

American '68ers, the Left Academy and the Backlash Contested Terrains on Campus

By Howard Brick

WRITING IN 1942, the conservative economist Joseph Schumpeter (1883-1950) remarked that capitalism was doomed to decay — not by means of economic breakdown, he said, but rather under assault from a variety of social, cultural and political forces. Among those, he highlighted the temper of modern intellectual life, which he believed encourages relentless criticism and thereby erodes the authority of wealth and power — or as he put it more elegantly, “rubs off all the glamour of super-empirical sanction from every species of classwise rights.”¹

It would have been hard for New Leftists in the 1960s, looking back across the experience of academic life through the Cold War and Red Scare of the 1950s, to give much credence to Schumpeter’s conviction that postwar intellectuals made up a subversive force. Instead, the complicity of academic institutions with the bulwarks of wealth and power seemed more to the point.

Yet not long after the turbulent year of 1968, the corporate lawyer Lewis F. Powell Jr., soon to be elevated to the Supreme Court, wrote a confidential report for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce echoing Schumpeter’s perspective: “One of the bewildering paradoxes of our time is the extent to which the enterprise system tolerates, if not participates in its own destruction.” Indeed, of that “attack on the American free enterprise system,” Powell argued, “there is reason to believe that the campus is the single most dynamic source.”²

Usually, we have good reason to discount such right-wing alarms. Consider, for instance, the 2018 Council of Economic Advisers’ report putting Bernie Sanders in the same basket of socialist agitators as Marx, Lenin, and Mao.

Yet there was something to Powell’s view. Not least among the consequences of the Left’s “1968” was the radicalization of students and younger scholars aiming to transform academic disciplines and create new ones — that is, to reconstruct the university by revolutionizing the production of knowledge. From the campus-rocking campaigns by students of color for Black, Chicano, and third-world studies to the formation of “radical caucuses” in many fields of the humanities and social sciences — to be followed shortly afterwards by the bottom-up building of Women’s Studies — the seeds of a new “Left Academy” sprouted 50 years ago, principally in the years from 1967 to 1969.

Although these academic movements, like so many other initiatives of the late 1960s, failed to turn their most far-reaching ambitions into institutional facts, they proved impressively productive in intellectual innovations. Far too easy to mock

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as a matter of “marching on the English Department” rather than the Winter Palace, the radical academy born of '68 turned elements of today’s knowledge base significantly leftward — an enduring achievement that has elicited a renewed right-wing backlash now seeking to re-conquer university life. As of yet, the now half-century-old current of left-leaning critical scholarship has shown a fair degree of strength and determination to withstand the attack.

A Heritage of Left Education

The history of left-wing alternative education in the United States is long, dating from children’s primers fashioned by Abolitionists and the schooling built into Fourierist and other utopian 19th-century colonies. Socialists and Communists ventured onto the turf of the “higher learning” (Thorstein Veblen’s term for university scholarship) by establishing the Rand School of Social Science and Popular Front institutes such as the Jefferson School of Social Science. These served in part to shelter persecuted left-wing scholars: the radical economist Scott Nearing, dismissed from the University of Pennsylvania, taught at the Rand School in the 1920s, and alleged Communists sacked from City College of New York in the early 1940s found refuge at Jefferson.

In addition, nonpartisan training centers such as Brookwood Labor College and Highlander Folk School actually seeded social movements with skilled organizers. Highlander’s Septima Clark (1898-1987) devised neighbor-taught adult literacy classes that directly inspired the “freedom schools” erected to promote voter registration during Mississippi Summer in 1964. Following the Vietnam War teach-ins of 1965, a dozen or so self-styled “free universities” sprouted by 1966.

Left Entry to the Academy

The campaigns of 1967-1969 represented a new stage in the history of left-wing scholarship, one that carried a daring ambition: they aimed not to foster alternative education by seceding from the mainstream institutions but rather to reconstruct teaching, learning, and research right at the heart of the system, building a new dissenting academy within established colleges and universities.

This move, which I call Left Entry, comprised three main dimensions: 1) Black Studies/Chicano Studies (as those fields were known at the time), 2) the “radical caucuses” in the disciplines, and 3) the slightly later establishment of Women’s Studies. Taken together these initiatives, now 50 years old, have played a significant role in reshaping U.S. higher education in the decades since, despite a great deal of conservative resistance and what appears now to be a mounting counter-attack.



A coalition among students of color led the Third World Liberation Front at Berkeley in early 1969, campaigning for a College of Ethnic Studies, as year-long strike for Black and ethnic studies continued at San Francisco State College. From left, activists Charles Brown, of the Afro-American Students Union; Ysidro Macias, of the Mexican-American Student Confederation; LaNada Means, of the Native American Student Union; and Stan Kadani, of the Asian American Political Alliance, walk down Bancroft Way. Chicano Studies Program Records, Ethnic Studies Library, UC Berkeley, CS ARC 2009/1, Carton 1, Folder 14

Eruption on Campus

Early in March 1968, a five-day building occupation at Howard University in Washington, D. C. became one of the first student protests that “demanded a role in the definition and production of scholarly knowledge,” according to historian Martha Biondi.³ Just before this moment, standard civil rights demands were still very much on the table: students at the historically Black South Carolina State University in Orangeburg, S.C. sought to desegregate a bowling alley and other shops in the town when their protest meeting was attacked by state police, leaving three dead and dozens injured.

