

Rick Perlstein on College, Horowitz, and "Intellectual Diversity"

Contributed by Chris Goff
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The deadline is fast approaching for students to submit their entries in the New York Times essay contest which poses the question: Is the college experience less critical to the nation than it was a generation ago? Readers will remember that the contest is, in part, a response to Rick Perlstein's essay "What's the Matter with College?"

Free Exchange got a chance to talk with Perlstein about the essay, his views on college, and how he sees the current debates about politics and supposed "liberal bias" on campus.

Free Exchange: What led you to write "What's the Matter with College?"

Perlstein: It wasn't an idea I dreamed up out of my head--the New York Times Magazine came to me, explaining that they were doing a special issue on college, and wanted an essay comparing the college experience today to the college experience in the 1960s. But the assignment chimed a deep cord in me. I live in a college neighborhood (my wife is a Ph.D. student) and am always seeking out interesting undergrads to spend time with, simply because I find those transition years a fascinating time of life. My intuition that college ain't what it used to be predates my work on the essay, and comes from my surprise at how alienated my most intellectually adventurous friends seemed from the University of Chicago experience. I naturally contrasted this to my own recollections at the same school in the late 1980s and early '90s, and also my historical research on college in the 1960s.

Free Exchange: In your essay, you state, "Now as then, everyone says higher education is more important than ever to America's future. But interesting enough to become a topic of national obsession? Controversial enough to fight a gubernatorial campaign over? Hardly." However, in the last few years, David Horowitz and groups like the American Council of Trustees and Alumni have been trying to force legislatures to confront "indoctrination" and the lack of so-called "intellectual diversity" on campuses. Would you characterize these campaigns as a return to the fights of the 1960s, or as something altogether different?

Perlstein: In a perverse sense--and come on, what about David Horowitz isn't perverse--Horowitz is a perfect example of my thesis, because his experience as a young man at Berkeley in the early 1960s was clearly so profound and formative he relives it every day. He's refighting the battles of the 1960s--and especially his own fall into nihilistic madness, which he's desperately trying to redeem--in his mind every day. But then, that merely makes him an exemplary man. The 1960s are a touchstone for our own cultural politics in a manner that refuses to go away. In important respects, the liberal side won those battles, at least on campus, and we can't go back. The horror the right feels when it casts its eye over the modern university is not so much its indoctrination and intellectual conformity (though that exists) but an openness unmatched by any institution in society.

The "conformity" they fight is often actually the university's "conformity" to an ideal that every idea deserves a fair hearing--which drowns out conservative assumptions taken for granted in the less open-minded precincts of society. Since the conservative assumptions don't dominate as they do elsewhere, they are presumed to be "suppressed." So why not re-fight the 1960s? Like Rambo back in Vietnam, maybe they'll get to win this time.

Free Exchange: Your essay is premised on an intriguing assumption: "College as America used to understand it is coming to an end." You compare the free-wheeling, student-driven intellectual environment of your undergraduate

experience with that of current students, which seems to be dominated by concerns of "marketability." What would you identify as the forces driving this dramatic change, and what does this portend for the future of higher education in the United States?

Perlstein: This part I wasn't able to fit into the word length the Times Magazine gave me. I don't blame the students--though surely many of the student responses to the essay will take me as blaming the students. College kids can't afford self-exploration in college, because it's so much harder to get into and stay in the middle class. It's political.

I'm always recommending a great book on the subject: "The Trap," by Daniel Brook. Every college student and recent grad should read it. Here's my review.

One of the things Dan points out is that in the early 1980s the tuition in Chicago was about a third of the annual salary of a Chicago public school teacher. Now the two figures are about equal. This against a political climate in which the maximum Pell grant, which now covers a third of the average tuition (and, of course, at Chicago the tuition is much, much higher than average), used to cover three-quarters. Meanwhile, the college loan system has been outsourced by the government to hustlers and cronies. It's not a pretty picture. This, I think, is the material base for the atrophying of college culture and vitality (which I heard about from sources at many schools, though I only talk about Chicago) we're experiencing. America will be worse off for it, I fear--because we need free spirits in order to innovate and compete.

