

Academic Socialism Versus the Free Market

BY RICHARD M. EBELING



Academia has long been thought of as the “marketplace of ideas,” the arena where truth may be pursued through dispassionate discourse and openness to competing views. Yet higher education in America has moved a great distance from this ideal and its practice.

Too many of our colleges and universities have become cloistered “hothouses” of bias and intolerance—schools of closed-mindedness. Everywhere we look these institutions are dominated by “political correctness,” the common theme of which is disdain and disapproval of the American traditions of individualism, free enterprise, and constitutionally limited government.

No amount of criticism or doubt from outside those hallowed halls seems to affect either the professors or the administrators, who claim to be the stewards of the younger generation placed in their intellectual and moral care. Indeed, more often than not, they demonstrate contempt for those who challenge their entitlement to mentor and mold our sons and daughters as they think fit. Their conduct shows that they consider themselves answerable to no one but themselves.

This should not be surprising considering the special, indeed, unique environment in which they operate. The vast majority of America’s colleges and universities have become insular islands of “academic socialism.” They are either directly owned and operated by government, or if they are “private,” they have become so dependent on government loans, scholarships, and research grants that they have little real interaction with the wider society.

Regardless of the lack of intellectual merit or usefulness of what is often taught in fields such as history, political science, economics, sociology, and literature, the faculties at these schools are protected from any negative feedback. Their salaries at state institutions

are paid through tax dollars; their jobs are secured through lifetime tenure; and the content of their courses are judged as good or bad only by themselves. Any doubts about or dissent against how and what they teach is responded to with shouts of “academic freedom.” That phrase has become a mantra to ward off the demons: those of us who may not agree with the “wisdom” they wish to “share” with our children.

Government funding, of course, comes from tax dollars expropriated from the hard-earned income of the American citizenry. Parents are therefore left with fewer financial resources with which to send their children to educational institutions outside the net of state sponsorship and control. Further, the lure of less-expensive state-funded and state-subsidized colleges and universities creates a perverse incentive for parents to send their young to these politically funded schools.

The damage from all this goes far beyond wasting the taxpayers’ dollars in guaranteeing these academics their annual incomes. It means that the future of America is predominantly placed in their hands. The vast majority of young men and women pass through their educational processing. They mold how our sons and daughters see and think about politics, economics, history, moral philosophy, and social institutions.

To put it bluntly, they push our children through an intellectual sieve of collectivism; as a result, these young people leave college with no proper and vital understanding of freedom, self-responsibility, and the character and value of a free society. They enter adulthood unaware of the noble and courageous struggle that was carried on over the centuries in the Western world to establish the legacy of liberty and prosperity that too many of us take for granted.

What applies to government spending on higher

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education of course applies no less to government spending on K–12 schooling as well. Indeed, it can be argued that government’s influence at this level is even more disturbing, since these are the most impressionable years, when young minds are shaped by core ideas about their world. Whether it is sex education or conceptions about the environment or even the basic capacity to read and write, the grammar- and high-school years can leave a mark on young men and women for the rest of their lives.

It is not surprising, therefore, that public-school teachers and administrators are opposed to private competitive education during these formative years. Not only would it wrest from them near-monopoly control over the minds of America’s youth, but a free market in education would also show the disastrous job the state system has done in preparing the next generation for earning a living in the global economy.

Compare that with the marketplace of everyday commerce, where the sellers of ideas and the products that embody them must demonstrate their value to the buying public. Sellers must prove that what is being offered is worth the price being asked. If they fail to do so, their clientele drifts away; their market share declines; and their incomes decrease. If a seller does not mend his ways, he will finally be driven out of business by those who more effectively serve consumers.

The private seller cannot shout “producer freedom” and claim the right to be protected from the disapproval of his customers. In the free market there is neither tenure nor government-guaranteed income. Every producer and seller is ultimately answerable to those he serves.

This is what makes competition a mechanism for fostering innovation and excellence. Every day, in every way, sellers must constantly try to stay ahead of their rivals in the marketplace. And they cannot forget that new entrants could come into their corner of the market, apply their creative abilities to better serve the consuming public, and earn some of the potential profits from doing so.

Ivory-Tower Existence

It is clear why so many teachers, professors, and administrators show such hostility to business and market competition. And it is no wonder that they despise the profit-and-loss system. To advocate a real marketplace of ideas would threaten their protected government-subsidized utopian, ivory-tower existence.

Defeating “academic socialism,” as I call it, will require effort to escape the government’s educational control. A growing number of parents in the United States are undertaking that effort, as demonstrated by the expanding attendance at private schools around the country and the increasing numbers of parents who incur the personal and family sacrifices to home-school their sons and daughters. Having lost all confidence in the government schooling system, they have taken more direct responsibility for their children’s education.

But what is also needed is a broader understanding of why government should not be trusted with the education of America’s youth—from kindergarten through the Ph.D. At the same time, this issue has to be put in a wider context, demonstrating why, in general, government should not be allowed to intrude into and control our personal, social, and economic affairs.

This is what the Foundation for Economic Education is all about. Our task is not simply to show why particular government regulations and programs fail or are counterproductive—though the articles in *The Freeman* do this issue after issue. In our publications, programs, and seminars, we analyze these particular policy questions as a means of providing a wider understanding of the moral, political, and economic principles of liberty without which a free society cannot survive in the long run.

FEE’s purpose is to supply the philosophical and economic compass that points to that spot on the social and political horizon representing the free society of tomorrow. Unless we know where we want to go, we can never be sure if we have chosen the right path to get there. Only by knowing where we want to go can we avoid the pitfalls and false scents along the way that would lead us in wrong directions.