Outrage over the Orangeburg massacre stirred students at Howard, already embroiled with conservative administrators over harsh discipline meted out to antiwar protesters, to take over a university assembly and demand Howard’s transformation into “a new Black University” offering African-American studies, a “black awareness institute,” and greater student and faculty autonomy.⁴ Similar initiatives struck many other historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) both before and after Martin Luther King’s assassination in April.

Meanwhile, Black students at predominantly white institutions such as Wellesley College soon raised demands for more Black admissions and appointments of Black faculty. Calls for a new Black Studies program were part of the May student strike at Columbia University. An even more explosive student strike, stretching through much of the 1968-69 academic year at San Francisco State College, put independent Black Studies and “ethnic studies” departments (the latter understood in multi-racial or “third world” terms) at the forefront, to be followed by upheavals at Berkeley (January through March 1969), Harvard University (April 1969) and the University of Michigan’s Black Action Movement (Winter 1970).

The first Department of Mexican American Studies was established at California State College in Los Angeles, and after the April 1969 formation of the Chicano student group MEChA, demands proliferated for Chicano Studies departments, programs, and research centers.

In part, these campaigns concerned the content of teaching and learning but, at least at first, those matters implied a further challenge to the nature of scholarly authority and even the character and social purpose of knowledge as such. That challenge had origins in the practice of egalitarian, participatory education that accompanied social-movement organizing from Highlander to Mississippi Summer.

Compounding those experiences, a new radical literature on schooling neared its peak at this time both within the United States and abroad. The Brazilian Paulo Freire offered his insurgent, anti-hierarchical, and anti-colonial model of education in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, first published in 1968 and quickly brought to the United States in English translation by 1970.⁵

At Yale University, where faculty members wondered whether Black studies was “intellectually defensible” as a scholarly field, Black Student Alliance leader (and later a respected historian) Armstead Robinson asked why they could not grant “the possibility that there are things worth teaching of which even most academicians may be unaware.”⁶ At San Francisco State, strikers had called for open admissions and programs controlled by students and faculty of color; these terms alone, they believed, provided the basic conditions needed to educate young people who could return to their communities ready to foster social change there.

Here was a militant program of what would be called today, in blander terms and with far lesser ambition, “community engagement.” At the time, however, imagining new means to



Historians Marilyn Young (left) and Howard Zinn (center), both active in the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, as part of an affinity group protesting the Vietnam War, Washington, D.C., May 1, 1971. To the immediate right of Zinn and behind are Daniel Ellsberg and Noam Chomsky.

create knowledge and act on it arose from the dynamics of collective action. As students and young faculty confronted university administrations and police repression they imagined a new world both within and beyond the campus.

In all three sectors of the 1967-69 academic left turn, groups of activist intellectuals consciously wedded their incubation of critical ideas with their experience of political organizing. In the following years, scholarly initiatives on the left frequently took the form of “collectives” hammering out declarations of principle, protest actions, and publishing ventures in intensive group collaboration.⁷

At Yale, Robinson regarded Black Studies as “the cutting edge of a revolution in American education,” one that aimed to uproot the white supremacy running through “western” culture. At Berkeley, where the Third World Liberation Front initiated a tumultuous student strike, the sociologist Andrew Billingsley said that Black Studies, like the program he helped build there, “provides us with an opportunity to dream of things that never were and to ask why not.”⁸

Genesis of the Radical Caucuses

Radical caucuses in the disciplines had a different lineage, which ran through a combination of the antiwar movement and the maturation of early New Leftists — often “graduates” of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) who were 5-10 years older than the undergraduates flooding into that organization as it was about to burst apart.

Starting in the summer and fall of 1967, veteran SDSers such as Richard Rothstein, Alan Haber and Heather Booth contributed to a *Radicals in the Professions Newsletter* that reported on an array of initiatives: how to act “as a musician and a radical;” teachers developing “counter-curricula” in U.S. history, on Vietnam, and in mathematics; and meetings by left-wing graduate students targeting the conservative leaderships of the academic professional societies.⁹

Karen Sacks led a contingent of graduate students from the University of Michigan to the American Anthropological Association meeting, convening an informal session there

regarding “radicals in anthropology” attended by two hundred. Literary scholar Paul Lauter reported on “Faculty Action against the war”; another report noted the formation of a Caucus for a New Political Science, claiming at the annual convention that the discipline had “become a servant of the government” and demanding a full day of convention panels devoted to Vietnam.¹⁰

The organization of these radical caucuses usually stemmed from agitation by young scholars pushing the academic professional societies to denounce the war. By spring 1968, a broad-based New University Conference (NUC) was created, which in turn promoted caucus organization in other disciplines.¹¹

At the same time, the *Radicals in the Professions Newsletter*, taken over by the incipient Weatherman circle in Ann Arbor, became *Something Else!*, declaring that “often ‘career’ demands conflict with ‘cadre’ needs of the movement” and that making one’s career “relevant” to the movement was a “misplaced sense of priorities.”¹² Notwithstanding that sort of hyper-militancy (and anti-intellectualism) the NUC persisted in its aim to build what might be called a Left Academy.

