

A More Principled Vision for Higher Learning

Jonathan Marks urges a recommitment to reason

**Let's Be Reasonable:
A Conservative Case for Liberal Education**
by Jonathan Marks

Princeton University Press, 2021, \$27.95; 228 pages.

As reviewed by J. Grant Addison

IN *LET'S BE REASONABLE*, Jonathan Marks argues that higher education should rededicate itself to the project of liberal education. Taking his cue from John Locke, Marks describes the aim of liberal education as creating a certain type of person: that is, a reasonable one. "Reason," as opposed to syllogism or simple debate, is both a habit of mind and a standard to hold while pursuing truth. "Our way of talking captures the sense, still alive in us despite the resolute unseriousness of public speech, that reason is not only an authority but also the kind of authority that is an honor to obey and a disgrace to betray, the sense that there's such a thing as conduct unbecoming a reasoner," he writes. Through study of great books and guided engagement with an academic community, liberal education seeks to "answer the question of what we are and what the best way of life is."

Producing graduates who are devoted to reason, Marks laments, has become "at best an intermittent concern" for higher education, even at those colleges and universities that are proud to market their "liberal education" offerings. His goal is to sway those inside of the academy to adopt a more principled vision for higher learning, but his defense of liberal education is also intended as a defense of colleges and universities themselves. As indicated by the book's title, Marks, a conservative who is a professor of politics at Ursinus College, is also aiming his argument specifically at other conservatives, many of whom he fears have written off colleges and universities entirely as factories of leftist indoctrination. He writes from the perspective that higher education's story is poorly told, and he rejects right-wing fatalism about colleges and universities.

His apology for an intentional liberal education focused on molding reasonable citizens is welcome, and often stirring. Marks bolsters his argument with insights from Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Alexis de Tocqueville, and others, and he frames much of his case for higher education's potential in constructive "conversation" with previous critiques such as Allan Bloom's *The Closing*

of the American Mind, Patrick Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed*, and Jonathan Rauch's *Kindly Inquisitors*.

He opens the book by differentiating his understanding of a liberal education—one that produces reasonable people—from the bland, diffuse label that is casually tossed around by so-called liberal arts colleges and academic associations that are otherwise unable to state with clarity what the true aim of liberal education is. "Adjectives, like integrative, interdisciplinary, interconnected, entrepreneurial, twenty-first century, complex, dynamic, and problem-solving, are distributed among brochures as if at random to make it appear that something buzzy is going on," he gently mocks. Marks then moves on to talking about academe's critics, on both the right and the left, from within higher education and from without, and why he feels they are both wrong.

The real meat of the book comes in Chapters 3 and 4, where Marks thoroughly presents his case for a liberal education dedicated to reasonableness and then the process and importance of shaping students with this aim. Here Marks is at his best, putting on his professor's hat to dip in and out of historical background and offer up discussion of political theory in an engaging, almost lecture-like style. The chapter-length look into the current generation of college students, which uses a mix of survey data, expert

analysis, and anecdote, provides a useful note of humility for those of us engaged in such discussions about higher education. "We professors know less than we think we know about our students," he admits.

Given the political and ideological polarization that has engulfed higher education and all discussion of it over the past decade, it is heartening to read a case made in optimism. Yet *Let's Be Reasonable* often undersells legitimate criticisms that can be levied at colleges and universities even as it ignores more serious, structural impediments to his vision of academic renewal. Indeed, in the book's final chapter Marks offers a lengthy analysis of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions, or BDS, movement against Israel as a case study of problematic left-wing campus activism and the need for reason. The organized campaign of viewpoint discrimination and personal harassment he describes paints a picture far closer to the right-wing critique of leftist colleges and universities than Marks allows.

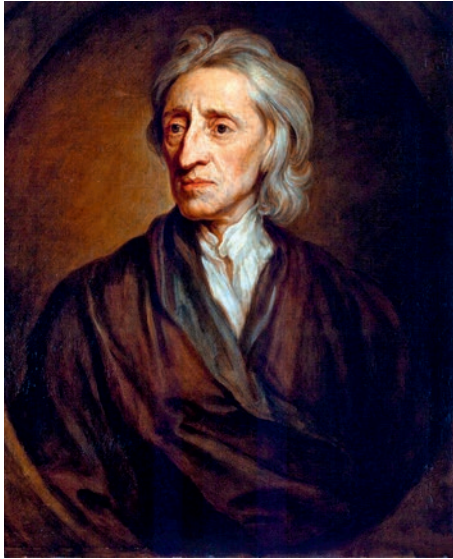
Let's Be Reasonable

A Conservative Case for Liberal Education

Jonathan Marks



Marks



John Locke



Alexis de Tocqueville

While I have no reason to doubt Marks’s non-combative experience as a conservative professor, survey data consistently reveal that a sizable portion of conservative students and faculty members feel some form of hostility from their peers because of their ideological or political views. Among

not exist.” Case closed, debate over.

Largely absent from Marks’s case is discussion of the permanent and ever-expanding administrative bureaucracy on college and university campuses. In Chapter 1, Marks recounts

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right-leaning academics in the United States and Canada, 70 percent of respondents said they experienced a “hostile departmental climate” because of their views, according to a survey released in March 2021 by the Center for the Study of Partisanship and Ideology.

At times, this hostility to heterodoxy in academe can calcify until disagreement is foreclosed and open inquiry is sacrificed to the party line. In fall 2020, for example, the American Educational Research Association and the National Academy of Education issued a “Joint Statement in Support of Anti-Racist Education,” endorsed by 16 scientific societies, which instructed that researchers “must stand against the notion that systemic racism does

JOHN LOCKE BY SIR GODFREY KNELLER, OIL ON CANVAS, BRITAIN, 1697, HERMITAGE, ST. PETERSBURG. ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE BY THEODORE CHASSERIAU, OIL ON CANVAS, PALACE OF VERSAILLES MUSEUM OF THE HISTORY OF FRANCE.

