

The New Criterion

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Memo to our critics on the Left: a little more candor, please & a little less paranoia

On Peter Brooks & the Bass grant at Yale.

“It is one of the curiosities of neoconservatism that it has continued to see itself as representing an embattled minority even in its hours of triumph.” So writes Peter Brooks, a professor of French and comparative literature at Yale, in a recent issue of the London Times Literary Supplement (August 30, 1996). Needless to say, this tenured member of the Yale faculty wasn’t speaking of any recent neoconservative “hours of triumph” in the lecture halls and classrooms of his own campus, where, to the extent that a neoconservative influence may be discernible at all, it does indeed survive as “an embattled minority” position.

No, what seemed to be roiling this academic eminence, himself a champion of all the radical ideologies that have lately come to corrupt the study of the humanities at Yale, was something he wished to avoid being explicit about, lest he be seen to allude to the role that he and his colleagues in comparative literature may have played in a recent Yale scandal. This was the uproar caused by the withdrawal of a gift of twenty million dollars by a Yale alumnus—Lee M. Bass of Fort Worth, Texas—that was intended to support a new program for Yale undergraduates in the history and achievements of Western civilization.

It will be recalled that Mr. Bass made that gift to Yale in 1991, and was moved to withdraw it some four years later when it became unmistakably apparent that the Yale faculty had conspired with the university administration to thwart the educational purposes which the gift was designed to serve. The terms of the gift called for the creation of seven senior and four junior professorships for the new double-credit survey course in Western civilization, yet in clear violation of the terms of the gift Yale refused to act on those appointments, hoping instead to channel funds from the gift into the kind of politically correct, multicultural courses—“gender studies,” et al.—that were already disfiguring the study of the humanities at Yale.

As we noted in this space in our issue of April 1995, in the immediate aftermath of the Bass affair, Professor Brooks’s colleague in Yale’s comparative literature department, Michael Holquist, was nothing if not explicit about the kind of “fusion” courses the Bass funds would be

used for when he declared that literature and history could no longer be taught “without reference to O. J. Simpson.” It was to prevent such a use of his gift that Mr. Bass withdrew it.

And how does Professor Brooks deal with this unlovely attempt to derail the purposes of the Bass gift? Without ever once mentioning the uproar in which his own department was a driving force, Professor Brooks denounces what he characterizes as “the neoconservative onslaught [that] has created a pervasive suspicion between the educational establishment and the society from which it must draw support,” and laments that “private donors to universities have gained greater power over the use of their monies.”

We frankly have no idea of whether Mr. Bass’s views on this or any other subject may accurately be described as neoconservative. And if the criticisms that we and others have lavished upon the way the humanities are taught in the universities today have indeed caused the public to take a closer look at what is actually occurring in the classrooms of the academy, we welcome that development without entertaining any illusions about imminent reversal of policy in that quarter.

As for private donors to universities acquiring more of a voice in the way their monies are used, we say “Amen! and high time, too.” But we are not overly optimistic about the outcome. After all, the successful actions taken by Professor Brooks and his colleagues at Yale have provided us with a vivid demonstration of the way even a very generous private donor can be defeated by the tenured radicals who continue to dominate the universities. Let’s not forget that the real losers in the Yale uproar are the school’s undergraduates.

But we are not overly optimistic about the outcome.

It is also nonsense—and dishonest nonsense, too—for Professor Brooks to speak, as he does in *The Times Literary Supplement*, of some mysterious “access to the mass media” which neoconservative critics are alleged to have enjoyed in this controversy. All he can possibly mean by “mass media” in this connection is *The Wall Street Journal*, for everywhere else in the mass media—as Professor Brooks has every reason to know—the politically correct views of the Left-liberal establishment are fully in control.

Isn’t it time for stalwarts of the academic Left like Peter Brooks to be more candid in arguing their case—explaining to the public why they prefer “gender studies” programs in Western civilization, for example—and a little less paranoid about their critics? Or are they so hopelessly entrenched in their own deconstructionist mystique that they are no longer capable of making distinctions between truth and falsehood?

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