Among the most prominent organizations to emerge from 1967 to 1969 were the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars (CCAS) and the Union of Radical Political Economics (URPE), along with the Sociology Liberation Movement and radical caucuses in English, history, psychiatry, American Studies, geography and more. When the professional association of physicists, the American Physical Society, rejected a proposal to declare its opposition to the Vietnam War, dissidents in January 1969 formed Scientists and Engineers for Social and Political Action, renamed Science for the People at the end of that year.¹³

Looking on as this scholarly protest percolated was the director of Pantheon Books, André Schiffrin (1935-2013), a French-born, anti-Stalinist socialist who was active both in early SDS and the antiwar movement. Schiffrin rallied a number of left-wing academics to prepare “antitextbooks,” a series that began with Theodore Roszak’s *The Dissenting*

Academy (1968). The very name given to the series signaled a general assault on the idea that a field's knowledge could be summed up in single-voiced, consensual and disinterested way, as standard textbooks assumed.

All the dissenting caucuses challenged the notion of "objectivity" that prevailed at the time: first, the academic establishment's claims to political neutrality veiled its affiliation (and service) to oppressive power in the society at large, and second, by affirming an oppositional political commitment and pursuing the cause of human liberation, radical scholars could produce more valid insights into social reality. The antitextbooks ranged from a volume on American history, *Towards a New Past* (1968) edited by Barton Bernstein, and *America's Asia* (1971) by CCAS activists Edward Friedman and Mark Selden to *Reinventing Anthropology* (1972), edited by Dell Hymes.¹⁴

The last of these was characteristic of the series. Its motive stemmed from outrage over the U.S. war in Vietnam and the complicity of scholars with U.S. Cold War policy in general: "The threat of the [subordination] of anthropology to the aims of counterinsurgency is permanent in a country devoted to a posture in the world in which Vietnam shows us only the extreme of a continuum," a situation that called for "a thoroughgoing analysis of the relation of the United States to the rest of the world as essentially colonial or imperial."¹⁵

Hymes was a specialist in Native American languages who identified with the left since he distributed copies of the independent Marxist journal *Monthly Review* as a Reed College student in the early 1950s. He hoped the "ethos of anthropology [would] move from a liberal humanism, defending the powerless, to a socialist humanism, confronting the powerful and seeking to transform the structure of power."¹⁶

Such a reorientation, he suggested, entailed certain theoretical and methodological changes in anthropological practice, namely restoring a keen sense of history not only to account for the historical embeddedness of the discipline (and the ties to modern imperialism it must resist) but also in the understanding of "culture" as ever-changing modes of life linked to world-wide social relations, rather than as static and isolated ways of life "discovered" among so-called "primitive" peoples. For elder leftists such as Hymes and Eric Wolf, who allied with the radical caucus, such views clearly emerged from a heritage of historical materialism.

Hymes' volume was reissued several times as late as 1999. "There is genuine indication that anthropology is being reinvented," he claimed, "and that the next generation will see its transformation."¹⁷ Most young anthropologists today, I venture, would agree that the discipline has changed dramatically, embracing a critique of imperialism, a more historical view of culture, and a greater degree of self-consciousness regarding the power relations between scholars and their research "subjects." Moreover, in most leading universities, anthropologists would rank among the most "radical" or left-leaning faculty members.

Ironically, the same cannot be said of Economics, the discipline which paradoxically gave rise to the most enduring radical caucus, the still-active Union of Radical Political Economics, and what might be considered the most successful of counter-textbooks. Richard C. Edwards, Michael Reich, and Thomas E. Weisskopf's *The Capitalist System: A Radical Analysis of American Society* was published in three editions from 1972

to 1986 by none other than the textbook publisher Prentice-Hall.¹⁸ It was, in other words, the textbook as antitextbook.

Feminist Resurgence

Women's Studies took a somewhat different course from the other two currents in the late-'60s academic turn — neither as confrontational and sudden as the initiation of Black and Chicano Studies nor directly tied to the radical caucuses, though clearly indebted to both Old Left and New Left lineages.

Early signs of a new women's history appeared in the writing by Eleanor Flexner (*Century of Struggle*, 1959) and Gerda Lerner (*The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina*, 1967), and poet Eve Merriam (*After Nora Slammed the Door*, 1964), all of whom had taught women's history at the Communist Party's Jefferson School in the early 1950s. All began as extra-academic writers, though Lerner, aged 48, earned a university appointment in 1968 and thereafter served as an elder mentor to younger feminist historians.¹⁹

The train of Old Left women's historians intersected with a line emerging later among New Left activists, from Casey Hayden and Mary King's 1965 internal critique of SDS, "Sex and Caste: A Kind of Memo," to the Women's Liberation circles germinating in 1967-68, followed by such influential, still non-academic work in radical feminist theory such as *Notes from the First, Second, and Third Years* (1968-71).²⁰

Closer to the academy, disciplinary critiques began appearing from 1968 on, such as Naomi Weisstein's "'Kinder, Küche, Kirche' as Scientific Law: Psychology Constructs the Female" (1968), Sally Slocum's "Woman the Gatherer: Male Bias in Anthropology" (1971), Linda Gordon's "Review of Sexism in American Historical Writing" (1972), and Arlie Hochschild's "A Review of Sex Role Research" (1973).²¹

