Jonathan Marks: *Let's Be Reasonable: a Conservative Case for Liberal Education*

Princeton University Press, 2021, 248 pp., ISBN: 978-0691193854

Jeffrey R. Collins¹

Published online: 21 June 2021

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2021

In the world university rankings of the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, fourteen of the top twenty schools are American, and American schools dominate the top hundred. The USA has one of the globe's highest rates of university educational attainment. University degrees bestow on graduates an ever-increasing income premium. Nevertheless, public estimation of American universities is in decline. In 2019, according to Pew, only half of adults viewed them positively. This poor result largely reflected a bearish attitude among conservatives. In Georgetown's "American Institutional Confidence Poll," universities ranked second from the top among Democrats, behind only Amazon and ahead of the military. Republicans ranked universities fifteenth, barely ahead of Congress and labor unions.

Universities are America's most distinguished national institutions — the envy and fondest desire of the global elite — and yet conservatives are turning on them. Jonathan Marks's *Let's Be Reasonable: A Conservative Case for Liberal Education* is an effort to explain this rising tide of hostility, and to stem it. The book is sincere and provocative, if not entirely persuasive. Marks concedes the legitimacy of conservative grievances against American higher education, but finds them exaggerated. He urges conservatives not to abandon the system, but to change it — or at least challenge it — from within. He presumably also intends to prick the consciences of the left-liberals who currently rule the university roost.

As an intervention in an intermural debate among conservatives, Marks has two foils. One is the libertarian critique of universities exemplified by Glenn Reynolds in his influential book of 2012, *The Higher Education Bubble*. While certainly agitated by an ideological conformity that often excludes

them, libertarians like Reynolds primarily criticize the university system as a market failure. They argue that rocketing tuition and valueless, politicized training will soon burst the higher education "bubble." Critiques of this kind often promote community colleges, vocational training, and online education. The idea is to make "tertiary education" less expensive, more convenient, and more productive. Marks criticizes libertarians for trading in misleading stereotypes of students trapped in "impractical, highly politicized, humanities majors" and working off "mountains of debt" (typically as baristas) (p. 55). He argues that such students are rare, and that most pursue more practical degrees. The student debt crisis and enrollment collapses, he claims, are largely confined to upstart "for profit" universities. Writes Marks: "the higher education bubble, if we can speak of one at all, isn't a creature of irresponsible hidebound colleges that are being disrupted by innovators. It's the supposed innovators who best fit the description of irresponsible institutions signing up students who can't afford college and leaving them without the resources to pay for their loans" (p. 57).

Perhaps the most appealing feature of Marks's book is his egalitarian desire to prevent the utilitarian mood exemplified by Reynolds from rendering the humanities, and liberal education generally, the hedged preserve of the privileged. He commends the estimable social critic Earl Shorris, founder of the Clemente Course in the Humanities, which sought to bring these "elite" subjects to "those in economic distress." Shorris, Marks acutely observes, "pitche[d] his course as a way of learning what rich people learn" (p. 83).

Marks might have spent more time dissecting the libertarian market critique of higher education, which has a populist and utilitarian flavor appealing on the left as well as the right. (Note President Biden's proposal to massively subsidize and thus favor community colleges over four-year institutions, and recall the spirit of President Obama's famous put down of art historians.) He dispenses with Reynolds in a few pages and is

✉ Jeffrey R. Collins
collinsj@queensu.ca

¹ Queens University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada

more interested in the appeal that Reynolds's book enjoyed among more traditional conservatives such as George Will and William Bennet, figures who might be expected to better appreciate the traditional liberal arts. Their cheer leading for institutional collapse, he suspects, reflects a general conservative despair over the aggressive ideological monoculture that has overtaken American higher education.

Here, Marks is more sympathetic, and his counter-case more nuanced. His book recounts some of the worse ideological excesses of recent university life: the ritual shaming and literal mobbing of Yale's Erika and Nicholas Christakis for a maladroit comment about Halloween costumes, an episode disgracefully enabled by a petrified administration; the confrontational activism at Evergreen State College; and the deplatforming riots at Berkeley and Middlebury College. Disgusted by these episodes, Marks nevertheless considers them atypical, and argues that conservatives are exaggerating the ideological intolerance of higher education. Conservatives are, furthermore, overly pessimistic about their own capacity, even as a beleaguered minority, to challenge the prevailing culture of universities.

