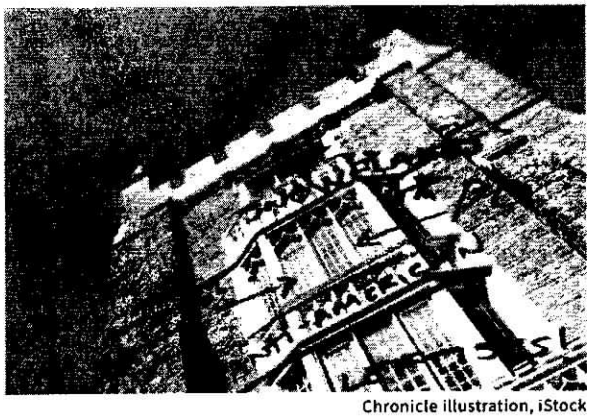
How the Right Learned to Loathe Higher Education

Conservative dislike of the academy isn't new. But it is alarming.

By Kim Phillips-Fein | January 31, 2019 ✔ PREMIUM



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In October 2017, Donald Trump Jr. spoke at a fund-raising event held at AT&T Stadium, in Arlington, Tex., intended to raise money for scholarships at the University of North Texas. Despite the stated goal of supporting education, the president's son used the occasion to lambaste the elitism and pretense of the modern university. Higher education, rather than improving the lives of young people, made them "unemployable" by teaching courses in "zombie studies, underwater basket weaving, and, my personal favorite, tree climbing." Universities, he argued, offered parents the following deal: "We'll take $200,000 of your money; in exchange, we'll train your children to hate our country."

In his mockery, Trump Jr. echoed one of the more disturbing works of literature to be published in recent years — the 2014 novel *Victoria*. This strange book (written by William S. Lind, under the pseudonym Thomas Hobbes) fantasizes about the eruption of civil war in the United States, driven by a multicultural politics emanating from academia. By the early 21st century, Lind writes, universities had become expensive "diploma mills crossed with asylums for the politically insane: howling Bluestockings, inventors of 'Afrocentric history,' mewling 'advocates' for the blind, the botched and the bewildered." Knife-wielding Christian revolutionaries consequently set upon a faculty meeting at Dartmouth, stabbing 162 "politically correct luminaries" to death as just punishment for their professed "cultural Marxism."

Lind's fantasy of disemboweling faculty members is, of course, quite far from Trump Jr.'s speech. But the two depictions of academia — overpriced, faddish, engaged in a project of political indoctrination rather than education — have some queasy similarities. From Milo Yiannopoulos's trolling to the website Professor Watchlist (which purports to "expose and document college professors who discriminate against conservative students and advance leftist propaganda in the classroom") to the popularity of the epithet "snowflake," it is

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no secret that the right today views universities as ground zero for political conflict. As the right-wing self-help guru Jordan Peterson, based at the University of Toronto, puts it, "Dangerous people … are indoctrinating young minds with their resentment-laden ideology."

This hostility is not limited to those at the extreme. Rather, such attitudes have filtered to the core of American politics. A study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2017 found that 58 percent of Republicans don't trust institutions of higher education (up from 32 percent in 2010) — with confidence declining the older and wealthier the respondent. State funding for public universities has long been in decline, but the cuts accelerated after 2008, so that by the end of 2018, overall state funding for two- and four-year colleges was more than $7 billion less than in 2008. Average annual published tuition at four-year colleges has risen by 36 percent, and much more sharply in some states: Arizona, for example, has increased tuition at its state colleges by 91 percent since 2008.