The academic professional associations established Commissions on the Status of Women after 1968, and women's caucuses analogous to the '68er radical caucuses began growing in those societies in the years 1969-1972. Based on surveys conducted by Betty Ch'maj, the earliest American Studies courses concerning women (across several different departments) appeared from late 1969 through 1971, many of them explicitly feminist from the start, before Women's Studies programs emerged — one of the earliest at Ch'maj's home institution Cal State Sacramento in 1972-73.²²

Uneven Trajectories, Enduring Legacies

In none of the three arms of the academic left turn did success follow smoothly. In Black Studies, fierce conflicts among students, different faculty factions, and administrators ensued at San Francisco State and at Harvard, roiling these pioneer programs for years after founding.²³ Women's Studies developed at many places in *ad hoc* fashion, which helped sustain the field's insurgent demeanor.

At the University of Michigan, for instance, the program's large introductory course was created by a collective of graduate student women led by Gayle Rubin, whose theoretical essays percolated for years as foundational documents nation-wide. When college administrators moved in 1980 to stipulate that all the core courses be taught by full-time faculty, campus protest and a large sit-in at college offices rebutted this attempt to sideline the grad student founders, which they and their supporters charged would "domesticate" women's

studies.²⁴

Nonetheless, across the country, Women's Studies followed a clear trajectory: from a handful of women's studies courses circa 1970, numbers rose to 20,000 courses offered and some 350 women's studies programs established — reaching more than 500 programs nationwide by the late 1980s. No doubt, “institutionalizing” the field rubbed off a good deal of the activist spirit that spawned it.

Indeed, some of the early founders had warned against losing the original connection to social-movement organizing.²⁵ The proliferation of “theory” of a postmodern or post-structuralist vein in the 1980s and 1990s drew a common critique from both the center and the left of the field's growing academic insularity.

Yet the penchant to dissent did not evaporate. At Michigan again, the very sign of academic achievement in 2006 — the reorganization of Women's Studies as a department rather than program — was challenged by some affiliated faculty members on the grounds that keeping the more informal “program” status “would reflect Women's Studies' continuing resistance to institutional conformity as well as its role as critic within the University.”²⁶ And despite right-wing attacks that these programs engaged in ideological indoctrination, the program at University of California-Santa Barbara has boldly assumed the name Feminist Studies.

Likewise, various descendants of the late 1960s Black Studies — Afro- or African-American Studies, often combined with African or Africana Studies to emphasize a “diasporic,” antiracist and anticolonial perspective — have become mainstays of liberal arts curricula across the country. Argument, controversy and change have never been absent from the field, particularly over the claims of Afrocentric ideology or in demands to incorporate Black feminism.

The recent rise of Black Lives Matter echoed through the academy to challenge the gross underrepresentation of Black students and faculty on major campuses, denials of tenure to faculty of color, and racist campus environments. Still these programs or departments exist at over 300 American campuses.

Similarly, Chicano Studies has persisted and embedded itself on campus — by now, often expanded and diversified in the form of Latina/o or Latinx studies — while struggles continue over inadequate recruitment of Latinx faculty and students. The number of distinct fields under the general rubric of Ethnic Studies has grown to include Native American, Asian/Pacific Islander, and at some institutions Arab American studies.

Sniping from Left and Right

While sniping at the supposed evils of “identity politics” keeps coming from all sides left and right, the prevailing mood (though always with injurious exceptions) tends more toward collaboration and ally-ship rather than exclusivist separation. As Martha Biondi has argued persuasively, Black Studies from the start was always more internationalist than nationalist in orientation. “Proponents of Black studies did not conceptualize it as an insular area of inquiry only of interest to black people,” Biondi writes, “but as the opening salvo in major changes in the American academy.”²⁷

The long-range impact of the original radical caucuses is considerably harder to assess. Having started in March 1968,

in two years' time the New University Conference claimed 2,000 dues-paying members and chapters on 60 campuses — but by summer 1972, when its members counted only about 300, it was ready to disband.²⁸

Many of the disciplinary caucuses folded before long or morphed into new forms. Initially, the term “radical” carried the imprint of a generic New Left disposition. A more decidedly Marxist revival followed thereafter through the 1970s (kick-started by literary theorist Fredric Jameson organizing the Marxist Literary Group in 1969).²⁹ By the early 1980s, these trends would be surveyed by Bertell Ollman and his collaborators in three volumes called *The Left Academy*.³⁰

Politically motivated dismissals of left-wing scholars aroused protests in the first decade, but by the 1980s veterans of the '68er left turn gained the security of tenure. The right-wing attack on “tenured radicals” began immediately, as did left-wing recriminations about the academic insularity that leached political commitment from the work of comfortable professors, most notably Russell Jacoby's 1987 polemic, *The Last Intellectuals*.³¹ Although more social-democratic than ultra-left, Jacoby's argument carried some of the anti-academic bias that had earlier marked *Something Else!*

The rightward trend of U.S. politics undoubtedly served to demobilize, disorient or deradicalize any number of left intellectuals descended from the 1960s, but nothing quite like the massive intellectual retreat or repression of the early Cold War years occurred — aside from limited, extreme cases of renegacy such as that of the red-baiting former red David Horowitz.³²

The Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars dissolved in 1979, while its *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* continued publishing, adopting the more formal journal name *Critical Asian Studies* in 2001. URPE survives though its brand of radical political economics remains more or less sequestered, most notably at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, while most Economics departments and business schools remain largely untouched by the history of Left Entry.