Marks begins by offering his own understanding of liberal education, which includes currently disfavored humanities and social science fields (such as his own field of politics). He rejects voguish defenses of liberal education as a source of "useful skills" and "social responsibility." In this vein, he can be droll: "Unfortunately, from Harvard on down, the statements of purpose and principle that supposedly animate our colleges and universities may as well have been produced by Mad Libs. Adjectives, like integrative, interdisciplinary, interconnected, entrepreneurial, twenty-first century, complex, dynamic, and problem-solving, are distributed among brochures as if at random to make it appear that something buzzy is going on" (p. 11).

Marks offers an alternative. Proper liberal education aims not just at useful knowledge, nor at cocktail party "cultural literacy," nor at specific political outcomes considered "socially just" by prevailing authorities. It instead seeks to form "reasonable people" of a specific sort. Marks distinguishes "competent users of reason, who may be highly skilled at making weak arguments seem strong, and reasonable people, between an intellectual community and a debate team" (p. x). In his account, our society is full of smart rationalizers. Politically polarized and segregated, baited by the narcissistic allures of social media, we indulge motivated reasoning and compulsive point scoring. We seek largely to affirm, rather than challenge, our own beliefs and "identities." We crave the applause of the like-minded. We delight more in needling and irritating opponents than in convincing them. We are, in a phrase Marks borrows from John Locke, "logical chicaners" (p. 68).

Who can dispute this diagnosis? Or the appeal of Marks's ideal of reason as open-minded inquiry, a willingness to test our own beliefs in dialogue with others? Liberal education

should cultivate this ideal, and too often, the politicized university fails to do so. Marks presents this as a conservative vision of education. It is really more of a liberal ideal drawn from the Enlightenment. Marks indeed models it on the educational writings of Locke, particularly his posthumous *Of the Conduct of the Understanding* (which was planned as an extensive addition to his preeminent *Essay concerning Human Understanding*). "Reasonable people disagree," write Marks, "and so, like Locke, we conservatives value 'the opposite arguings of men of parts, showing the different sides of things and their various aspects and probabilities'" (p. xi). Like Locke, we should "learn to yield to 'plain reason and the conviction of clear arguments'," and should feel shame when we instead espouse — however cleverly — mere dogma (p. 5). Though Marks mostly invokes Locke, the intellectual lineage he favors runs from the blank slate empiricism of Locke, through the probabilistic skepticism of Hume, the autonomous reasoning of Kant, to the liberalism of Mill.

The characterization is defensible in our current deconstructive, post-modern academic era, but these were not exactly "conservative" figures in their own time. Marks values the heroically autonomous reasoner, "daring to know," generally contemptuous — or at least suspicious — of intellectual authority. The canon, and the past, operate as a storehouse of smart and diverse opinions, all of which, when properly tested, might inform the personal convictions of a liberal-minded individual. The traditional, the customary, or the orthodox hold no authority beyond this. The university then becomes a Popper-like laboratory for reasoners to engage in intellectual experimentation. The "knowledge" thus produced is provisional, individual, and inescapably diverse. It can be judged only by testing its methodological integrity and authenticity. "The highest aim of liberal education" is not a body of specific truths, "but a kind of person" (p. 63). Liberal education, writes Marks, is an "education in freedom" (p. 67).

Again, this ideal is only "conservative" because it is now old-fashioned and increasingly unfashionable. It is really a classically liberal interpretation of the liberal arts. It excludes an alternate conservative tradition, best exemplified by Cardinal Newman, and growing from the now desiccated Christian roots of the European university. To Newman, the university should primarily disseminate foundational knowledge, rather than "advance" new discoveries (which he felt better done by scholarly academies), or pursue "useful" political ends. Newman's university was nourished by wisdom and tradition accumulated outside of its walls (for Newman in the Catholic Church). Only willful fools believe themselves capable of constantly evaluating and testing truth claims, arrogantly judging all intellectual authorities and bequeathed truths by the measure of individual conscience.