Today's conservative dislike of academia — as shrill as it is — is nothing new: On the contrary, it builds on more than 50 years of animus directed at higher education, with many of the ideas contributed by heroes in the conservative pantheon such as William F. Buckley Jr. and Irving Kristol. Not for nothing did Lind dedicate *Victoria* to the granddaddy of conservative intellectuals, Russell Kirk, author of the 1953 book *The Conservative Mind.*

The conservative hostility toward universities stems from myriad sources — for some thinkers on the right, the problem has to do with the role of professors in spreading heterodox economic ideas; for others, the way that the university opens the door to feminism, gender studies, and critical race theory. But despite the differences, there are common themes that surface again and again. Generations of conservatives have depicted intellectuals and scholars as a disruptive, chaotic force, people who willfully unsettle what would otherwise be harmonious societies, corrupting the young and teaching them to hate their countries, their traditions, their families, and their faiths. For conservatives, universities are powerful institutions that are not beholden solely to the market — that operate according to their own logic and professional standards. This is what makes them so difficult to trust.

Today's conservative critique, though, has an additional element: It suggests that universities, rather than make possible social and economic mobility, actually reinforce class hierarchies. This populist thread makes the contemporary assault especially dangerous. As Richard Hofstadter suggested in 1963, the real power of anti-intellectualism derives from its ability to tap into a reservoir of skepticism toward academia that is far from the province of conservatives alone.

Although it can be traced back farther, in the United States resentment and mistrust of higher education in its modern form begins with the 1930s and the aftermath of the New Deal. Washington, D.C. in the 1930s had been a haven for intellectuals. Roosevelt's "brain trust" was one part of a broader mobilization of academics suddenly given greater power to reform governments and markets. In the 1950s, during the early Cold War, intellectuals and the universities that often housed them became one of the primary targets of the right. Senator Joseph McCarthy fulminated against "those who have had all the benefits that the wealthiest nation on earth has to offer — the finest homes, the finest college education" — whom he accused of "selling this nation out." Hofstadter quoted the conservative publication *The Freeman*, which mounted its critique of higher education in language easily recognizable today:

Our universities are the training grounds for the barbarians of the future, those who, in the guise of learning, shall come forth loaded with pitchforks of ignorance and cynicism, and stab and destroy the remnants of human civilization. … If you send your son to the colleges of today, you will create the Executioner of tomorrow.

But the most influential of the conservative critics of academia was William F. Buckley Jr., founder of the *National Review*. Buckley burst onto the intellectual scene in 1951 with a broadside against his alma mater, *God and Man at Yale*. When he went to New Haven, "fresh from a two-year stint in the Army," he possessed "a firm belief in Christianity and a profound respect for American institutions and traditions." At Yale he hoped to find "allies against secularism and collectivism" — but instead, he wrote, he found himself fighting against "those who seek to subvert religion and individualism." While the all-male Yale of the late 1940s might have seemed as elitist and conservative an institution as one can imagine, Buckley railed against the secular humanism he claimed to find there. He said his professors belittled Christianity, insisting that faith was simply one choice among many. The economics education eschewed "individualism," advocating instead a strident Keynesian creed.

Yale promoted its own "value orthodoxy," Buckley argued. Far from being neutral, it was an institution devoted to promulgating a particular set of political values that were antithetical to his own Christian, free-market principles. He ventured that the orthodoxy at Yale was at odds with the opinions of most Yale trustees and alumni — and that if they were given more direct power over the curriculum, Yale could be compelled to articulate a vision that echoed their sense of the righteous and the good.

Buckley had little use for academic freedom; if a professor wanted to teach something that fell outside of the boundaries of acceptable discourse, he or she should be fired: "Freedom is in no way violated by an educational overseer's insistence that the teacher he employs hold a given set of values." Should the university prove incapable of gaining control over its curriculum, Yale alumni should stop donating financially. No one "can in good conscience contribute to the ascendancy of ideas he considers destructive of the best in civilization."