As for the future of higher education in the United States, the problem with market thinking in American life is that it often turns out to be inherently short-term thinking--which, paradoxically, ends up weakening traditional institutions, because their value is based on that which makes them different from the rest of society. A university that seeks to "compete" by better resembling the business world harms itself in the long term in exactly this way. If scientists, for example, chase after patents at the expense of mere intellectual curiosity, what makes a university scientist different from a scientist in a corporate department of research and development? And if the scientists at a university are nothing special, than why pay good money to train at their feet?

Free Exchange: As you know, the members of the Free Exchange on Campus coalition are concerned with proposed legislation like the Academic Bill of Rights and so-called "intellectual diversity" measures that we believe would negatively impact academic freedom and impose restrictions on how professors approach controversial subjects in classrooms. How would you characterize the current state of academic freedom on American college campuses compared to 40 years ago?

Perlstein: In certain respects better, in certain respects worse. One of my interviewees was a wizened old professor who started teaching at Chicago in the 1950s. He pointed out that universities are all basically the same now; and one of the ways they're basically the same is that all professors are expected to hew to the highest values of their profession--one of those values being academic freedom. Forty years ago there were a higher percentage of teacher's colleges, denominational colleges, "agricultural and mining" colleges and all the rest whose pedagogy probably more resembled high schools, and whose professors were much less cosmopolitan people. On the other hand, another consequence of the "sameness" of more universities is a narrowing of professional concerns--all English professors think a bit more alike, in accord with the "stars" of their profession; all sociologists; all historians; etc. Some of that sameness does indeed manifest itself in what the conservatives would call "political correctness." But conservatives imagine that today's "PC" is as stultifying as the small-minded orthodoxies of a sleepy mid-level state teacher's college in 1967, they're tripping.

But then again, the true threat to "intellectual diversity" on campus is surely the hegemony of market thinking I describe. A nation of business majors is not an intellectually diverse nation.

Free Exchange: What links do you see between what occurs in college classrooms and the extracurricular learning that occurs outside of those classrooms? How do you think measures which would circumscribe how college professors deal with sensitive topics in class impact the out-of-class college experience?

Perlstein: At Chicago, even many of the people who were impressed by their classes and professors--and almost all of my interviewees were--complained that the university had bureaucratized and infantilized extracurricular life. Outside the classroom, they simply didn't feel like they were being treated like adults. Maybe it's the market mania--schools trying to "guarantee" a satisfying experience (if so it's backfiring). Maybe it's actuarial culture: schools trying to micromanage leisure to keep their students out of danger. Many professors tell me they simply wish their students had a greater sense of adventure and risk generally. They're horrified to speak out on sensitive topics. Again, I blame the political and economic climate--and the attendant fear of failure--but maybe it has something to do with the fact that you can't treat students like children outside of the classroom and expect them to act like autonomous adults inside the classroom. I don't know. I'm speculating.

Free Exchange: If you had the ability to change anything on college campuses in order to return them to their former vitality, what would you do?

Perlstein: I'm a proud man of the left, which I'm sure comes through in my essay--though I struggle to be fair to everyone, I never try to hide where I'm coming from. College should be free. Adolph Reed, in a 2003 article in the Nation, laid out a program that would have cost about \$70 billion a year, if I recall correctly. We're spending \$12 billion a month on Iraq according to the latest estimates. The investment in "human capital" would surely pay for itself many times over; better, the liberation of a generation of young people from the yawning maw of tuition and debt would release creative energies the likes this nation hasn't seen since the G.I. Bill educated a generation of men who were the first in their family to get to college after World War II.

Free Exchange: Do you have any other comments as to how your essay relates to the work we're engaged in at Free Exchange on Campus?

Perlstein: Here's the whole point of my essay: a university's value to the world outside it is directly proportionate to its difference from the world outside. Obviously, the easiest way to make campus less vital and more enervated than they are now is to turn over control of them from the faculties to state legislators. It would be death. It would take what is still the greatest university system in the world, and turn it into something feeble and wan.

Free Exchange: Thanks for both your time and your thoughts.