

# EDUCATION, POLITICS, AND PUBLIC LIFE

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Within the last three decades, education as a political, moral, and ideological practice has become central to rethinking not only the role of public and higher education, but also the emergence of pedagogical sites outside of the schools—which include but are not limited to the Internet, television, film, magazines, and the media of print culture. Education as both a form of schooling and public pedagogy reaches into every aspect of political, economic, and social life. What is particularly important in this highly interdisciplinary and politically nuanced view of education are a number of issues that now connect learning to social change, the operations of democratic public life, and the formation of critically engaged individual and social agents. At the center of this series will be questions regarding what young people, adults, academics, artists, and cultural workers need to know to be able to live in an inclusive and just democracy and what it would mean to develop institutional capacities to reintroduce politics and public commitment into everyday life. Books in this series aim to play a vital role in rethinking the entire project of the related themes of politics, democratic struggles, and critical education within the global public sphere.

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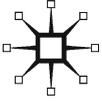
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WHY HIGHER EDUCATION  
SHOULD HAVE A LEFTIST BIAS

*By Donald Lazere*

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WHY HIGHER EDUCATION SHOULD HAVE A LEFTIST BIAS

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## PREFACE

In this book, I argue that conservatives' case against leftist bias in education, as well as in media and politics itself, turns reality upside down: Critical pedagogy and left media have a legitimate responsibility to provide minimal balance against the far more powerful forms of conservative bias in American society. I identify two sources of these forms of conservative bias, tacit and calculated. The calculated forms are, at any given time, more newsworthy, egregious, and directly influential on society; thus they might be expected to dominate the opening sections of the book. In my design, however, I defer discussing them until part II, giving priority in part I to the tacit forms because it is only by foregrounding the all-pervasive forms of conservative bias that are generally not even perceived as such but only as business as usual, the "unmarked" norm of neutrality, that the disproportion in the arguments advanced in the calculated forms becomes fully apparent.

Part I, then, begins with the conventions of semantic framing in American public discourse, which may be established partly by conservatives' design but become habitual assumptions in politics, media, education, and general consciousness. Thus our discourse is confined to a narrow spectrum whose leftward limit is the Democratic-Party version of governance by relatively liberal, wealthy corporate and military executives—so that supposed liberals like President Obama must constantly profess their faith in economic free enterprise, American exceptionalism, and military superiority. Meanwhile democratic socialist and even social-democratic viewpoints, even (or especially?) when propounded by distinguished scholars and intellectual journalists, are labeled "loony left," as far off the charts of acceptable discourse as the Ku Klux Klan or American Nazis. This skewing of the public agenda to the right enables conservative polemicists to grossly exaggerate the extent of leftist bias in mainstream discourse. In 2012, future senator Ted Cruz of Texas claimed in a campaign speech that in the early nineties when he and Barack Obama were students at Harvard Law

School, ““There were fewer declared Republicans in the faculty when we were there than Communists! There was one Republican. But there were twelve who would say they were Marxists who believed in the Communists overthrowing the United States government”” (quoted in Mayer, “Is Senator Ted Cruz Our New McCarthy?”).

A further tacit, semantic convention is equivocations on the meanings of “conservatism,” which play up the more idealistic, theoretical versions while downplaying the more tawdry forms of “actual, existing conservatism,” including the multiple realms of corporate power, the unscrupulous pursuit of wealth, and the limited stage of cognitive development in the conservative “base” susceptible to demagogic appeals to religion, patriotism, xenophobia, and every ethnocentric prejudice. One more form of tacit bias is what I call the politics of no politics, an avoidance of thinking about politics at all, which pervades American society and contributes by default to maintaining the conservative status quo, preeminently through erasing public consciousness of the power of corporations in politics. This avoidance results in public attention being directed to issues of political bias only in overt, ad hoc, and sensational instances, say, of left political correctness, while political correctness in business’s business as usual goes unremarked.