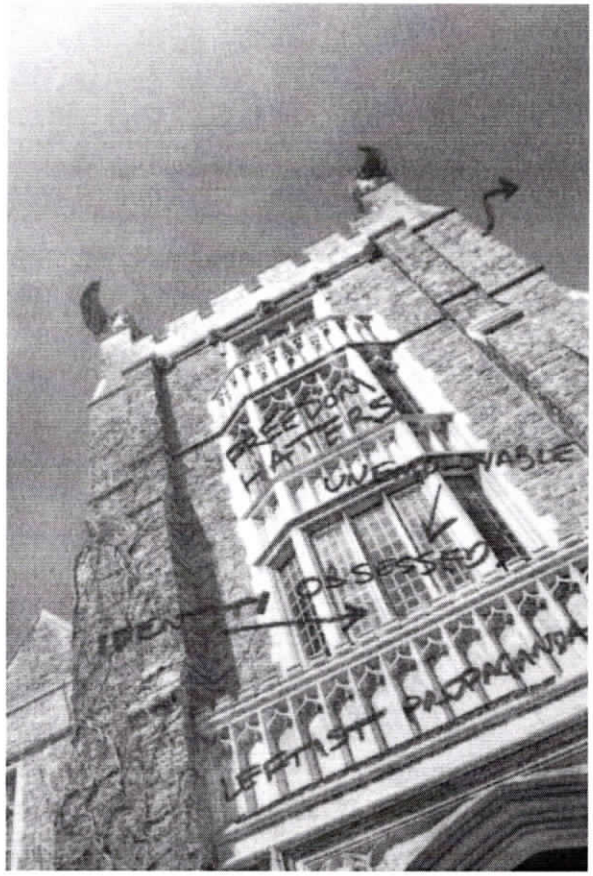
From Buckley, the contemporary right takes its sense that the university promotes its own distinctive values — and that these are at odds, in profound ways, with Christianity and the free market. He emphasized — as do conservatives today — that higher education is not simply utilitarian, and that colleges and universities are never entirely beholden to commercial norms; for Buckley, this independence was precisely what made them dangerous.

During the 1960s and 1970s, conservatives honed their critique of universities. In some ways, this was ironic: After all, the New Left was itself fiercely critical of academia for its complicity in the Vietnam War and reinforcement of social hierarchy more generally. Some of the most intense protests of the era involved students demonstrating against university policies, such as at Berkeley in 1964 and Columbia in 1968.

As student protests intensified, so did criticism of the academy from the right. Only now, in contrast to Buckley's focus on the faculty, the heart of the new conservative critique was its antagonism toward student leftists.

One source of the rising mistrust of universities was the business community. When Lewis Powell wrote his now-infamous memorandum for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in 1971 ("Attack on the American Free Enterprise System"), he pointed out that universities were a prime example of the ways that "the enterprise system tolerates, if not participates in, its own destruction." Echoing (probably unwittingly) the arguments of Joseph Schumpeter in his 1943 classic *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, Powell noted that the campuses "from which much of the criticism emanates" were largely supported by contributions from the rich, while boards of trustees were composed of "men and women who are leaders in the system." Yet despite this, the college campus had become "the single most dynamic source"

of anticapitalist sentiment. Social scientists — ranging from Marxists (Powell singled out Herbert Marcuse) to "the ambivalent liberal critic who finds more to condemn than to commend" — were especially "unsympathetic" to the enterprise system, and the result was that students graduated from college having been taught to hate capitalism. Many of them moved into government positions, where they were given the power to regulate the businesses they had learned to despise.



Powell's fear that universities taught students to reject the values of capitalism was taken up a few years later by the neoconservative intellectual Irving Kristol, an editor of the journal *The Public Interest*. "When we send our sons and daughters to college, we may expect that by the time they are graduated they are likely to have a lower opinion of our social and economic order than when they entered," he wrote in a 1979 essay. Student Marxists believed that the working class would lead the revolution, but Kristol noted that radicalism had in fact found "more fertile ground among the college-educated than among the high school graduates."

For Kristol (who had been a student leftist himself at the City College of New York in the 1930s), the university system helped to create an entire "New Class" in American society — an "intelligentsia" of social workers, teachers, scientists, journalists, and other professional white-collar, post-industrial occupations, that "despises the ethos of bourgeois society," despite being itself created by and dependent on that which it condemns. These were people who would always feel keenly the lack of spiritual or moral justification present within a market economy, who would long to be able to wield greater power themselves so that they could push the world to more closely resemble their image of a just society. They rejected the constricting sexual ethos of the family, and loyalty to church or country, but they sought to impose regulation on the market. For Kristol, they were the ultimate enemies of freedom.

