



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 12, No. 2

October 1, 1999

In Defense Of Elitism

“Now, my Friend, who are the *aristoi* [“the best”]? Philosophy may Answer “The Wise and Good.” But the World, Mankind, have by their practice always answered, “the rich the beautiful and well born”. . . . What chance have Talents and Virtues in comparison with Wealth and Birth? and Beauty?”

John Adams to Thomas Jefferson; Sept. 2, 1813

Mary Jean Herzog’s revisiting the bar seems to have left me groggy. In addition to Adams’ list of wealth, birth, and beauty, we should also have to include the ‘sweetly disabled’ students of the modern university. She claims that elitism and privilege do not mesh with our ideals or mission as a university. However, I wish to raise some “inconvenient questions” about her appraisal of our situation and to defend several unfashionable principles underlying the idea of an Honors College.

Not only do ‘elitism’ and ‘privilege’ mesh with, they are required by, institutions of higher learning. To enlist such epithets is to fail to recognize that knowledge-elitism is a natural product of human activities and social practices that embrace earned privilege whereas power-elitism is a defective holdover from the days of royal prerogative which is inconsistent with democratic practices. Our own democratic traditions, at their best, rightly exemplify the former and at the same time abhor the latter sort of elitism.

To call an Honors College “elitist” is itself a product of an elitist, privileged education. Recognizing excellence is one of the tasks of any worthwhile, lasting human activity or social practice, and so it is central to democratically oriented institutions. The recent idea that all should be rewarded equally, no matter how much or how little they contribute to or even care about the ultimate goal, is a mistaken and ultimately self-defeating social/political and educational goal. Similarly, the conception that all are equally talented and evenly prepared for present or future tasks is doomed to a short life. Imagine how destructive such a policy would be were we to institute it in our hiring craftspeople: we would have to say that we don’t want the best mechanic or doctor or carpenter; after all, they all are equally gifted or all deserve equal recognition. Of course, this on the surface sounds like egalitarianism, but it is the sort that is destined to subject us all to the ‘Tyranny of the Majority’, as John Stuart Mill rightly called the desires for power of the ill-informed and ill-willed.

To pretend that all elitism is despicable or only exists once students are here is incoherent. It is elitism and privilege to be able to attend a university at all. Our jobs represent elitist, privileged positions in our society. The moment I trudged out of the loamy farm soils of southern Indiana and stepped onto the manicured campus of a university, I entered into the life of privilege. Giving out grades (of any sort) is elitist; judging this work (of art, science, or a craft) as of higher quality than that work is elitist. In fact, such elitism is unavoidable. We already provide athletic scholarships to those who are physically talented. Why then are we, the privileged few, so offended by the idea of providing the intellectually gifted with a few privileges, which we all acknowledge they have earned? And why are those of us in the Academy, of all places, complaining about the attainment of academic excellence?

To reflect on our democratic ideal of disseminating knowledge among the people is to recognize that some people are naturally going to be more well-informed than others. A true

republic depends on a populace of well-informed citizens; however, let's face it: not everyone desires or is competent at being well-informed. Many people rely on journalists, news anchors, film critics, ministers, politicians, doctors, and other 'experts' for their information. Consequently, ill-informed or biased sorts often dominate all sorts of media: ideologues clog our scholarly journals; religious and political demagogues pander the masses for financial support; dysfunctional whiners/exhibitionists/doomsdayers terrorize communications media; and pseudo-scientists feel compelled to offer up their 'solutions' to the less informed. Without some individual and groups of well-informed, reflective, and constructively critical activists, a *lively* democratic regime cannot survive. We should not confuse power-elitism (rule by a specially privileged group unfairly wielding inordinate power) with knowledge-elitism (reliance on leadership by a select group on the basis of their deliberations). So, let's not fool ourselves into thinking Honors classes are elitist whereas regular classes, or other parts of the university, are not.

Anyone that excels in a craft intuitively raises their own standards of excellence and simultaneously invokes appropriate standards for apprentices and 'journeymen' in the craft. If learning and teaching are crafts, then let's not feign that elitism does not and should not exist. That is yet another one of the dishonesties of the modern Academy. We should recall Socrates' remark that the truly free person is one who inculcates not only knowledge, but also good will and frankness. Our apprentices might better attain lives of flourishing by more application of this insight.

Finally, to recall our own tradition as a republic of learning is also to acknowledge the call for excellence and elitism in the Academy. As Jefferson and Adams noted in their survey of the past, all societies bring forth a "natural aristocracy" of leaders. Who are these *aristoi* ["the best"]? Certainly not, as Adams and Jefferson fully agree, the 'usual suspects', i.e. the rich, beautiful, or well born. Nor, one might add, are they the 'sweetly disabled'. Of course, that does not mean that we are not to help all of those under our charge to become liberated to actualize their potentialities. Certainly, that is a main part of our task. "The Wise and the Good" is the answer given by thinkers from Socrates to Jefferson; that is because they are the ones who can best reason through wisely and moderately, speaking about the driving issues of every age, not merely the present. It was Adams' whispered fear that the 'pseudo-aristocracy', comprised of the wealthy, beautiful, and wellborn, would domineer and destroy the young republic: what chance, he says, do talents and virtues have when competing with wealth, birth, and beauty? More distrustful than Jefferson, he was sure that Washington's children would be courted by or become enamored of European aristocracy here. A moment's thought about American obsessions with Princess Di or the Rockefellers demonstrates the fear to be well-founded. And so it is with the modern Academy: obsessions with pedigrees, titles, and 'professionalism' prevails in teaching; and our withdrawal into scholarly cubicles is of a piece with our surrenders to marketing analysis of external consultants, educational assessments from those not in the trenches, public relations hypes of mission statements, political agendas of demagogic legislators, and any number of other pressures.

It must be our overarching and common goal (otherwise, let's give up the tired rhetoric about "community") as teachers of the young (faculty, staff, administrators) to **craft**, not 'produce' (or, 'facilitate' for academic 'success') well-rounded, discerning reasoners who love learning. This is our task for the 'sweetly disabled' as much as for the self-enabled. I for one hope that we in the Academy encourage the wise and the good rather than the wealthy, beautiful, wellborn and pseudo-disabled; the latter dominate far too much of our national culture. Let us prove Jefferson (and his optimism about the prevalence of a natural aristocracy) rather than Adams (and his pessimism about the rule of the pseudo-aristocrats) to be the prophet honored in his own country. And let us not disdain the ideal of our common goal, remembering this means we should gladly aid our current apprentices to attain the lives of privilege and flourishing that we richly enjoy.

Apologist for the Wise and Good,

Daryl L. Hale, Philosophy & Religion Dept.