For universities, preserving tradition and superseding it are plausible, but potentially contradictory, ends. That great advocate of core education, Robert Maynard Hutchins — whom

Marks admires — tried to reconcile this conflict by presenting “the spirit of inquiry” itself as the essence of “Western civilization.” “Nothing is to remain undiscussed.” Hutchins wrote in 1952. “Everybody is to speak his mind. No proposition is to be left unexamined.” Anyone passingly familiar with the history of “Western” universities will recognize this as a pious, liberal reverie. Newman’s vision was in most respects more historically accurate. Only recently have universities become broadly secular institutions that supposedly eschew any guiding orthodoxy.

Marks shadow boxes with Newman by explicitly engaging the Catholic political theorist Patrick Deneen of Notre Dame. To Marks, Deneen’s anti-liberalism (presented in his 2018 *Why Liberalism Failed*) represents a quixotic desire to restore a Christian moral agreement based on appeal to an authoritative tradition. Deneen, he claims, shares with the intolerant left a suspicion of moral neutrality and autonomous individuality, a desire to promulgate foundational truths rather than to preserve individual academic freedom. However appealing his critique of liberalism might be to some conservatives, Marks suggests, Deneen risks a shooting war over “foundational knowledge” that his side cannot presently win. To abandon the liberal university is to abandon the academic freedom that is the only inlet for conservative ideas.

In practical terms, it is hard to disagree with Marks that a liberal vision of open exchange is probably the best *modus vivendi* presently available to academic conservatives of any stripe. But in the faceoff between Marks and Deneen, we glimpse a fracture in modern conservatism that goes even deeper than the divide over libertarianism: namely, a split opened up by secularism. By pitting the politicized, deconstructive university with the vision of Locke (and Kant, and Mill), Marks certainly has identified some striking contrasts. But he may underestimate how entwined the traditional university was with Christian culture, and how difficult it is for some conservatives to accept the methodological naturalism, secularity, and implicit atheism of the post-Christian university. The ideological crisis of the modern university reflects, in this sense, the yawning moral disagreements that now disquiet Western society as a whole. Marks may evade the implications of this intractable problem by choosing the pious, Christian Locke as his hero, rather than the atheistic Mill. But, on the whole, where Marks seeks to train students to “reason” honestly for themselves, a conservative like Deneen is seeking something more akin to “right reason” and spiritual formation. Deneen will be inclined to retreat to, and revive, Christian educational institutions. Marks seeks to re-reconcile conservatives to the secular, liberal university. Deneen argues that “academic freedom” naively valorizing individual emancipation and diversity will slide toward a liberal perfectionism. Speech codes, safe spaces, cancel culture, de-platforming, trigger-warnings, and the policing of “micro-aggressions”: to Marks, these are lapses from a shared ideal of intellectual

liberality; to Deneen, they are the inevitable consequences of a new, aggressive (and false) orthodoxy. Marks pushes hard against what he presents as Deneen’s hopeless yearning for a world lost. He sides with Alan Bloom and William F. Buckley in holding that “the mere determination to take arguments seriously, in an atmosphere otherwise hostile to conservative principles, is of great value” (111).

Perhaps it is because of the limited nature of his particular understanding of conservatism that Marks is more optimistic than Deneen about the current state of play in American universities. His classic liberalism will certainly find more takers on current faculties than Deneen’s integrated Christian foundationalism. Marks’s Lockean-conservative project seeks to save the humanities and social sciences from terminal “wokeness,” and to vindicate instruction in the Western canon of literature and philosophy as an aspect of broad-minded intellectual engagement. In surveying the prospects for this project, Marks counsels against despair. He points to the relative (and bipartisan) success of projects such as Jonathan Haidt’s “Heterodox Academy” and the “Foundation for Individual Rights in Education” (FIRE), and to the broad institutional adoption of principles of free inquiry first developed at the University of Chicago.

