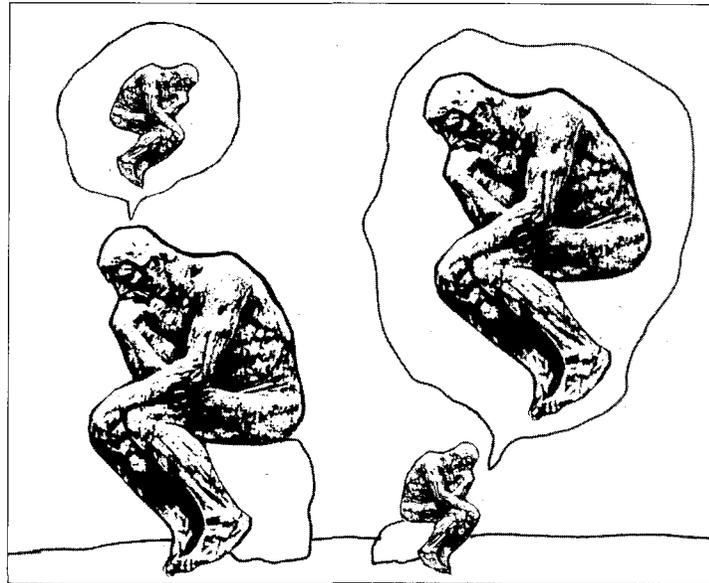


# The Politics of Education and the Metaphysics of Emptiness

by Stephen A. Erickson



Igor Kopeinitsky

The president of a prominent liberal arts college recently conveyed to its philosophy department (and to other constituencies) that regulations may soon be in place which would influence, if not altogether control, the conferring of bachelor's degrees. Mandated by the federal government, these "guidelines" would have a strongly utilitarian bias. However supportive this might be to the sciences and the social sciences (chemistry and economics, for example) it is likely to harm the humanities. These (as of late, curiously self-destructive) disciplines are likely to contract, perhaps even shrink, both in size and in influence.

This should not surprise us. Sputnik alarmed the country about its global military competitiveness, rather irrationally sweeping the humanities along with the hard sciences into what was quantitatively an educational boom. A rising tide is said to lift all boats, and the educational bull market of the post-Sputnik era made advanced degrees in any and every field common and plentiful commodities, compromising excellence in the process and, rather tragically, breaking many an aspiring academic job applicant's heart. Especially in the humanities, supply rather quickly and devastatingly outstripped demand, and this when it had already long been unclear what needs the supply was meant to meet. Were these needs merely institutional, or were they in some deeper sense educational, or even metaphysical?

Now in the 90's, the terrors of a lingering, largely white-collar recession and a quiet but growing anxiety over foreign influence in our capital markets have sounded a different call. In the name of enhanced global economic competitiveness, the trumpet sounds educational retreat, best known as curricular retrenchment and restructuring, and where else first to down-

size than in the humanities, where bread is neither baked nor even much eaten anymore but is mostly theorized about as a possible object of production and consumption—if, that is, it were prepared by previously "marginalized" and gastronomically and politically correct bakers, 40-some percent of whom are to be women and about 30 percent non-Euroamerican. Ingredients themselves are to be gathered from previously "oppressed" sources (and by previously oppressed gatherers), and their gathering must be environmentally nondisruptive and sexually nondiscriminating. In these requirements, incidentally, there may be some genuine virtues, but in the meantime little bread is getting baked and even less is reaching any student's table, except, that is, as an example of a kind of bread that is not to be preferred over any other.

Somewhat separately from the college president's all too easily confirmable message, something slightly less visible has also been happening in the humanistic bakery and, more importantly, on those administrative drawing boards where humanistic bakeries are now being remodeled and their staffing reconsidered. In accelerating increments, value-oriented discussions are receding from view in the academy, getting discouraged if not subtly punished. It is not hard, though no less painful, to understand why. Such discussions often imply choices based upon evaluations of better and worse, commendable and contemptible, promising and pointless, or even the more truncated Nietzschean categories of life-enhancing and life-denying. And these discussions are invariably guided by deep commitments to first principles and to ultimates. These latter are seldom adjudicable through further "argument," though they are often illuminated and even transformed in the clash of perspectives and convictions. At such "clash points" serious dialogue must ensue; much is put at risk, and much also ends up devalued, if not rejected. But in an environment where power and "empowerment" are themselves

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construed as ultimate values, and less advantaged power groups transitionally mask themselves in the cloak of nonjudgmental multiculturalism, value discussion is itself unavoidably discouraged. (Those having grabbed the best seats, if only by default or by successful ascription of inherited guilt to others, find nothing to gain in any further discussion of the seating arrangements, and therefore they do their best either to ignore or to outlaw such discussions.)

