

What Universities Have Done to Themselves

They ‘have gone from being centers of excellence to institutions pushing political agendas.’



By

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Following

Dec. 14, 2023 6:49 pm ET

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Protesters gather at Harvard University to show their support for Palestinians in Gaza at a rally in Cambridge, Mass., Oct. 14. PHOTO: JOSEPH PREZIOSO/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Fareed Zakaria opened his CNN show last weekend with a commentary that seemed to me a signal moment in the DEI/woke/identity-politics wars. I don't know how Mr. Zakaria would characterize his political views, but there was a quality of something building within him that finally came out. It was an earnest commentary that perhaps took some daring.

“When one thinks of America’s greatest strengths, the kind of assets the world looks at with admiration and envy, America’s elite universities would long have been at the top of that list,” he said. “But the American public has been losing faith in these universities for good reason.” He scored the three presidents who’d come under fire in the House for their “vague and indecisive answers when asked whether calling for the genocide of Jews would violate their institutions’ codes of conduct.” Their performance was understandable if you understand that our elite universities “have gone from being centers of excellence to institutions pushing political agendas.”

Those agendas, “clustered around diversity and inclusion,” began in good faith, “but those good intentions have morphed into a dogmatic ideology and turned these universities into places where the pervasive goals are political and social engineering, not academic merit.”

“In the humanities, hiring for new academic positions now appears to center on the race and gender of the applicant, as well as the subject matter, which needs to be about marginalized groups. A white man studying the American presidency does not have a prayer of getting tenure at a major history department in America today. . . . New subjects crop up that are really political agendas, not academic fields.”

“Out of this culture of diversity has grown the collection of ideas and practices that we have now all heard of—safe spaces, trigger warnings and microaggressions.” Schools have instituted speech codes “that make it a violation of university rules to say things that some groups might find offensive. Universities advise students not to speak, act, even dress in ways that might cause offense to some minority groups.” When the George Floyd protests erupted, universities publicly aligned their institutions to those protests. “In this context, it is understandable that Jewish groups would wonder: Why do safe spaces, microaggressions and hate speech not apply to us? If universities can take positions against free speech to make some groups feel safe, why not us? Having coddled so many student groups for so long, university administrators found themselves squirming, unable to explain why certain groups (Jews, Asians) don’t seem to count in these conversations.”

The House testimony “was the inevitable result of decades of the politicization of universities. America’s top colleges are no longer seen as bastions of excellence but partisan outfits.” They should “abandon this long misadventure into politics . . . and rebuild their reputations as centers of research and learning.”

This was a realistic and straightforward assessment of where the universities are and what they should do. It would be helpful if all on the sane left would drop their relative silence, rise up and end the misadventure.

I make two points connected to Mr. Zakaria’s larger statement. He emphasized the decreasing number of Americans who have confidence in our elite universities. I have been reading Edmund Wilson’s 1940 classic, “To the Finland Station: A Study in the Writing and Acting of History.” It famously offers a portrait of the groundbreaking French historian Jules Michelet (1798-1874), a father of modern historiography. The whole section reads like a tribute to the idea of learning, of understanding, of telling. It is not too much to say it is a kind of paean to the idea of the university.

What a scholar Michelet was, what a searcher for truth. His early life, in Wilson's words, was "sad, poor and hard." Natural brilliance drove him to and through the academy. He received honors, tutored princesses, but he was really a historian. He longed to know the facts of the past and to understand them. Appointed to the civil service, he was put in the Record Office. He was in charge of the archives of all of France. Wilson: "No one had really explored the French archives before; the histories had mostly been written from other histories" and by hired hands. Over the coming decades Michelet would write the first serious, documented, comprehensive history of France from its beginning through the 1789 revolution.

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Michelet said there came to him in the archives "the whispers of the souls who had suffered so long ago and who were smothered now in the past." His approach was rational and realistic, not romantic, though there was plenty of color and sweep in his work. The story of Joan of Arc interested him because her story was fully documented—"incontestable"—and because he saw her as the first modern hero of action, "contrary to passive Christianity."

Michelet said the historian is one who, "taking history as something more than a game, makes the effort in good faith to enter into the life of the past." He treated history as the crowded, jagged thing it is, Wilson observes, and he didn't simplify. He saw the story of France, and history in general, as complex, braided, intertwined, and driven in the end more by the masses than their leaders.

The idea of this man—a true scholar who attempts to find the honest truth—seems inapplicable to the current moment. And the reason is the three words he uses—"in good faith"—to define how the historian must act. In the DEI/woke regime, the good faith of the scholar is sacrificed to political fashion. In going all in on the regime, those who run the universities negate their own worth. Faculty and professors, administrators and department heads lower their own standing. Because they are not now seen as people of the mind, of the intellect, but as mere operatives, enforcers. They thus give up their place of respect in the public imagination.

Regular people used to imagine what a university looks like—rows of gleaming books, learned professors, an air of honest inquiry. That isn't now a picture the public can see. Now it's something else, less impressive, less *moving*. Less important to our continuance as a people.

The elites who run our elite colleges are killing their own status. They are also lowering the esteem in which college graduates are held. Your primary job as a student is *taking in*. You read, learn, connect this event with that, apply your imagination, empathize, judge. It is a spacious act—it takes time to absorb, reflect, feel—which is why you're given four whole years to do it. But if the public senses that few are studying like independent scholars in there, not enough are absorbing the expertise of their field, that they've merely been instructed to internalize a particular worldview and parrot it back . . .

Well, if that's the case, who needs them? Is it even worth having them around in the office? The people of a country have a greater stake in all this than universities and their students understand. And the elite schools are lowering their own standing more than they know.

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