The calculated forms of conservative bias, surveyed in part II, include periodic offensives launched from the 1970s to the present by an array of organizations, mostly aligned with the Republican Party, that have attempted to control public perceptions of bias in politics, economics, media, and education. As a grizzled veteran of nearly half a century of the culture wars, I review in chapters 6 and 7 the history of neoconservative intellectuals and of conservative academic organizations—including some of my favorite golden-oldie episodes—with the aim of confirming their integral connection, despite their leaders’ repeated denials, to the more lowbrow operations of the Republican attack apparatus. I trace the steps by which these intellectual movements have gradually degenerated to the present point where they have merged indistinguishably with the know-nothing right wing of Fox News, the Tea Party, and Sarah Palin (who has been lauded by erstwhile defenders of intellectual standards like Norman Podhoretz and William Kristol).

My introduction and chapter 5 address the dilemmas posed by one tactic in these conservative polemics—to obstruct reasoned public debate by mimicking any and all evidence or arguments favoring leftists, to turn them against leftists. The introduction concludes with my suggested model for a meta-polemical approach to studying this

tactic, which becomes a point of reference through the rest of the book.

The three chapters in part III apply the previous themes to my models for responsible teaching practices by leftist college faculties. Chapter 8 describes an argumentative writing course I have taught that embodies my method of facilitating fair-minded study of conservative versus liberal or left sources and arguments, and chapter 9 applies that method to studying the issue of the escalating cost of college education, with detailed attention to the work of conservative economist Richard Vedder on this subject. Chapter 10 challenges both conservative defenses of the humanistic canon and leftist rejections of it, by affirming the elements of rebellion, skepticism, and ribaldry within that canon, as legitimate subject matter for liberal arts courses.

I frame all these issues and arguments within a disciplinary framework of critical thinking, argumentative rhetoric, general semantics, developmental psychology, and sociolinguistics, which was fully developed in *Reading and Writing for Civic Literacy*. And I immodestly put forward this framework, not only as a possible model for the entire enterprise of liberal education, but for American political and media discourse in general. However, I am all too aware that our major political parties and media are generally impervious to such challenges from scholars to their modes of business as usual, and that even within the internal, departmental balkanization of today's academic world and publishing industry, this kind of conceptual framework is just likely to be consigned to one or another obscure disciplinary corner of specialization; indeed, this is one of the many ways I survey in which all potential forces for leftism in America are narrowly confined.

To what audience is this book addressed, then? Aye, there's the rub. In today's balkanized American politics, media, and scholarship, it is extremely difficult to communicate with anyone outside one's own ideological camp. It is similarly difficult for intellectuals and academics to communicate with the broader audience addressed by mass media because of the anti-intellectual, antiacademic, sound-bite bias of mainstream politics, journalism, and entertainment media. This dilemma is compounded by the grim reality that much of the American left has been reduced to scholars or intellectual journalists, so that the anti-intellectualism of mainstream discourse also amounts to an anti-leftist bias. For example, in July 2011, Thomas Frank, a University of Chicago PhD and presently one of the leading leftist intellectual journalists, was allowed a rare appearance on a CNN

panel, about the debt-ceiling crisis in Congress. He tried to frame this issue in terms of his book *The Wrecking Crew: How Conservatives Rule*, which describes a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby American conservatives denounce government inefficiency, then when they gain control over government, do their utmost to make sure it is inefficient, while deflecting public anger toward pro-government liberals, in this case President Obama. But Frank was interrupted in mid-sentence about a minute into his extended explanation by the moderator calling time, ignoring what he said, and turning to other panelists who changed the subject. Conservative intellectuals and academics are in somewhat the same dilemma, although conservative think tanks have outdone liberal or leftist ones in using public relations agents to produce press releases, op-eds, and TV and radio appearances for which writers and speakers are prepped in sound bites.