Value discussion, which almost always involves rejection as well as choice, tends to be counterproductive, even destructive, with respect to power's preservation, for value discussion demystifies such power, asking the why of its accumulation, the ends of its potential deployments. Such discussion subsumes, if not often debunks, some of power's aspirants for their relative intellectual poverty. If I do not feel good about myself or my group, telling me that there is good reason for me to feel bad—a feeling which itself is construed in many educational quarters as an early sign both of awareness and of hope—can only further diminish my self-respect, my sense of empowerment and of status. We have now moved from the intellectually relativistic position that every point of view is “valid in its own way” to the paralyzing dogma that every cultural production is on the same footing with every other. Add to this brew the asphyxiating conviction that whatever has seemingly advanced beyond its cultural rivals must have done so unfairly through economic “privilege” and should be unmasked and then excoriated for its misbegotten cultural dominance, and you have a picture of cultural socialism being played out in the name of tolerance. Neither sports teams nor businesses operate in this manner, nor is it a method by which medical, aviation, or personal decisions are made, and if it bespeaks the educational future, perhaps the humanities are best abolished altogether. Hosting a convention of plague victims may enhance the city's revenues in the short term, but soon that same city will surely perish, victim of its own success.

In higher education nowadays two factors are in play. The less dangerous of the two has to do with our economic competitiveness and the basic abilities of our work force. Here, reading comprehension and computer literacy are undoubtedly of more importance than understanding Athenian democracy or the open couplet. Plato, Jung, and the Hindus have claimed, as have numerous others, that it is usually after the age of 18 that the “big” questions find fertile soil. Though it may well be that the ground must be cultivated early and regularly if any crops are later to grow, the college president's report on utilitarian bias may serve a useful purpose, directing students toward the more immediate mysteries of label and direction reading and comprehension and drawing them back from Derridean deconstruction or from those depressing social histories of still one further dimension of the commonplace. Utilitarian bias may shrivel the soul, but it may be worse to bloat it irremediably with empty sophistications, especially if it is already mystified by such basics as complex sentence construction and the fundamentals of the card catalogue system in the library.

Worker-proficiency is supposedly related to a party our country allegedly held and now has to pick up after. Deficit status, trade balance, dollar strength, and so on are all taken as measures of underlying economic health, and, it is argued, by these very measures too much has been eaten and drunk, whether an actual party has been thrown or not. In any case a cleaning crew is needed, a somewhat self-sacrificing one at that, and the

more competent and efficient it is, the quicker its work will be accomplished. The irony of our metaphysical poverty is that for many the cleanup's only purpose is to enable some future generation to have a life similar to the one after which our younger generations are now being asked to pick up. Something is surely wrong.

But there is more, and this brings me to the second and more explosive factor in the educational condominium, the factor which has been much at the heart of multiculturalism. This second factor might be described as an educational version of the trickle-down theory. And what does this mean? To be economically competitive the United States must function to some considerable degree as a cooperative unit, as a team, so to speak. This is at best difficult, and increasingly so, for we are progressively a country of separating and growing ethnicities, particularities with clout and aspiration, particularities wanting both larger pieces of the pie and insulation and protection from each other's competitive claims. How is this to be accomplished? The underlying educational theory is that an elite of the college-educable among diverse ethnicities, if brought together to understand each other's cultures and to live in conversational proximity to each other, will form a kind of multicultural vanguard, not just of tolerance but of appreciation, and this will trickle down to the less educated over time and become common wisdom. Further, as more and more representatives of each differing ethnicity get prominent and well-rewarded positions in society, those ethnic groups will become more positively visible, more integrated into what might be called an emerging multicultural mainstream. And they are likely, too, regardless of their ethnicity, to be less resentful, thus less potentially destructive, of the productively privileged members of the society as a whole, regardless of *their* ethnicity.

Obviously, no one knows the long-term outcome of the application of this educational theory, though few social-engineering projects seem to have had more than a modest and often cataclysmically reversible success. In the short term this theory will surely create chaos and violence, and a great deal of resentment will be engendered in those groups who feel themselves being displaced, having to give way to the demands of various emerging and insistent minorities. It will require, as do virtually all social-engineering projects, what the Czech writer Milan Kundera calls the “organizing forgetting” of much of American history. The communists themselves, as cunning and ruthless as any amnesia salesman could possibly be, found that this could not be sustained. Whether the American educational establishment will have any better fortune is doubtful, for they lack both the hardness and the clear sense of (hallucinated) outcome that supported the various communist nomenclatures for so long.

One final word on these tangled social-engineering issues. We know that forced busing did not work, was in fact a miserable failure. But we also know that for the current educational theory to have a chance, for it in fact to be tested, something other than what is now happening would have to occur. To give an example, it would be precisely the non-African-Americans who would have to study black culture, for in this might be found the expansion of understanding, and perhaps even appreciation and critical respect. As it is, with each ethnic claimant seeking an impregnable basis from which to reflect appreciatively upon itself, little can be accomplished beyond a kind of solipsistically driven balkanization. It is not only Leib-

nizean monads, we are now discovering, that lack windows.