In other fields, such as Sociology, the long-ago demise of the Sociology Liberation Movement has been followed by the proliferation of specialty caucuses, officially recognized by discipline, that provide homes for left-leaning scholarship on matters of class, comparative and historical sociology, world-systems analysis, and the like. In English and Comparative Literature very lively circles of feminist, anti-colonial (or “postcolonial”), Marxist and radical post-Marxist discourse persist.

In fact, while the overall tone of left-leaning academic circles has moderated as intellectuals aged, professionalized, and grew distant from the founding days of mass action, the survival of radical currents in scholarship has been assured by the entry of successive generations of activists stirred by each episode of insurgent action at large, from Central America solidarity and anti-apartheid agitation of the 1980s, the rise of queer protest from ACT-UP on, campaigns for reproductive rights, the alter-globalization movement, to the Occupy surge of 2011, and the Black campaign against police killings.³³

Where We Stand Today

There is no question that the university system remains a massive institution structurally wedded to bourgeois society, given its role as a credentialing (and thus stratifying) operation

and the constitutive ties of its research and training apparatus to government and business wealth. Yet in what historian James Livingston calls the “pilot disciplines” of the humanities and some of the social sciences, the intellectual left has won something more than a toehold.³⁴

It is difficult to assess exactly what impact radical ideas have at large in today’s social life, but they have borne great influence in shaping several academic provinces. Historical scholarship, especially regarding the United States, has been reinvented and turned away from its modern origins in nation-building. Perspectives once marginal, such as the critical history of Reconstruction and its overthrow pioneered by W. E. B. Du Bois, are now central.³⁵ The new field of Science, Technology and Society (STS) has institutionalized the idea, which drove Science for the People, that scientific knowledge is socially, historically embedded.³⁶

In the social sciences, notwithstanding the ascendancy of pro-market “rational choice” orientations of Economics and much of Political Science, the concepts once distinctive to the left of exploitation, domination, conflict, hegemony and resistance now preoccupy significant numbers of researchers and learners.

Whether or not the latter concerns carry with them explicit political commitments or translate into insurgent action, such critical dispositions render the social status quo far less a matter taken for granted, as “second nature” to us, than it was in prior generations of academic institutions.

Treating society as second nature had always been the function of “ideology” in the Marxian sense. We have yet to see whether such intellectual attempts at dislodging the givenness of our social and political conditions matter much, but we may suspect that many of the leaders of the new American left in organs such as *Jacobin* and in the recent Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) surge have been radicalized both by events and by ideas encountered within the academy.

The Mounting Reaction

It has always been easy to mock Lewis Powell’s conservative alarm at the ascendancy of left-wing academics. Historian David Hollinger aptly quoted journalist Joe Queenan: “The left gets Harvard, Oberlin, Twila Tharp’s dance company, and Madison, Wisconsin. The right gets NASDAQ, Boeing, General Motors, Apple, McDonnell Douglas, Washington D.C., Citicorp, Texas, Coca-Cola, General Electric, Japan, and outer space.”³⁷

Yet the drumbeat of anti-academic attacks kept mounting. *Frontpage*, a publication of David Horowitz’s Freedom Center (founded 1988), has harried radical faculty for years and encouraged students to charge their teachers with left-wing “indoctrination.” The Leadership Institute, founded in 1979 to train young conservative activists, established Campus Watch in 2012, a website dedicated to targeting supposed “liberal bias” in higher education and alleged denial of “free speech” rights to conservatives.

Harassment reached a new extreme with the debut of Professor Watchlist in 2016, intended to identify professors who “discriminate against conservative students, promote anti-American values and advance leftist propaganda in the classroom.”

Throughout the 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump made hay with repeated denunciations of “political correctness,” and a year later, Attorney General Jeff Sessions brought the fanatic Horowitz style to the mainstream stage by declaring at Georgetown University Law School, “Freedom of thought and speech on the American campus are under attack. The American university was once the center of academic freedom — a place of robust debate, a forum for the competition of ideas. But it is transforming into an echo chamber of political correctness and homogeneous thought, a shelter for fragile egos.”³⁸

Sessions’ remarks were followed by Trump’s executive order that universities receiving federal funds must guarantee free speech rights (to the right) in order to defend “American values that have been under siege” by liberal academics.³⁹ Aside from such cheap rhetoric, it now appears that practical measures will be brought to bear, signaled for instance by Department of Education investigations of Middle Eastern Studies departments accused of anti-Semitic bias in sponsoring events including sharp criticism of Israeli policy.⁴⁰

Conservative complaints about subversive influences in higher education, however, are nothing new, given a history including dismissal of dissenting faculty in the 1890s, administrative discipline of left-wing students in the 1930s, and Red Scare firing and blacklisting of suspected Communist instructors in the 1940s and 1950s.

Right Colonization

Just as left-wing intellectual life took a new turn in the late 1960s, which I have called Left Entry, there is something new about the conservative attack today. In what appears to be a campaign of conservative revanche, following the Powell Memorandum, reaction to the new Left Academy now takes the form of colonizing campuses with richly endowed, ideologically driven and specially administered centers or institutes pushing right-wing ideas.

