

The Opportunity Cost of Obsolete Beliefs in Academia

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After UCLAprofs.com, a right-wing alumni website, named UCLA Education Professor Peter McLaren “the worst of the worst” last month he responded by calling the website “a reactionary form of McCarthyism.” Although UCLAprofs.com is a ranting, mean-spirited site, it is nonetheless absurd to call this “McCarthyism.” McCarthy was frightening because he was using the threat of government power to intimidate. Although UCLAprofs.com originally offered students cash for recording professors’ lectures, (the offer was rescinded in the face of threatened legal action from UCLA), this is not government intimidation.

One of the great democratic reforms of the 60s was the Open Meetings Acts that made public officials more accountable to the public. UCLAprofs.com, despite the ranting, is yet another positive move forward towards greater transparency and accountability in society. Public universities (and all universities that receive public funding) should be accountable to the public and serve the public good. It seems odd that Leftist enthusiasts for democracy should be hostile to the notion that public servants should be accountable to the people. And government-funded professors are public servants; their activities ought to be scrutinized accordingly.

Because of our obligation to scrutinize the work of public servants, it is therefore unfortunate that only conservative voices are criticizing academia. Although I am a great believer in academic freedom and as culturally liberal as almost anyone in academia, the more distance I gain from academic life the more I am struck by the extent to which all too often academic opinion is obsolete.

Listen to McLaren, for instance, describe one of his education courses (in 2003):

“We begin by examining the intrinsically exploitative nature of capitalist society, using some introductory texts and essays by Bertell Ollman, and then tackle the difficult task of reading of *Capital*, Volume 1, and the labor theory of value. We look at this issue from the perspective from a number of Marxist orientations and I try to present the case that capitalism can’t be reformed and still remain capitalism.”

I am at first saddened, and then disgusted, at the extent to which McLaren is wasting his students’ time.

The 20th century was a violent and tragic century because in its early years both the left and the right deserted classical liberalism. We can be optimistic about a 21st century to the extent market democracies spread around the world. Although there are still serious challenges in launching successful market economies in many nations, we need to work together to help those nations succeed in growing market economies. McLaren is not helping this cause.

Oxfam is encouraging global trade to alleviate global poverty. Mohammad Yunus, of Bangladesh, launched a microfinance movement that has made successful entrepreneurs out of millions of women in the developing world. Hernando De Soto, of Peru, has launched a global program to give property rights to squatters around the world and to eliminate the over-regulation that prevents them from becoming successful entrepreneurs. Bill Clinton describes De Soto's work as "The most promising anti-poverty initiative in the world." These are heroic movements that deserve our attention and support. And yet when I talked to a recent college graduate last year who had majored in "Globalization," she had not heard of any of these initiatives. It was as if a computer science graduate had not heard of the personal computer: How could this be?

In too many cases professors in the humanities and social sciences (outside economics) are unreconstructed Leftists. Bertell Ollman, whose Marxists texts are used by McLaren, published the following in September 1991:

"Paradoxically enough, the objective conditions for socialism in the USSR are now largely present, but because of the unhappy experience with a regime that called itself 'socialist' the subjective conditions are absent . . . on the other hand . . . the Soviet Union might be saved by a socialist revolution in the West as our capitalist economy goes into a tailspin."

Note that September 1991 is two years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and indeed, is in the midst of the collapse of the Soviet Union. This absurdity was published by the American Political Science Association (APSA), the leading organization of academic political scientists.

It is odd enough that the APSA considered Ollman's opinions worthy of academic publication at the time; it is odder still that he was given a lifetime achievement award by the APSA in 2001. It is as if the Association for Computing Machinery was to give a lifetime achievement award to a sliderule manufacturer in 2001. And when I read that McLaren is using Ollman's texts in *education* courses I really have to wonder about his judgment. Wouldn't it be more useful for people in education courses to learn how to help students learn?

It would be one thing if these people were fringe figures. But not only is Ollman an APSA-award winner, McLaren is a global academic superstar for his work in "critical pedagogy," with institutes being named after him in Mexico and Argentina.

As it turns out, I am an expert in a sort of "critical pedagogy" of my own creation. And I would be willing to bet that if 100 registered Democrats in the tech field examined both my work and McLaren's work, upwards of 80% (and quite possibly 100%) would agree that my work would be more helpful to inner city students than is his, much as the work of Yunus and De Soto is more valuable for global development than is thought of Ollman. And yet McLaren is training the next generation of urban educators in America, and I am not.

We need to speak truth to power. And the truth that we need to speak is that the academics who control the publishing of textbooks and curricula, teacher licensure and the education of most journalists, are in many cases out of touch with reality. They continue to live in 1968, a world in

which people used sliderules and typewriters and J.K. Gailbraith could claim, “the entrepreneur no longer exists in the mature industrial enterprise.”

We now live in a dynamic world of tech entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship, and micro-entrepreneurship, in which we recognize that decentralized systems beat command and control systems, and in which the entire corpus of Marxist thought is as outdated as a sliderule. People like me are not allowed to create the personal computers of 21st century education because people like Peter McLaren control teacher education and certification on behalf of a belief system that is as obsolete as are the machine tools of mid-20th century sliderule manufacturers. The opportunity cost of allowing the tenured radicals to continue to control academic life may be compared to the opportunity cost of allowing the sliderule manufacturers to have controlled the “calculation” business from 1968 onwards. Think about that critically.

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