More than once I have referred to the metaphysical, implying its absence *from* contemporary educational discussion. The wonderful German word *Armutszeugnis* might best be translated as “confession of inner poverty,” and surely this describes the intellectual future engineered for us by the educational bureaucrats. A little over 200 years ago the philosopher Kant posited three questions central to being human—What can I know? What ought I do? And for what may I hope?—and found their integration possible in terms of one terse but synoptic query: What is man? From Kant’s view, these questions and their pursuit were unavoidable and, however finally impossible of consummation, certified our humanity.

Times have surely changed. If Nietzsche’s announcement of God’s demise provided a dramatic opportunity to usher out the theological from professional educational debate, Freud’s remark to Marie Bonaparte that such questions as Kant’s were themselves symptomatic of illness encouraged the emptying of the metaphysical arena altogether. Now reflections regarding the meaning and ends of human life are shelved with such relics as phrenology and phlogiston theory and paid the same patronizing anthropological courtesy: “Once people thought. . . . How charmingly quaint! It was not known in those times that . . . .”

But this does not mean that the Kantian questions were magically suspended. No, in governmentally encouraged, professional educational planning groups they have been largely answered, if only by myopic (though politically correct) default. Students in particular—thus, the “future”—can know that, however similar, human beings are different, but in their difference they are really “the same,” their activities and creations valuable in a manner not subject to evaluation. Given these epistemological insights, ethics can be truly diverse in its affirmation of everything: everyone ought equally to empower everyone else, thereby raising the level of self-esteem in a manner that neither lifts nor separates anyone (or anything) from any other, thereby avoiding the implications of rank, accomplishment, excellence, or exclusion. (If political socialism was criticized for requiring too many evening meetings, cultural socialism will likely be charged with engendering too many sleepy afternoons.) The grand hope in all this is that a sufficiently large pie might eventually be baked (and celebrated) so that all may effortlessly and in equal measure devour it, in the process acknowledging that all ingredients, and the ensuing result, are technologically sound, culturally diverse, but indistinguishable in value from other ingredients which might have been used. The consumption of this pie, advertised on a home-shopping network, is what *it is* “all about”—life, that is.

And what, then, is “man”? The one-dimensional, profane, and cozily materialistic parameters now circumscribing this question, their seductive secularism and lazy, largely mid- to low-brow aestheticism, render it too depressing to pursue. Under these circumstances Prozac may prove salvific, at least for those scattered souls not completely manipulated, indoctrinated, and ultimately numbed by this paltry vision.

Rescue often arrives from the least favorable of sources, and such it may well be for the coming night in which all creations (and creatures, even) are altogether “correct.” The college president mentioned at the beginning of this essay spoke of utilitarian biases in the service of global economic competitiveness. If cultural socialism, the gradual extinction of the discriminate, implies passively acquired esteem, economic restructuring and

enhancement demand actively pursued, mostly measurable results. They require skill, energy, efficiency, and discrimination of the highest order, however humanistically impoverished. The collision of these prerequisites with the political directives embedded in a currently unfocused “trickle-down” multiculturalism will likely engender a conflict unholy in nature and unholy to watch. If one side prevails, we replay the late stages of the Roman Empire; if the other, we experience brisk philistinism not dissimilar to the best of an aliterate public works administration, staffed by willing, though intellectually and spiritually sanitized, technicians.

The important issue is whether a space can be discovered or engendered, a locus for transcendence, in which questions regarding what might really matter could again become unavoidable—and not just for the few. Were this to happen, everyday life, education, and the journey of the (much neglected) human soul might confront one another in a manner both painful and saving. The current metaphysics of emptiness would selectively dissolve, and the politics of education would join Alice in Blunderland. Our spirits might again receive continuing and even, occasionally, public sustenance.

Barring this outcome, it is hard to imagine any hope aside from strategies of withdrawal. Has the loud noise of the educational world drowned out those necessary silences in which wisdom and character grow? Might the strength, the courage, and the unblinking compassion paradoxically required for discriminate judgment then be nurtured in small, separated communities? Ours may now and finally be the time for the reemergence of a late-Hellenistic retreat and renewal. Surely the metaphysics and politics of our current day offer no plausible alternative. 

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## History Is Not Finished

by Peter Russell

I wonder, is there any sense at all  
Either in what they say or what they do  
My own life’s absolutely senseless too  
An endless waiting for the bombs to fall  
Not only on the crowd beyond the wall  
(Who hardly count) but on *our* mindless crew.  
*Here and now*,—and that means *me and you*  
The wall’s set down—it’s moving at our call.

We are the ones drawing the noose around us  
The barbarians are massing day by day  
In search of shelter, money, food and work  
And like a moving wall will soon surround us  
Nothing we do can keep these hordes away  
The TV newsmen wear a nasty smirk.