Marks implicitly identifies, and sometimes conflates, two separate obstacles to his project. The first is the gatekeeping that keeps conservative scholars outside the walls of academia, and secures a left-leaning intellectual and political monoculture. The second is the stifling of academic freedom that results from this development, and is further encouraged by the paternalistic safetyism (safe spaces, de-platforming, trigger warnings) demanded by some students and provided by many university administrations.

These are really two distinct problems. Robust academic freedom and debate will not matter much if only one side of any debate is present. It is telling in this regard that leftist concerns about academic freedom tend to condemn interference from outside the university (meddling lawmakers and conservative “watchdog” groups), while conservatives condemn an intolerant consensus within universities.

Marks does little to diffuse the belief that universities are prejudiced against conservative scholars and students in hiring and graduate school admission. He concedes the imbalance of faculty politics, but he is reluctant to attribute this to systematic gate-keeping. In this he puts too much weight on his personal experience of “get[ting] along all right” with left-wing faculty (p. 34). He is also inattentive to the curricular mandates (“decolonization,” for instance) that threaten the very survival of the fields — such as early modern European history, or Western political thought — that might appeal to more tradition-minded scholars, and that strike the prevailing faculty consensus as too “white” or “male” or “canonical.” He thus waives away what for most conservatives is problem number one: exclusion.

Instead, he tries to rally what he hopes is a silent academic majority: the small conservative cohort and the larger “traditional liberal” one that might together defend core education, exploration of the canon, and a free exchange of ideas that would include conservative views and texts. Part of his optimism is his own success teaching the philosophical canon at non high-flying institutions (Carthage and Ursinus Colleges). Again, this anecdotal evidence is uplifting, but not exactly overwhelming. Somewhat more compelling is his argument that the “wokeness” of present universities is the work of a dedicated minority overbearing cautious administrators and could be countered by an equally dedicated minority with different priorities. “A mentor taught me,” he writes, “referring to our department, that anyone who cared about departmental affairs could have a disproportionate influence over them, because most department members . . . wanted to do their work without being bothered. The same is true of college campuses in general, and that helps explain why, even though the far left is a small minority on most campuses, far-leftists have an outsized influence” (p. 37). This is a fair point. Once hired, academic conservatives enjoy considerable job protection, and should be bolder than they tend to be in lobbying for hiring and curricular decisions that they favor. They might find more allies among the old liberals than they expect, and among students. Cautious administrators used to placating the left might then respond to counter-pressures. To the extent that the precipitous decline of humanities enrollments in particular reflects, at least in part, the semi-suicidal and self-loathing ideological orientation of those disciplines, more activism from the traditionalist rump of faculty could do these fields some good.

As rallying cries go, this is all a bit unsteady: a “go get ’em” speech to a team losing by 30 in the final minute of the game. Marks’s book contains a lot of common sense. It is convincing in arguing that the libertarian market critique of universities is exaggerated, as is the popular belief that universities are, in ideological terms, totalitarian indoctrination mills. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for conservative professors to have Marks’s experience (or indeed the present reviewer’s) of being generally accepted and respected by predominantly left-wing colleagues. And yet one cannot help but feel that Marks’s book misses the wood for the trees. Observing that problems are exaggerated does not entirely solve them. Both qualitative experience and quantitative data demonstrate that the absence of conservatives from university faculties is a worsening problem, and that important university constituencies are faltering in their support for academic freedom. These developments are damaging both the educational offerings and the public standing of universities.

Marks’s book is merely the latest (and gentlest) in a series of recent pieces seeking to deflate the conservative case against higher education. Most of these emit from the left, and engage in a certain amount of obfuscation. They

sometimes highlight military academies and religious schools, where one can occasionally find concentrated gatherings of more conservative faculty. But this confuses the average for the mean and, in fact, demonstrates the sequestration of conservative academics. Another strategy is to identify disciplines where conservatives are, if not exactly plentiful, less dramatically underrepresented. Here again, however, this argument implicitly defeats itself: conservatives are more present (relatively) in fields such as engineering or medicine that are basically technical. All the more glaring then, and requiring explanation, is their absence from social science and humanities departments where political orientation is more pertinent. That ideological uniformity in history or political science is balanced by apolitical schools of dentistry is not an argument to be taken seriously. Nor does the relative political pluralism of community colleges compensate for the ideological monoculture that exists in the Ivy League and its peers.