So it is sadly predictable that a book like mine defending the academic left will only be published by a press specializing in that niche market and mainly be read by fellow academic leftists. Nevertheless, I have perhaps wistfully conceived the intended readership for this book as conservative academics and intellectuals and even some mainstream journalists, politicians, and general readers who share some of my concerns and may be open to dialogue on others. At the least, I can hope that such readers will be prompted to engage me in debate on the reasoned, civil level that I call for here as an alternative to polarized culture-wars invective, and I invite them to hold me accountable for lapses in my own reasoning and civility level. On several previous occasions I have tried to establish such a dialogue with conservative intellectuals, in a few cases successfully, in others not so much. I have lengthy email files of such efforts with David Horowitz and the leaders of the National Association of Scholars, which are available to readers on request, at [dlazere@jgc.org](mailto:dlazere@jgc.org). I have also invited some conservatives I am on good terms with to write a response to be published in the book, without any takers, but I encourage others to respond after publication.

Does the qualified case I make for teachers and scholars advocating a leftist viewpoint mean that I endorse political correctness? To begin with, perhaps that infamous phrase should be in quotation marks, to indicate its reference to the term as a fabrication, by the conservative attack apparatus whose workings over the past four decades I will delineate here, and by the mainstream media that have lazily parroted that attack, generally without bothering to verify the accuracy of its allegations. However, I am not in denial that there is any such reality as

political correctness. “Political correctness exists, even if Lynne Cheney and the National Association of Scholars say it does,” was a byword of Teachers for a Democratic Culture (TDC), an organization I was active in that thrived in the 1990s, started by English professors Gerald Graff and Gregory Jay, which had a plague-on-both-your-houses position toward both the real thing and unscrupulous conservative exploitation of it. (TDC’s position was best supported in two books by John K. Wilson, *The Myth of Political Correctness* and *Patriotic Correctness*.) I have long done scholarly battle with many truly obnoxious leftists and what I call “diverseologues” in academia and elsewhere. (See Lazere, *The Retreat from Political Literacy in Rhetcomp Studies*.)

Nevertheless, in virtually every case, the scale and influence of leftists’ misdeeds has been miniscule in proportion to those of countless malefactors on the right whom leftists expose to scrutiny, but about whom conservative critics tend to get far less indignant. I hold no brief for Ward Churchill, but at his worst, after all, how great a public menace was he, compared to Ken Lay, Jack Abramoff, and Bernard Madoff, the bankers who contrived the predatory lending and subprime-mortgage disasters in the late 2000s, or the multitude of corrupt wheeler-dealers in the military-industrial complex? Incidentally, here is a small sampling of the dozens of obscene bigoted, emails Churchill’s department at Boulder received after the controversy over Churchill’s “little Eichmanns” gaffe (Perez):

From: David Bland  
 To: Chancellor Phil DiStefano  
 CC: Ward Churchill

I am writing this letter . . . to voice my distaste and gross disappointment in your dubious judgment in hiring and retaining such a repugnant and repulsive human being as Ward Churchill. . . . I suppose for a pathetic American Indian like himself, he sees this as some sort of payback to the United States for what he sees as injustices to the American Indian 150 years ago. . . . I implore you not to be intimidated by this pathetic excuse for a man and a human being. Fire his sorry \*ass! . . . It’s too bad that he is one Indian that got away!

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From: Rob Ebright  
 To: Ethnic Studies  
 Subject: Ward Churchill is a d\*ckhead

I must laugh at your so called college department. Tell Ward, my ancestors killed a lot of Indians and I’m proud of it.

Compare the extent of public attention and indignation toward Churchill's foolishness with that afforded this kind of ignorance and bigotry on the right, which is far more widespread than acknowledged by conservative polemicists, especially those who wallow in self-pity over the abuse they receive from intolerant liberals, such as in a similar display of hate mail received by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni in response to their criticism of unpatriotic academics after 9/11 (Martin and Neal). What annoys me most about irresponsible leftists like Churchill is their ingenuousness in playing into the hands of Republican operatives like the late Andrew Breitbart, who manufactured highly publicized, selectively edited sting videos defaming the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN, US Department of Agriculture official Shirley Sherrod (who sued him), and two pro-labor teachers at the University of Missouri, Kansas City (see <http://labornotes.org/2011/04/right-wing-hoaxster-smears-labor-educators>).

