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BOOKS

The Opening of the Academic Mind

How to rescue the professoriate from professionalization.

BY GIDEON LEWIS-KRAUS JAN 17, 2010 • 7:04 AM

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GIFT STORY

The state of higher education in America is one of those things, like the airline industry or publishing, that's always in crisis. The academy is too distant from the concerns of everyday life, or else it's too politically engaged. The academy has become completely irrelevant, except for the fact that it's too relevant. We ought to be grateful to our universities for this. Academic wrongheadedness is one of the few things people across the political and cultural spectrum can agree upon.

One popular way of describing the failure of the contemporary academy is to complain that it no longer produces special things called "public intellectuals," so it is either a great relief or a rule-proving exception to read a blazingly sane take on the academy's troubles by one of the few professors who pretty safely deserves the term. Louis Menand's *The Marketplace of Ideas* manages to do many things in four short essays—describe the changing self-conception of the university, identify the difficulties behind curricular reform, and analyze the anxieties of humanities professors. But the book's chief accomplishment is its insistence that what we take for academic crises are probably just academic problems, and they are ours to solve.

Menand is a dialectical thinker. He has inherited the wry historical sensibility that runs from William James and John Dewey through Lionel Trilling and Menand's strongest recent antecedent, Richard Rorty. This is to say that he understands that most new problems were once solutions to old problems. His new book suggests that contemporary higher education's biggest problem is professionalization. The academic department has become a guild, and, like any self-regulating bureaucracy, its errand is to replicate itself. To draw on an example close to Menand, who is both a member of Harvard's English department and an unfailingly interesting cultural critic at *The New Yorker*, the result is that "the university literature department is not especially well suited to the business of producing either interesting literary criticism or interesting literary critics." What it does well, of course, is produce good literature professors.

And this is precisely the issue: *Professors*, the people most visibly responsible for the creation of new ideas, have, over the last century, become all too consummate *professionals*, initiates in a system committed to its own protection and perpetuation. Professors worry that any general-education requirements, any attempt to make a college education seem relevant in a specific way, will be too "presentist" or "instrumentalist." They have been taught to think of their own work, which is accountable only to the internal standards of their profession, as something pure, something unrelated to the messy business of the world. But this belief itself was only ever dreamed up as a solution to different problems, and once we understand it as a matter of historical contingency, we shall presumably be better able to deal with its consequences.

In the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, the American college faced several obstacles. It was still largely in thrall to theological obligations, and scientists had to contort themselves to seem religiously legitimate. It was also watching its student base disappear to the newly emergent professional schools. The man responsible for the sweeping institutional reform that created the modern research university was Harvard President Charles William Eliot —"the greatest professionalizer in the history of higher education," Menand calls him in his Pulitzer Prize-winning intellectual history of pragmatist thought, *The Metaphysical Club*.

In the course of his 40-year tenure starting in 1869, Menand explains, Eliot became "identified with almost everything that distinguishes the modern research university from the antebellum college: the abandonment of the role of *in loco parentis*; the abolition of required coursework; the introduction of the elective system for undergraduates; the establishment of graduate schools with doctoral programs in the arts and sciences; and the emergence of pure and applied research as principal components of the university's mission." Eliot's most "original and revolutionary idea" was to require a college degree to enter professional school. This established the educational model that still obtains: liberalization first, then specialization. Universities assumed the role of credentializing professionals, and the professoriate was on the way to becoming a guild.

This transformation gave the professoriate a new autonomy, but at a price: If professors wanted academic freedom, insulation from the demands of the commercial marketplace, they had to start thinking of what they did in nonvocational terms—as the pursuit of specialized knowledge for its own sake. This self-conception helps to explain why the attempt to construct a general-education curriculum has been so fraught. General-education requirements are designed with the idea that there are some nonnegotiable ends to a college education—to provide, for example, the "social glue" that bonds disparate Americans to one another, or to generate productive minds for the purposes of Cold War defense—but professors have been socialized to believe that what they do can't be reduced to something so vulgar and utilitarian.

"The instinctive response of liberal educators is to pull up the drawbridge, to preserve college's separateness at any price," Menand writes. "But maybe purity is the disease." His point, and it is an important one, is that academics only believe that "the practical is the enemy of the true" because that was part of the bargain Eliot struck. But this misunderstands the original point of academic freedom. Eliot didn't promote academic professionalization because he thought that professors ought to have no truck with the wider world. He did it because he thought that if professors were answerable only to one another, and responsible for the perpetuation of their own system, they would produce better scholarship—scholarship held to its own standards, not the standards of the open market. But knowledge is important, in the end, not because it flatters the pretensions of its producers, but because it helps us achieve our purposes.

The ultimate problem is this: How do you create a system for the production of knowledge that is, on the one hand, rigorous and peer-reviewed and, on the other, committed to aims and obligations beyond its own survival? The professoriate itself is well aware of the dilemma, Menand observes, and has enthusiastically promoted what sounds like a solution: "interdisciplinarity." The hope is that if professors join in conversation with one another, they'll remember to be interesting to people outside their building.

Theoretically, this solves everything. The disciplines are still accountable only to themselves, but they're also engaged with something broader—i.e., other disciplines. They are still autonomous without being hermetic. Except that, Menand explains, interdisciplinarity finally does nothing to alter the ways in which the individual disciplines produce their professors. Rather than a therapy for academic neurosis, interdisciplinarity is in fact yet one more symptom of it. "Interdisciplinary anxiety," he writes, "is a displaced anxiety about the position of privilege that academic professionalism confers on its initiates *and* about the peculiar position of social disempowerment created by the barrier between academic workers and the larger culture. It is anxiety about the formalism and methodological fetishism of the disciplines *and* about the danger of sliding into aimless subjectivism or eclecticism."

If Menand, whose print persona is ordinarily so unruffled, can seem a little frustrated about the academy's lack of clarity about this stuff, it's because he really does think that something is wrong. He concludes the book with a discussion of a study by two sociologists that shows how overwhelmingly center-left the politics of academics are. In the 2004 election, he notes, 95 percent of humanities and social-science professors voted for Kerry; zero percent voted for Bush. This is sure to be taken up by the few remaining culture warriors as proof of the disloyalty of the American professoriate. But Menand, in the context of a book about the trade-offs of professionalization, reads the situation differently. The fault is not with the politics themselves; academics are usually careful to keep policy out of the classroom. It is with the homogeneity. The system is simply replicating itself too smoothly.

The Marketplace of Ideas is a diagnostic book, not a prescriptive one, and Menand's proposals for how we might invigorate the academic production of knowledge are added as afterthoughts. He thinks we ought to shorten the length of study required for graduate students; the fact that it takes three years to get a law degree and close to a decade to get a humanities doctorate, he writes, is just another symptom of professors' anxiety about the worth of their trade. We also ought to invite more applications from students who might not have self-selected as academic specialists. The notional aims of the academy—the lively and contentious production of new scholarship—would be better served by making academic boundaries more permeable rather than less.

But in the end, Menand's proposals, smart and coherent though they are, seem less important than the case study provided by his career. He has managed to stay accountable at once to his colleagues in English departments and to his audience of general readers, and he has pulled this off without sacrificing either rigor or range. Menand is proof that an academic can be a great prose stylist, and that a journalist doesn't have to be a dilettante—and that having a commitment to one community enriches one's contribution to the other. He makes it hard to take seriously the rhetoric of crisis, and helps us get on with the important business of creating the problems of the future.

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