In the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Naomi Oreskes and Charlie Tyson recently deflected conservative criticism by citing statistics that “moderates” (not conservatives) “outnumber liberals in every institution type except private liberal-arts colleges and elite Ph.D.-granting institutions.” It is telling how carefully this claim is parsed.¹ Oreskes and Tyson, in any case, betray the circularity of their reasoning when they later concede the liberal slant of higher education, but excuse it by claiming that “the professoriate is representative both of the pool of Ph.D.-holders from which it draws and of the population of highly educated Americans in general.” It does not seem to have occurred to them that the particularly strong political bias of Ph.D. granting institutions may go some way toward explaining the overall political profile of the supply of Ph.D. holders available for hire. Furthermore, that “higher education has a liberalizing effect on social and political views” is itself something of a “chicken or egg” argument. Do universities reflect a left wing consensus among their constituencies, or produce it? Oreskes and Tyson show their cards in asserting that “some ‘conservative’ ideas, while perhaps sincerely held, are not supported by the standards of evidence that the academy rightly demands.” (Among their strained examples of this is supposed conservative hostility to coronavirus mitigation measures that they, as a historian and an English student, favor as “scientific.”) But that this liberalizing effect might be produced by institutional conformism and gate-keeping (rather than reflective of the “left wing” nature of truth), is suggested by the historical contingency of the university’s present ideological slant.

The first serious surveys of faculty political views (conducted by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education) date only to the late 1960s, by which time there had likely already been some slide left. Nevertheless, these early surveys found that nearly 30% of faculty identified as conservative, and that

¹ <https://www.chronicle.com/article/is-academe-awash-in-liberal-bias>

conservatives together with moderates outnumbered liberals by nearly 10 percentage points. In recent years, by contrast, conservatives have plunged to 9% representation (a decline of two-thirds), and professors of left-liberal inclination now outnumber the combined forces of conservatives and moderates by 20 percentage points, with the imbalance much more severe than this in the humanities and social sciences. Surveys by the Higher Education Research Institute confirm that this shift has largely occurred since 1998. Left wing slant is thus a contingent matter, not a timeless one, and is particularly pronounced in more interpretive and subjective disciplines such as history, literature, politics, and ethnic studies. To explain all of this by invoking “evidentiary standards” reflecting a “left wing” reality is nothing more than special pleading.

A second strategy for deflecting criticism of the left leaning university is to change the question entirely. The problem, by this logic, is not how university teach and research, but how they are governed. Leftists may own the classrooms, but CEOs and MBAs dominate trustee boards and the ranks of rich alumni and donors. Administrations answer to these latter parties and have increasingly marginalized faculties, which may be leftist, but are powerless. Presto, universities are actually “right wing” institutions. The historian Asheesh Siddique has recently argued that “gauging political preferences of employees is an impoverished way of understanding the ideology of an institution. To actually do so, you must look at who runs it — and in the case of the American university, that is no longer the professoriate.”² This argument certainly identifies some worrying trends in university governance, which is indeed increasingly dominated by engorged administrations indifferent to faculties (which are themselves smaller and more part-time). These trends have been well discussed by Larry Gerber (*The Rise and Decline of Faculty Governance*, 2014) and Benjamin Ginsburg (*The Fall of the Faculty*, 2011). However, in the present context, the argument tendentiously treats phenomena such as corporatization as “conservative” (a very tenuous proposition, particularly in our era of corporate activism). It also minimizes the extensive power that faculty retain over hiring, curriculum, and teaching practices. Finally, it conflates two meanings of “conservatism”: political or ideological conservatism, and conservatism defined as institutional caution.