According to Kristol and the right in the 1970s, writing in the aftermath of the student revolt of the previous decade, the university was dangerous because it helped to create and sustain a paradoxical new kind of elite — one implacably opposed to capitalism.

Kristol's depiction of the New Class, prim and moralistic in economic life while libertine and amoral in all other regards, seeped into the conservative critique of academia that developed in the 1980s, one that focused on moral relativism. Conservatives in the 1980s argued that the contemporary academy had abandoned any sense that instructing students in moral life was part of its project — an anxiety closely linked to the notion that the university had become antagonistic toward "Western culture" itself. This argument was framed in terms that might have seemed quite different from earlier critiques, especially as it often evoked an image of the university as a space of devotion to great texts and a life of the mind freed from commercial constraints. But it also mirrored the complaints that came before, as it spread the fear that universities had turned against the very culture they were supposed to protect.

In his 1987 polemic, *The Closing of the American Mind,* the University of Chicago classics professor Allan Bloom assailed higher education in rhetoric that harked back to Buckley's: The university, Bloom insisted, failed to put forward any stringent values or moral truths, any sense that it was intending or seeking to guide young people to a deeper understanding of life. Far from a love of truth, he argued, higher education cultivated a narrow, self-interested ambition.

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Most memorable were Bloom's rants against rock music and his condescending depiction of his undergraduate students as "nice" but basically idiotic. His caustic depiction of youth culture was linked to a set of dire warnings about how universities were undermining the ideals of the West. Requiring that students take a class "in a non-Western culture," for Bloom, had a "demagogic intention:" it was intended to "force students to recognize that there are other ways of thinking and that Western ways are not better."

Bloom's disparagement of feminism and gender studies, his critique of relativism, and his celebration of the canon all fit into the longstanding conservative critique of higher education — that it had become the province of a silly, self-interested, subversive elite (even as his general suspicion that universities were too engaged in training students for narrow economic success set him apart from other conservative critics). But it also marked a new articulation of Western culture as in need of defense in the academy. His book became part of the broader "culture wars" of the 1990s — the continuing conflicts over which books should be taught, what the boundaries of accepted literature might be, and the place of formerly marginalized groups in the academy.

Even as Bloom's book appeared, conservative activists were busy building new organizations, such as the Federalist Society, to nurture and develop conservative intellectual networks. Christian conservatives organized whole institutions (such as Liberty University) to promote versions of higher education in keeping with their values. They took the conservative critique of the academy and put it into action. The university, they argued, had come to form a bastion of culture that was antagonistic to the proper norms needed for capitalism to operate. It could be resisted only by building alternative institutions. Mainstream higher education was beyond saving.

Although their sheer outrageousness might seem to set today's conservatives apart from those of the past, the differences are not as great as they might appear. Much of the contemporary right-wing animosity toward the university grows out of these older ideas and arguments. Today as earlier, conservatives tend to depict college professors as power-hungry ideologues, and students as supine and easily misled. Conservatives have generally resisted the notion that students might have minds of their own — that they might resist the teachings of their professors. Instead, conservatives tend to present students as empty vessels, and therefore victims of their professors, rather than interlocutors. The contemporary right shares with earlier thinkers a fear that higher education is nurturing a narcissistic, self-centered youth culture — one that leaves young people without the resources to confront the job market, let alone the difficulties of the world. And it picks up on Bloom's claims about moral relativism and the need to defend the primacy of the cultural tradition that descends from Plato.