What kind of leftist am I and what kind of leftism do I advocate teaching? It is a pretty broad, eclectic kind in both cases. My politics lie between democratic socialist and social-democratic, and are on an intellectual level rather than that of militant action by workers, although I am centrally concerned with how intellectuals can act in concert with workers and the undiminished numbers of the wretched of the earth. Anyone in America criticizing free enterprise and saying a word in favor of socialism will be smeared as a commissar seeking to suppress democracy and freedom of enterprise and thought, but I submit that it is the present degeneration of free enterprise that has suppressed a full range of viewpoints, and the essence of my "radicalism" is seeking means of expanding free discourse in politics, media, and education. So I do not advocate dogmatic imposition of socialist views, but only their being allowed a place at the table of American public discourse, evaluated in every instance against the strongest arguments for capitalism or the free market. A voice for socialists is justified more than ever in the atmosphere of the 2010s when our two capitalist-party system and corporate media may be terminally incapable of coping with the economic and environmental problems they have done much to create. Who knows? Maybe the final crisis of capitalism may really be upon us, long after most Marxists consigned it to the realm of fundamentalist End-Times predictions.

Am I a Marxist, then? No, not in the sense of being an authority on Marxism, viewing it as the measure of all things, believing that the working class will be the agent of socialist revolution, or endorsing any government or movement in the world just because it calls itself

Marxist. However, I do find a great deal of validity in anticommunistic Marxist concepts and critical works, especially concerning power relations in political economy and social class, along with the myriad gaps, evasions, and mystifications to be found in public discourse and cultural works that ignore or dismiss those concepts. (I discuss a few examples from cultural criticism in chapter 3.) In that respect, I again simply argue against the red-baiting exclusion of Marxist views (both communistic and anticommunistic) in our public discourse, and I lament the retreat from academic Marxism in recent decades, after its productive peak in the sixties and seventies. Publishers of academic Marxist works like Routledge, Verso, Bergin & Garvey, Boynton-Cook, Westview, and South End Press have either gone out of business, retreated from left politics, or been engulfed and devoured by corporate conglomerates. (Terry Eagleton, professor emeritus at Oxford, made a brave, nuanced attempt to reaffirm Marxist history and economics in *Why Marx Was Right* in 2011—Eagleton’s international eminence as a literary theorist enabled the book to be published by Yale—but it has mostly been ignored in both mainstream and academic media.)

The preface and introduction to my *American Media and Mass Culture: Left Perspectives* in 1987 surveyed the range of Marxist and other (anticommunistic) leftist thought in the emerging, interdisciplinary field of cultural studies; the collection mainly emphasized continuations of Frankfurt School critical theory, which I also attempt to reaffirm in this book, against its facile rejection by postmodernists and other current cultural studies theorists. No conservative critics to my knowledge have ever discussed *American Media* or the responsible level of democratic-left scholarship like that of its 30-some contributors; they prefer to dig up every wilder expression of communism, postmodernism, and cultural studies that can be easily derided. Right-wing demagogues can gain publicity with charges that there is “a Marxist network” of “13,000 faculty members” in American universities (*Conservative Digest*, Jan. 1983), without bothering to document how such figures are calculated, to define Marxism and distinguish communistic from anticommunistic Marxists (or some shades in-between), between self-styled Marxist governments or parties and Marxist intellectual thought, or to acknowledge that there is wide diversity among Marxist scholars, who have about the same range of intelligence and integrity within their ranks as any other academic school, so that the work of each must be evaluated on its own merits. The power of Marxist cultural critique at its best is periodically reconfirmed by works like Henry Giroux’s 2013 *Youth in*

*Revolt*, which draws from Frankfurt School critical theory to launch a devastating assault on the utter surrender by contemporary capitalism of any moral or aesthetic opposition to the debasement of American society by profit-motivated violence in both the proliferation of weaponry and the blood-drenched mass culture, especially as it bombards children and adolescents. (Conflict of Interest Watch: As acknowledged in the front matter, Henry and Susan Giroux are advisory editors for the Palgrave-Macmillan series in which this book was published.)