From the 1970s on, along with the expansion of right-wing think tanks and media, business donations promoted establishment of “economic literacy” and “entrepreneurship” programs on college campuses, particularly at small regional public universities and Christian colleges. Wal-Mart’s family owners threw themselves into college-based public relations starting in the mid 1980s and by 1990, their prime propaganda vehicle Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) had 40,000 student members on more than 150 campuses.⁴¹

Carrying greater academic prestige and ultimately more financial clout, the free-market economist James Buchanan won the backing of the Scaife Foundation to develop his “public choice” theory aimed at gutting government regulation. At the same time, Cornell University alum John M. Olin, outraged by the 1969 Black studies insurgency at his alma mater, began showering hundreds of millions of dollars on building free-market “Law and Economics” programs on campus, seeding the Federalist Society, and subsidizing appointments of “pro-capitalist faculty,” according to historian Nancy MacLean.⁴²

The Koch Brothers brought their big guns to bear by the 1980s and 1990s, backing James Buchanan’s Center for



Political Economy at George Mason University, which hosted a mini-empire of associated outfits there including the Mercatus Center, self-described as “the world’s premier university source for market-oriented ideas—bridging the gap between academic ideas and real-world problems.”⁴³

Like colonizing ventures in the age of great-power imperialism, these settlements on university campuses possess a kind of extra-territorial sovereignty. The Institute of Humane Studies, begun in 1961 by an American member of Friedrich Hayek’s Mont Pèlerin Society, gained additional Koch support

and relocated in 1985 to George Mason, where its director boasted, “The imprimatur of George Mason University alone will aid our program . . . we will retain complete program and financial autonomy . . . and our post-doctoral programs will have full and equal standing” with other GMU programs.⁴⁴

This posture has become the model for a host of other Koch-funded campus ventures. As MacLean explains, the programs “would carry the authority of association with scholarly research in a public university, yet operate free of control by or accountability to that university as its operatives joined with corporate partners to promote their shared ideas to policymakers.”⁴⁵

In contrast to the advance of left-wing ideas in academia since the late 1960s, achieved through the autonomous research and writing of scholars whose work has met and surpassed standards of academic peer review, these conservative ventures rely on heavy-hitter donors intent on promoting interested viewpoints of extra-academic origin.

Almost ten years ago, donor agreements concluded by Florida State and Utah State Universities with the Charles G. Koch Foundation to establish special institutes to study free enterprise, became public and revealed outrageous clauses defining the character of faculty appointments the donor funded: Faculty should advance “the understanding and practice of those free voluntary processes and principles that promote social progress, human well-being, individual freedom, opportunity and prosperity based on the rule of law, constitutional government, private property and the laws, regulations, organizations, institutions and social norms upon which they rely.”⁴⁶

Given the scale of Koch-funded academic initiatives — amounting in one year alone, 2016, to \$77 million, according to one report — such designation of ideas to be fostered figure as a far more serious threat to academic freedom than any left-wing “bias” of the sort Campus Watch claims to discern.⁴⁷

The Balance of Forces

Meanwhile, as the far right hikes up its assault on “liberal” or radical scholarship, a broad left-leaning current has built a growing critique of “the neoliberal university,” targeting the decline of public funding, tighter connections with business, reliance on the casual labor of part-time instructors, high costs and skyrocketing student debt, the ubiquity of individualistic, “meritocratic” ideology, system-wide stratification and the reproduction of social hierarchies.⁴⁸



All these features indeed mark U.S. higher education, though concerns over the “corporatization” of university life are not at all new. The negative impact of ties to big business and the corrosive effect of business-like management on the academic enterprise have been criticized almost from the beginnings of the modern research university, most prominently in Thorstein Veblen’s severe polemic, *The Higher Learning in America* of 1918.⁴⁹

Aside from the structural pressures on university life since the onset of “the long downturn” in world capi-

talism, however, one of the distinctive features of our time is the tension between Left Entry and the revanchist program of Right Colonization.

How do we assess the balance of forces between these contenders? If we recall Joe Queenan’s appropriately sarcastic view of the left’s social weight, the answer looks simple: The left loses. Yet strictly in academic, intellectual terms, conditions look a little brighter. Institutional norms of scholarly autonomy can militate against right colonization, and on occasion those norms talk just a bit louder than money, as when the faculty senate at Montana State University voted by a narrow majority to reject a \$5.76 million Koch grant to found a Center for Regulation and Applied Economic Analysis there.⁵⁰

As yet, we see little evidence of administrations at major universities caving in to Campus Watch / Professor Watchlist-like pressure (although such administrations, true to the standards of corporate-style management, are not unwilling to seek refuge in a Trumpian NLRB to combat teacher unionism). And that kind of extramural harassment has not come to occupy the attention of Congressional committees as in the 1950s red scare.

The scholarly scene in the humanities and some social sciences, however, has dramatically changed since the days when the academic establishment resisted New Left demands in the 1960s. In contrast to the postwar norm that the disciplines’ professional associations dare not comment on controversial public policy, the American Anthropological Association in 2007 officially denounced the Human Terrain System, the military’s attempt to rope social scientists into the service of counter-insurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Avowed Marxists and other radical scholars, feminists and scholars of color have taken presidential leadership in the American Sociological Association, the Organization of American Historians, American Studies Association, Modern Language Association and other such groups.