A final question is whether the framing of grievances against American universities as specifically “conservative” might unjustifiably minimize the extent of the real challenges facing them. The headline polarization over the popularity of universities conceals some important areas of consensus. According to Pew, overwhelming majorities of both parties consider university tuition too high (as well they might. It has outpaced inflation for decades). There is broad agreement that the student loan system has become bloated and dysfunctional.

These developments have spawned aggressive Democratic plans for public funding that risk turning universities into public utilities. The excellence of American higher education is the achievement of a complex institutional ecology: private and public institutions, large research universities and small liberal arts colleges, four-year and two-year degrees, community colleges and vocational schools alongside highly selective universities. This plurality has preserved wide access and, in many quarters, affordability, but allowed elite (and even middle-ranked) institutions to amass resources and preserve institutional autonomy. The loss of that autonomy to a state paymaster with purely utilitarian priorities, and a fickle public to placate, would prove damaging, as it has in much of Europe. In alienating conservatives, America’s distinguished private universities have distained the most reliable defenders of their autonomy from the state. They may live to regret this. Facing what they regard as intractable bias against conservatives, some elected Republicans have begun to threaten the funding and tax privileges of universities. More and more of them are, to Marks’s dismay, abandoning the cause of academic freedom, and publically campaigning against the perceived ideological bias of higher education. A dangerous escalation has begun, a mutual, reactive ratcheting up of interference from outside the university and intellectual conformity within it.

Universities have crept onto even thinner ice with their admissions practices. Here again, it is ill-advised for universities to fixate on specifically conservative critics. According to Pew, fully 73% of Americans (including large majorities of black and Hispanic Americans) think that race and ethnicity should not be considered at all in university admissions. A USA Today poll in 2019 found large majorities opposing admission advantages for athletes and legacy students, and fully 83% opposing such advantages for the children of donors.

Standard admission practices, in short, are staggeringly unpopular. Emboldened by tentative and unclear judicial guidance, selective American universities have become brazen in arbitrarily curating their entering classes. In the interest of a certain conception of diversity, they provide not modest but often enormous advantages to racialized applicants (from various backgrounds, not always disadvantaged), and often provide them with greatly enhanced financial support. This impinges on applicants considered less relevantly “diverse” (most dramatically Asians). The goal of affirmative action is undoubtedly noble and, in some measure, justifiable, but in practice seems to outstrip the “narrowly tailored” and “limited in time” measures upheld by the Supreme Court in 2003. This sacrifice for the common good, moreover, is not evenly shared, and is particularly galling given the unwillingness of universities to pinch their own interests when admitting students. The children of the rich and powerful are often waved to the front of the line. (A recent lawsuit revealed that 10% of Harvard’s recent entering classes were admitted from a “Dean’s Interest List” of the wealthy and connected. The

² <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/campus-cancel-culture-university-boards>

acceptance rate of those on this list was 42%, nine times the overall acceptance rate.) The “charitable” donations that buy this “most favored” status are tax deductible, so average tax payers are partially subsidizing a system that disadvantages them. There is, furthermore, every reason to suspect that the increasing number of schools not requiring (or even forbidding) the submission of standardized test scores is mainly seeking to remove objective measures of the extent to which they are advantaging applicants in favored categories. Reparatory sacrifices are thus demanded of middle-class families, allowing universities some cheap grace while they continue their money spinning. Whether the combined effects of these admission policies decrease or increase social inequities is an open question at best.

Conservatives, agitated by their marginalization from higher education, are often the loudest voices condemning these practices. Universities are encouraged by this contingency to dismiss their criticism as ideologically unsound. But

even if they could afford to alienate half of the country (and they cannot), they would be wise to recognize the broader consensus that often undergirds criticism explicitly voiced by conservatives. They might also reflect on the threat to their institutional autonomy posed by an overreliance on the political left. It may be that alongside Marks’s case to conservatives for the university, universities need to read a case for conservative allies.

Publisher’s Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Jeffrey R. Collins is Associate Professor of History at Queens University, Ontario. His most recent book is *In the Shadow of Leviathan: John Locke and the Politics of Conscience* (2020, Cambridge University Press).