Nor was I born and bred as a leftist. After growing up in a conservative, completely unintellectual family of shopkeepers and salespeople in Des Moines, I was a scholarship student at Brown and Northwestern. My undergraduate and graduate degrees were in English and French, with emphasis on the intersections between language, literature, and politics, which I have continued to pursue through my subsequent career. In a five-year hiatus after college, I studied for an MA part-time at Columbia while working in a succession of jobs on Madison Avenue in advertising, public relations, and celebrity journalism. That experience exposed me to the more tawdry aspects of the upper circles of power and wealth in America and to the contempt that many of the conservative elitists in those circles privately express toward the masses they claim to champion. I also concluded that the liberal arts are among the few educational or occupational sites in America not subservient to conservative interests, so I moved to Berkeley for doctoral study in English at the height of campus protest in the mid-sixties, which was for me an inspirational challenge to the whole social order epitomized by Madison Avenue. I wrote my dissertation, later published as *The Unique Creation of Albert Camus*, about Camus's integration of literature, language, and politics, as both a writer of fiction and drama and as a political journalist and public intellectual. It also dealt with his importance for American readers, including his influence on the New Left as an advocate of pacifism, nonviolent resistance, and left-communitarianism.

However, the strongest influence in my political formation was my membership in Berkeley, during the years following the Free Speech Movement, in the Independent Socialist Club, whose mentors were Hal Draper, a University of California librarian, veteran of the New York anti-Stalinist left and brilliant independent scholar of Marxism, and his wife Anne, a labor activist. The position of ISC, (later to merge with the International Socialist Organization), was that capitalism and communism were in many ways mirror images (despite capitalism's far less totalitarian modes of rule), whose rival

elites perpetrate endless wars (actual or cold) to terrorize, subjugate, and impoverish their own peoples, in the manner of the rulers of the three superpowers in Orwell's *1984*: "So long as they remain in conflict, they prop one another up like three sheaves of corn" (162)—to avert democratic, worker-controlled socialism. This position has been continued in little magazines like *New Politics*, *Against the Current*, and *International Socialist Review*. ISC's alumni from that period, many of them leaders in the Free Speech Movement, became prominent activists for labor like Michael Parker and Kim Moody, for human rights like Joanne Landy, and for environmentalism like Jack Weinberg (famous in FSM as the arrested protestor in a police car immobilized by a sit-in), along with labor-oriented social scientists Nelson Lichtenstein and James Petras, and political journalist and playwright Barbara Garson, author of several great studies of American working class life like *All the Livelong Day: The Meaning and Demeaning of Routine Work* and *Down the Up Escalator: How the 99 Percent Live in the Great Recession*. My experience there again belies conservatives' unscrupulous lumping together of the communist and anticommunist left.

My second important political affinity group, also going back to New Left activism in the 1960s, has been the Radical Caucus in the Modern Language Association (MLA). Its orientation is toward studies in democratic socialism, American working-class culture, feminism, antiracism, and antimilitarism, embodied in the journal *Radical Teacher*, which since 1975 has maintained a level of scholarly quality that gives the lie to conservative derision of these fields of study. (Radical Caucus has also been more oriented toward Marxist political economy than the Marxist Literary Group in MLA, focused on European philosophical theory.) From the beginning, its most eminent, indefatigable leaders have been Richard Ohmann, Louis Kampf, Paul Lauter, and Susan O'Malley, who have produced an exemplary body of leftist criticism free from dogma or theoretical jargon.<sup>1</sup> They are high among the tenured radicals at prestige colleges whom conservatives love to hate, refusing to grant the respect their accomplishments have earned, Dick at Wesleyan and Paul at Trinity having attained endowed professorships and administrative positions and Louis (now retired, as is Dick) at MIT—where he used to teach a course with Noam Chomsky—having been elected president of the MLA for a year that was quite unrevolutionary, despite the apocalyptic alarms of conservative culture warriors. Susan, longtime activist for labor and feminism, is professor of English at Kingsborough Community College and at City University of New York ( Graduate