Where left-wing faculty have suffered conservative academic discipline, allies mounted a substantial response. Penalties imposed on Michigan professor John Cheney-Lippold for his actions in solidarity with the Boycott-Divestment-Sanctions campaign were denounced by several professional societies as infringements on academic freedom. In the more severe case of Stephen Salaita, when he was peremptorily severed from the University of Illinois faculty, a fightback resulted in administrative turnover there, though not a return of Salaita’s job.

Younger and untenured faculty, not to speak of adjuncts in

the casual labor force, probably do find these cases chilling, inducing caution in voicing their political convictions, but I see no mass trend among left-wing senior faculty to scurry to some political safe harbor. Furthermore, in disciplines such as literature, history, sociology, anthropology and others, young Ph.D.s today are likely to be inclined to the radical left — along with the general radical reawakening of their generation following Occupy, Black Lives Matter, the threats of the climate crisis and of Trumpism.

In short, despite the stacked odds of life in the “neoliberal university,” a kind of Left Academy has a foothold, more than a toehold, on campus with a sufficiently large body of sympathizers to resist, so far, the heightened right-wing attacks on higher education and the dissenting content of much teaching and learning. That status bears witness to the long-run influence of the '68er generation of academic intellectuals and innovators. And since ideas actually matter in political struggle, albeit in contexts shaped by concrete pressures and limits, the left turn in scholarship now 50 years old merits both appreciation and resolute commitment to its protection. ■

Notes

1. Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. (Harper & Brothers, 1947), 127.
2. Lewis F. Powell, Jr., “Attack on American Free Enterprise System” (1971), quoted in Roderick A. Ferguson, *We Demand: The University and Student Protests*. (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017), 35-6.
3. Martha Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 2.
4. Biondi, 30-35.
5. In his history of the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, *The End of Concern: Maoist China, Activism, and Asian Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), Fabio Lanza emphasizes the early CCAS attempt to fashion new non-hierarchical modes of knowledge-production, which he credits largely to the influence of Mao's Cultural Revolution and echoes of it in French Maoism after 1968. Although romantic notions of radical egalitarianism associated with Mao's slogan, “Serve the People,” achieved salience throughout this period, the insurgent challenge in pedagogy owed as much to the practices of movement-building in the United States and other exemplars outside of China.
6. Armstead L. Robinson et al., *Black Studies in the University; a Symposium* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), viii.
7. In his retrospective on the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Geoff Eley potently describes the insurgent spirit of the U.K. parallels. Assuming leadership of the Centre after a student-power building occupation in late 1968, Stuart Hall proposed that the Centre “become a ‘utopian enclave’ capable of ‘transcend[ing] the limits of what appears possible and natural within the existing limits of our situation. It would ‘challenge and modify the prevailing modes of knowledge and authority.’ The goal was ‘nothing less than the creation, within . . . the existing system, of a collective — an intellectual *foco*: a sort of advanced base.” See Eley, “Conjuncture and the Politics of Knowledge,” in Kieran Connell and Matthew Hilton, eds., *Cultural Studies 50 Years On: History, Practice and Politics* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016), 30-31. In Britain, as in the United States, disciplinary departures proliferated from Radical Philosophy and a Radical Science Collective to a “New Criminology” and the emergence of interdisciplinary studies of “Women in Society” in the early 1970s. Also, a right-wing backlash appeared by the late 1970s in publications such as *The Attack on Higher Education: Marxist and Radical Penetration* (Eley, 32-38).
8. Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus*, 179.
9. Formally, Radicals in the Professions was an offshoot of the Radical Education Project (REP), which Al Haber started in 1965 in Ann Arbor, as the more academic, campus-based alternative to the Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP), the community-organizing program championed by Tom Hayden. As SDS continued to radicalize, REP published “Study Guides,” including Jim Jacobs's *Power in American Society* and Michael Goldfield's *Marxism — An Introduction* (Ann Arbor, n.d. [1967]). Meanwhile, in Ann Arbor, the embryonic Weatherman circle of Bill Ayers, Diana Oughton, and Terry Robbins was gaining influence in the REP, with consequences for the *Radicals in the Professions Newsletter*. See Kirkpatrick Sales, *SDS* (NY: Vintage, 1974), 251, 490-91, 558.
10. Karen Sacks, “At the AAA Meeting,” *Radicals in the Professions Newsletter* [hereafter *RiP*], December 1967, 12; David Norris, “Caucus for a New Political Science,” *RiP*, June 1968; Bob Levine and Richard Ochs, “New Science Prospectus,” *RiP*, July-August 1968; “Vocations for Radicals: Some Suggestions,” *RiP*, September 1968; Martin Nicolaus, “Remarks at the ASA Convention,” *RiP*, November-December 1968.
11. Bob Ross, “New University Conference: National Director's Report,” *RiP*, September 1968.
12. “Something Else! or: R.i.P. Didn't Die, It's Just Growing: An Editorial,” *Something Else!* 2:1 (March 1969), 2-3.
13. Sigrid Schmalzer et al., eds., *Science for the People: Documents from America's Movement of Radical Scientists* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018). Kelly Moore, *Disrupting Science: Social Movements, American Scientists, and the Politics of the Military, 1945-1975* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 146-55. Martin