At the same time, there are a couple of new elements to today's right-wing assault on higher education. First is that today's conservative critics depict themselves as proud outsiders (whether or not this is entirely true): They claim that they are not intellectuals or scholars, and they openly deride higher education itself as a waste of time and money. Buckley, Kristol, and Bloom were immersed in intellectual culture even as they critiqued the academy. Today's activists, however, go farther: They reject the institutions of higher education, which allows

them to deploy a freewheeling viciousness that the older right could not. Bloom wanted to reinvigorate the study of the classics; the new critics advocate trade schools and STEM classes (and — since in many cases their hostility extends to elementary school — homeschooling for younger kids). As Gavin McInnes, founder of the "Western chauvinist" men's organization Proud Boys, puts it in a video titled "20 Reasons Why School Sucks": "Now that they've made college totally and utterly useless, it's cheap to have kids! Don't send kids to school!"

In its paranoia as well as its desire to single out scholars for public shaming and abuse, the conservative critique today echoes the McCarthy-era idea of a "watchlist" intended to intimidate those whose names appear on it. The taunting, cruel tone is not different from earlier conservative mobilizations — but it comes to the forefront more quickly, as when Yiannopoulos describes "social justice" as a "cancer" rotting universities from within (as he did in a 2016 speech at the University of California at Irvine), mocking the liberals who want to keep him from speaking: "You have the right to a useless gender- or race-studies degree for which we will make you pay the rest of your life and possibly sting the taxpayer, too."

The rhetorical vitriol is closely connected to another distinctive aspect of this politics: its intense focus on race and affirmative action. A recent article in the online publication of the Foundation for Economic Education (a digital-age descendent of *The Freeman,* the publication that Hofstadter quoted in 1963) argued that because of affirmative action, Ivy League institutions no longer effectively embody a meritocracy. Rather, they are "race-obsessed," manipulating admissions to ensure "'diversity' (except for diversity of opinion, of course)" — while they jack up tuition prices in large part to generate more funds for financial aid. In this way, they try to help one group of students — members of historically underrepresented groups — while actively excluding white men.

The idea (reflected in Yiannopoulos's speeches, which are studded with penis jokes and asides exalting the attractiveness of the police) is that universities have become spaces of privilege that specifically benefit women, African-Americans, and Latinos, while systematically denigrating, even humiliating, white men. This theme shines through, as well, in the rantings of McInnes, who argues that formal education is set up to make it hard for boys to succeed (which, he argues, also accounts for diagnoses of ADHD and the use of Ritalin). And, of course, it runs through Jordan Peterson's suggestion that people should abandon universities (which have been hopelessly corrupted by their adoption of "women's studies") in favor of trade schools. The conservative critique of universities today is closely bound up with reclaiming a sense of masculinity, the idea being that higher education has become a way to control men.

And this relates, in turn, to a third aspect of the new right-wing assault on the academy: its focus on high tuition prices. The cost of higher education is further evidence of the flimsy morality of the entire enterprise. The Foundation for Economic Education author touted his own decision to attend a state university instead of an Ivy League college, thus saving what he estimated at $200,000; this was also a focus of Trump Jr.'s Arlington speech. The high sticker price (even if often defrayed through financial aid) seems to render suspect all theoretical or academic rhetoric about challenging power, making it clear that a university education is primarily about the rise of a new elite. The university thus becomes an agent of exclusion and division.

For the contemporary right, universities are supposedly bent on undermining traditional norms and hierarchies, teaching the young to resent religion, reject family, and hate capitalism. As a result, the young are going crazy. ("Education is child abuse," as McInnes puts it.) Yet at the same time, conservatives portray the university as the institution that more than any other acts as a gateway to social power. The university's function as a subversive gatekeeper is what marks it as especially dangerous.

The image of the university as a monopolistic enterprise, doling out credentials that are meaningless yet essential to economic success, also sets the argument apart from the older broadsides. Again, this builds on the longstanding posture on the right of venerating the common wisdom of the people as opposed to the book-

learning and theoretical flights of the "pointy-headed" college professors once castigated by George Wallace. It even echoes Buckley's famous if disingenuous suggestion that he'd rather be ruled by the first 2,000 names in the phone book than by the Harvard faculty.

