or not do? Dean of the Faculty Michael Spence refused to discipline anyone, but was moved to praise Thernstrom’s accusers as “judicious and fair” because they had followed university grievance procedures. Harvard President Derek Bok did concede that Thernstrom had a right to teach as he wished, but cautioned that Harvard professors should be aware of “possible insensitivity” in their lectures.

D’Souza continues with a litany of examples of what he calls the “tyranny of the minority,” which has invaded American higher education and against which too many university administrators stand fearful and mute. Genuine scholars in Central and Eastern Europe universities know very well what can happen when tyrants gain control of what should be citadels of truth and its objective pursuit. If anyone has anything to teach those on the other side of what was the Iron Curtain, it is not those who are about the business of transforming American higher education in the name of sensitivity and diversity, but rather those who have been victimized by tyrants, “sensitive” or otherwise, and their deafeningly silent accomplices in bureaucracies everywhere.

The havoc created by these tyrants goes well beyond a stunned liberal professor here and there. That Stephan Thernstrom no longer teaches the history of American ethnic groups at Harvard is, I suppose, a victory of sorts for the sensitivity police. But it is a minor victory compared with entire curricula stripped of meaning by deconstructionists or loaded with meaning by the ideologues of diversity. On the subject of the challenge to the traditional core curriculum D’Souza offers two telling points: there are non-western and non-white male authors who ought to be added to any educated person’s definition of the canon; but those who propose such additions are often not interested in great literature or reflective discourse.

Led by the Reverend Jesse Jackson, Stanford University students chant “Hey, hey, ho, ho, western culture’s got to go.” Led by Clayborne Carson, professor of Afro-American history and editor of the Martin Luther

King papers, Stanford has eliminated its western-oriented great books curriculum and replaced it with a new set of required courses on "Culture, Ideas, and values" (or CIV, which may have been some administrator's idea of lulling the alumni into thinking that this was just another version of what was once called "western civ"). Carson contends that there is "something inherently anti-intellectual about...an educational institution establishing a canon." If so, wonders D'Souza, why not jettison any notion of a required curriculum, rather than replace the western culture emphasis with a multicultural requirement? But then Stanford students might not become acquainted with an oral history called *I. Rigoberta: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. In the name of diversity, the translator's introduction informs students that Rigoberta "speaks for all the Indians of the American continent." And just what does she have to say? That feminism, socialism, and Marxism represent the way and the truth for her and for "all Indians of the American continent." So much for the new diversity.

D'Souza rightly prefers a different brand of diversity, namely diversity of the mind. University leaders at Stanford, Harvard, etc., assume the "self-evident virtues of diversity," but D'Souza thinks otherwise: "Universities such as Brandeis, Notre Dame, and Mount Holyoke, which were founded on principles of religious or gender homogeneity, still manage to provide an excellent education." For the final time, irony claims our attention. These three universities, which are grounded in old orthodoxies, refuse to promote a curriculum that is politically orthodox and, therefore, continue to produce students who have at least a chance of achieving intellectual independence.

But whether the classroom or coffeehouse is at Brandeis or Berkeley. D'Souza is overwhelmed by the homogeneity, not the diversity of intellectual opinion. Within the student body of his Bombay high school were monarchists, liberals, communists, Fabian socialists, agrarians, theocrats, to name a few. Within American universities are students, the vast majority of whom "display striking agreement on all the basic questions of life." Moreover, those same students tend to regard anyone with a firmly held idea as at worst "dangerously dogmatic" and at best in violation of the "social etiquette of tolerance."

Given that intellectually drab picture of the American university, one might think that Dinesh D'Souza would praise the intensity and conviction of the campus radicals whose activities he has chronicled and whose ideas he explores in order to deplore. In fairness, D'Souza does not object to the presence of Marxists, paleo or neo, within any faculty. Nor does he wish to ban feminists from the world of scholarly inquiry or even from a campus picket line. He is not at all opposed to unconventional ideas; what he is opposed to is enforced dogmatism, whether the issue is curricular reform, faculty hiring or freedom of speech. And he firmly rejects the notion that mandated racial diversity on the college campus will eventually create true intellectual diversity.

Having roundly criticized what passes for reform within the American academy, D'Souza offers his own "modest proposals," which he prefaces with a few guiding principles. In the first place the university ought to be an intellectual community, and "no community can be built on the basis of preferential treatment and double standards." According to D'Souza, a liberal education is "education for rulers"; and since every citizen is a ruler in a democracy, "liberal education is consistent with democracy." So is the notion of treating people as individuals rather than as members of warring groups. Moreover, both democracy and liberal education presume that issues should be settled "in terms of idealism, not interest; in terms of right, not force." Finally, D'Souza agrees that liberal education in America must mean global education. "Provincialism has always been the enemy of that broad-minded outlook which is the very essence of liberal learning." And provincialism he finds aplenty, especially in the ghetto-ized enclaves which claim to be hot-houses of campus revolution.

With these principles in mind, D'Souza argues for the retention of preferential treatment in admissions, so long as the criteria is based on proven "socioeconomic," rather than presumed "racial disadvantage." Therefore, "no longer will a black or Hispanic doctor's son...receive preference over the daughter of an Appalachian coal miner or a Vietnamese street vendor."

Secondly, D'Souza wants universities to discourage campus-wide "self-segregation" (read provincialism). No group which is racially separatist

ought to be recognized or funded by the university. This would mean no Black Student Association. But it might well mean a W.E.B. DuBois Society based on the ideas and writings of the black Marxist author. University-funded groups should be organized on the basis of “intellectual and cultural interests, not skin color or sexual proclivity.”

Finally, universities ought to devise required freshmen courses which are grounded in the classics, both western and non-western. Paul Robeson, the black American actor and fellow traveler with communism, recalled that his father took him “page by page through Virgil and Homer.” The result was a “love of learning, a ceaseless quest for truth in all its fulness...” That Robeson’s quest also led him to embrace communism may or may not have had anything to do with his introduction to the classics. In any event, D’Souza is not worried. Then again, perhaps he should be. Students can be mightily perverse creatures. If reading Homer contributed to the radicalization of Paul Robeson, then reading John Stuart Mill might have a similar effect on future generations of students. For that matter, “traveling with Rigoberta” might lead her readers to reject Marxism totally. Indoctrination seldom works the way that the tyrants intend. Once again this is a lesson that the east might teach the west.

Still, whether D’Souza is worried or unworried about the intended—or unintended—consequences of his proposals is not the important issue. His larger point is both simple and correct: efforts at indoctrination have no legitimate place in the academy. Here he has much to teach the increasingly politicized universities of the west and little to offer the leaders of universities in Central and Eastern Europe which are currently about the business of recovering from the “tyranny of the minority” long imposed on them.