14. Oppenheimer et al., eds., *Radical Sociologists and the Movement: Experiences, Lessons, and Legacies* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).
15. Theodore Roszak, ed., *The Dissenting Academy* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968); Barton J. Bernstein, ed., *Towards a New Past; Dissenting Essays in American History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968); Philip Green and Sanford Levinson, eds., *Power and Community; Dissenting Essays in Political Science* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970); Edward Friedman and Mark Selden, eds., *America's Asia; Dissenting Essays on Asian-American Relations*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971). Louis Kampf et al., eds., *The Politics of Literature; Dissenting Essays on the Teaching of English* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).
16. Dell H. Hymes, *Reinventing Anthropology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 49-50.
17. Hymes, 52.
18. Hymes, 8.
19. Richard Edwards et al., *The Capitalist System: A Radical Analysis of American Society* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972).
20. Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).
21. Sara M. Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Knopf, 1979); Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-75* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).
22. Ellen Carol DuBois, *Feminist Scholarship: Kindling in the Groves of Academe* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 1-37.
23. Betty E. M. Ch'maj, *American Women and American Studies*, (Pittsburgh: Women's Free Press, Pittsburgh, 1971).
24. Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus*, 174-210.
25. Dena Goodman and Wang Zheng, “Women's Studies (2015),” in *The University of Michigan: An Encyclopedic Survey*, n.d., <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/b/bicentennial/113950886.0002.096?view=text;rgn=main#section-2>. “Views on the Domestication of Women's Studies,” *Michigan Daily*, April 15, 1980, 4.
26. See the bitter screed written by academic women against academic careerism, Ann Leffler et al., *Academic Feminists and the Women's Movement* (Iowa City, Iowa: Printed by the Iowa City Women's Press, 1973).
27. Dena Goodman and Wang Zheng, “Women's Studies (2015).”
28. Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus*, 179.
29. Fred Pincus and Howard J. Ehrlich, “The New University Conference: A Study of Former Members,” *Critical Sociology* 15 (Summer 1988), 145-47.
30. <http://www.marxistliterary.org/a-brief-history-of-the-mlg>
31. Bertell Ollman et al., *The Left Academy: Marxist Scholarship on American Campuses*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981).
32. Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).
33. For a subtle analysis comparing the intellectual deradicalization of the early Cold War years with right-ward shifts of liberal and left-wing writers early in the 21st century, see Alan Wald's assessment in the preface to his 30th anniversary edition of *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), xi-xiv.
34. It is telling, then, that amid the socialist revival of the past few years, a new generation has revived Science for the People, and veterans of the Radical Historians Organization now leading Historians for Peace and Democracy (H-PAD) collaborate with Democratic Socialists of America to distribute position papers on current affairs. See Schmalzer, Chard, and Botelton, eds. *Science for the People*.
35. James Livingston, *The World Turned Inside Out: American Thought and Culture at the End of the 20th Century* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010).
36. In the late 1960s, while teaching at San Francisco State College, the Black Arts Movement poet Sonia Sanchez was visited by an FBI agent “to interrogate her for teaching the communist Du Bois.” Biondi, 47.
37. Sarah Bridger, “Anti-Militarism and the Critique of Professional Neutrality in the Origins of Science for the People,” *Science as Culture* 25, no. 3 (July 2, 2016): 373-78.
38. Quoted in David Hollinger, “Money and Academic Freedom a Half-Century after McCarthyism: Universities amid the Force Fields of Capital,” in Peggie J. Hollingsworth, ed., *Unfettered Expression: Freedom in American Intellectual Life* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).
39. Andrew Kreighbaum, “Attorney General Sessions Blasts Colleges on Issues of Free Speech,” *Inside Higher Ed*, September 27, 2017.
40. Lee Bollinger, “Free Speech on Campus Is Doing Just Fine, Thank You,” *The Atlantic*, June 12, 2019.
41. Manuel Balce Ceneta, “DeVos Opens Investigation into Duke-UNC Event with Alleged ‘Anti-Semitic Rhetoric,’” *The News & Observer* (Raleigh, N.C.), June 17, 2019.
42. Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 173-93.
43. Nancy MacLean, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America* (New York: Viking, 2017), 109-111.
44. <https://www.mercatus.org/about>
45. MacLean, *Democracy in Chains*, 188.
46. MacLean, *Democracy in Chains*, 109.
47. Dan Berrett, “Not Just Florida State,” *Inside Higher Ed*, June 28, 2011.
48. Colleen Flaherty “Montana State's Faculty Senate Narrowly Votes down Proposed Economics Research Center to Be Funded by Charles Koch Foundation,” *Inside Higher Ed*, April 27, 2018.
49. Christopher Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008); Alpesh Maisuria and Svenja Helmes, *Life for the Academic in the Neoliberal University* (London: Routledge, 2019).
50. Thorstein Veblen, *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015). With his characteristic wit, Veblen originally intended to subtitle the book, “A Study in Total Depravity.”
51. Flaherty, “Montana State's Faculty Senate Narrowly Votes down Proposed Economics Research Center to Be Funded by Charles Koch Foundation.”