It is hardly surprising that universities would emerge as a target of rage. They symbolize who can and cannot get in, who is and is not worthy.

But this vision of the university also taps into a change in the role of higher education in American society more broadly. When Buckley and Kristol (and to a lesser extent Bloom) wrote, the public-university system was steadily expanding, and access to higher education was widening. This was part of a broader social pattern toward greater economic equality. True, Kristol wrote about a "new class" of professional do-gooders emerging from institutions of higher learning — but this intelligentsia was defined in part by its modest consumer habits, its distance from the very rich.

Today, however, the whole debate over higher education cannot but be inflected by competitive desperation and anxiety — not just about college, but about the whole social order.

The tremendous pressure to get into an elite college, the financial sacrifices and sheer gambles families make, give universities a shakier moral status than once they had. The right is not altogether wrong that higher education seems to be the only clear way to secure a place in the middle class, let alone anything more. An elite credential stands in for social mobility, economic security, and prestige. Universities do in fact channel students into certain kinds of high-prestige, well-paid jobs (for example, the active recruitment carried out by investment banks, particularly at Ivy League institutions). It's not that obtaining a college education necessarily places one in the economic elite — far from it. But in a highly stratified society, attending college — and especially an elite college — comes to bear a new symbolic weight. Those at the top, we are told, are there because they proved themselves the best: the smartest, the most gifted, the most talented, those with the most evident and obvious merit. Given this, it is hardly surprising that universities would emerge as a target of rage for those who fear downward mobility. Universities symbolize who can and cannot get in, who is and is not worthy.

The violent fantasies circulating on the right pick up on and reproduce a social sadism far more broadly evident. In this context, the university seems simply another institution bent on diminishing the living standards and opportunities available to working-class people (and in the iconography of the right, especially to blue-collar white men). No longer an engine of mobility or uplift — let alone a space that cultivates a citizenry capable of governing itself — it instead appears to uphold an exclusive politics, a privileged elite.

The aggressiveness of today's right, its oft-noted flirtation with violence, its combination of machismo and disdain, set it apart from the conservatism of the mid-20th century. But those aspects are not the most distinctive and dangerous. Rather, what is most troubling is the way that the right has managed to tap into certain hypocrisies present within academic institutions as they are.

There has long been a tension between conservatism and intellectual life, a rift between the right and higher education; as Hofstadter wrote in 1963, "In a certain sense the suspicious Tories and militant philistines are right: Intellect *is* dangerous. Left free, there is nothing it will not reconsider, analyze, throw into question." That may be inevitable. But what is less certain is the extent to which the right-wing critique resonates with the broader society. As participants in the maintenance of economic privilege, universities open themselves up to these attacks from the right and also undercut their own ability to nurture true intellectual freedom. Were universities to do more to actively challenge the harsh inequality that governs so much of our society, the critique of the right would be far less likely to catch on.

Making higher education less expensive and more democratic might help to defang the caricatures of academia promoted on the right. The university should stand for the idea that developing one's intellect, and learning to think more deeply and freely about the world, is possible and important for everyone. It is a fundamental right, and one for which society is better off the more widely people are able to exercise it. Ending legacy admissions, lowering tuition, supporting unionization efforts for faculty and staff at all levels, pressing for greater aid for public universities and more financial assistance for students (including the calls for free tuition), and ceasing to mirror the corporate sector in the rising salaries for university presidents and other top administrators would be steps in the right direction.

This vision of the university as a counterforce to economic inequality may be alienating to Donald Trump Jr., as well as to many university boards of trustees. After all, as anyone who actually works at one knows, the idea of the university as a hotbed of revolution exists only in the imagination of the right. But this is a time to articulate principles anew, to claim a moral high ground, to ask ourselves what our institutions are doing and why.

Correction (2/4/2019, 11:30 a.m.): AT&T Stadium is located in Arlington, Tex., not in Dallas. The text has been corrected accordingly.

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