SCALIA'S CONSTITUTION

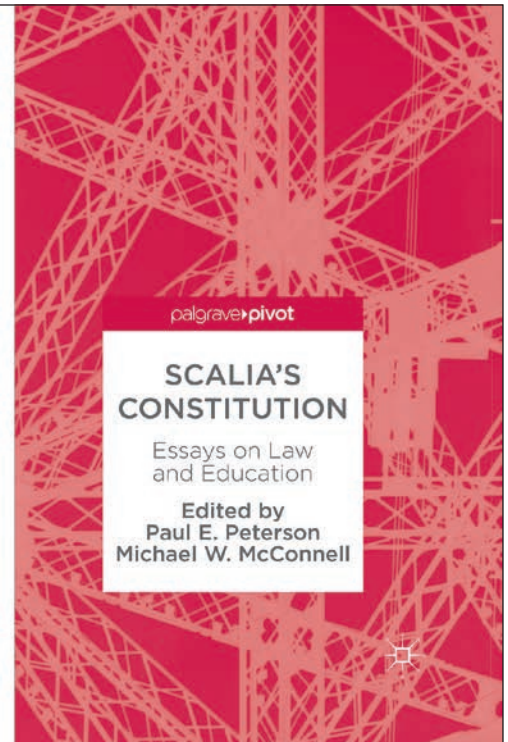
Essays on Law and Education

Editors: Paul E. Peterson and Michael W. McConnell
September 2017

“Scalia's Constitution: Essays on Law and Education provides a valuable examination of the remarkable Justice's jurisprudence. The educational system of the United States, although not mentioned in the Constitution, has provoked some of the most contentious legal conflicts ever argued before the Supreme Court. The essays in this book, from a variety of perspectives, give an insightful review of Scalia's judicial doctrines and teachings that relate to this subject.”

—Ed Meese III

Ronald Reagan Distinguished Fellow Emeritus, Meese Center for Legal and Judicial Studies, Institute for Constitutional Government, The Heritage Foundation



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how, in 2015, administrators at Harvard University gave out “Holiday Placemats for Social Justice” to serve as crib sheets for undergraduates who might want to browbeat their less-woke family members over the holidays. Marks points out that several Harvard undergraduates openly criticized the move, anecdotal he uses to make the argument that not all college students fit the caricature of coddled “crybullies.” All well and good; he’s right about that. What he overlooks, though, is that the placemat project was administrator-driven.

For all the ink spilled about potential indoctrination by leftist professors (largely a specious claim), it is administrators and campus bureaucrats who make up the most ideologically biased group in academe—a group that makes major decisions related to collegiate life and campus mores. As my former American Enterprise Institute colleague Samuel J. Abrams found from conducting a survey of about 900 “student-facing” administrators, “liberal staff members outnumber their conservative counterparts by the astonishing ratio of 12-to-one.” It is most often these campus mandarins, particularly those in positions related to offices of “diversity, equity, and inclusion,” who interfere with the

academic enterprise and threaten the idea of liberal education.

Also missing from Marks’s defense of liberal education is a real acknowledgment of the labor-market realities underpinning our higher-education system. Unfortunately, higher education has become for a great many Americans principally a toll—a credential that must be purchased to become eligible for higher-paying employment. A recommitment to liberal

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education with a core curriculum that focuses largely on the “Great Books” would be a worthy recalibration for many colleges, but need it be the pathway for all of them? Perhaps a more effective move would be to reestablish institutional diversity and differentiate between liberal arts colleges,

research universities, and vocational programs while making it easier for students to acquire the skills and credentials they need to progress more quickly (and cheaply) to the workforce.

In the end, Marks’s case for a reason-oriented liberal education is likely altogether too reasonable a goal to accomplish. But, as he writes in his preface, “there are worse things to do than to go down swinging.”

J. Grant Addison is deputy editor of the Washington Examiner Magazine.

SCHOOL LIFE

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academic year?

It’s my hope that most schools will be open. I was feeling hopeful until I saw the AFT, again, disagree with the CDC and the vast majority of scientific bodies out there. It’s hard to anticipate what the unions’ disagreements will be in a couple of months. So maybe that ends up disrupting the reopening of schools for the coming year.

The wild card we need to watch is that with these new variants of the virus, there’s the risk that at least one or two of them will evade the efficacy of the vaccines. One could imagine a worst-case scenario where a wave of such a variant hits, and that could end up closing some communities and schools.

Another challenge right now is that the fear mongering that’s been taking place for the better part of a year has paralyzed a lot of families. Many parents don’t know who to believe. They hear from the superintendent that it’s safe to reopen. They hear from the unions that it’s not. So in some instances, schools are open, but a sizable number of parents have kept

“It was right to close schools early, but it’s been absolutely wrong to keep schools closed, given the accumulating body of research that we have on the virus and on the various mitigation measures that can help keep teachers and kids safe in the classroom.”

their kids in remote learning.

And the same way that we have vaccine hesitancy, we have “reopening hesitancy.” Some people are waiting for something to make them feel a bit more confident that it’s safe to send their kids back. That is a population we need to listen to and better understand, because I could imagine scenarios this fall where some parents want to keep their kids home until there’s a vaccine available for the kids. What we know is that a vaccine won’t be available for younger children until 2022. And for

older children, probably not until the late summer or early fall of 2021.

If you go by the vaccine rule, you’re going to have another year with schools closed. That would be absurdly costly to an entire generation of students.

That’s right.

This is an edited excerpt from an Education Exchange podcast, which can be heard at educationnext.org.