

Towering Ivories

Stanley Fish and his ideal of the American university.

by Peter Berkowitz

11/03/2008, Volume 014, Issue 08

Save the World on Your Own Time

by Stanley Fish

Oxford, 208 pp., \$19.95

Many people have as difficult a time hearing and giving due weight to the *liberal* in "liberal education" as they have in hearing and giving due weight to the *liberal* in "liberal democracy." But in both cases the adjective is critical: A liberal education is a specific form of education, one that fits individuals for freedom; and a liberal democracy is a specific form of popular government, one that protects individual freedom by limiting majority power.

Their common connection to freedom connects liberal education and liberal democracy. Because individual freedom not only presupposes rights and responsibilities but also presents individuals and society with distinctive opportunities and temptations, liberal democracies depend on citizens of a certain sort: self-reliant, disciplined, tolerant, rational, industrious, open to the variety of ways of being human, informed about public affairs, and disposed to settle disagreements through compromise and under law.

Of course, this does not exhaust the list of human virtues, not all citizens display all these virtues or display them to the same degree, and some conspicuously lack them. Because virtues do not develop automatically, liberal democracies must take an interest in citizens' acquisition of them. But the state's interest must be circumscribed by its duty to protect individual rights: A liberal and democratic state cannot too directly or aggressively cultivate the virtues of freedom without compromising the rights it is established to preserve.

In executing this delicate balancing act, liberal democracies depend on the associations and institutions of civil society: the family, religious community, work, and, not least, education. This is not to suggest that these associations and

institutions should become organs of the state. To the contrary; to reap their benefits, liberal democracies must respect their integrity and ensure their independence.

For example, by pursuing their distinctive ends, religious communities--or, at least, some religious communities---encourage individuals to care for their souls, which can serve as a counterweight to the state's emphasis on physical security and material abundance. Religion can also provide a ground for toleration by teaching that all human beings share a common dignity. A liberal democracy that is home to tolerant and law-abiding religions might reasonably go beyond tolerating them to supporting them. This does not mean enlisting or politicizing, but rather, say, eliminating their tax burdens and otherwise leaving them alone, enabling them to benefit the nation by fostering the virtues that flow from the pursuit of their distinctively religious mission.

The good reasons that liberal democracies have for supporting liberal education are even clearer. Liberal education hones intellectual skills that prepare students to contribute to the nation's prosperity; exposes them to the findings of the sciences and social sciences, making them more knowledgeable and sophisticated voters; and by deepening their acquaintance with the humanities, liberal education refines their judgment and enlarges their sympathies.

In other words, by directly providing nonpolitical benefits to students, liberal education indirectly provides political benefits to the nation. Were the state to commandeer the curriculum to disseminate a distinctly political message, it would destroy liberal education's private and political benefits. The consequences would be no less ruinous were it not the state but faculty and administrators who commandeered the curriculum for political purposes.

Stanley Fish, the title of whose book is an admonition to professors to keep their politics out of the classroom, understands a great deal about what is wrong with higher education in America. Unfortunately, his prescriptions for reform--which amount to little more than exhortations to faculty and administrators to mend their ways and, whatever else they do, not to explain or justify liberal education to legislators, private donors, alumni, parents, or students--are foolish and self-defeating. Part of the trouble is Fish's fondness for deflationary tactics and contrarian positions. The deeper problem is his failure to take seriously the *liberal* in liberal education and the *liberal* in liberal democracy.

Fish is the Davidson-Kahn distinguished university professor of humanities and a professor of law at Florida International University in Miami, as well as a regular blogger on politics and culture for the *New York Times* editorial pages. He has long reveled in his role as a kind of academic bad boy, only too happy, for example, to tout his taste for cars, celebrity, and high salaries.

But he is a bad boy with a witty and incisive mind and stellar academic credentials.

He taught English literature at Berkeley and Johns Hopkins before joining both the English literature department and law school at Duke, where he also ran the Duke University Press. From 1998 to 2004 he served as dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He made his name as a young scholar in the late 1960s with *Surprised by Sin*, a major reinterpretation of Milton's "Paradise Lost." Works such as *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (1989) and *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech and It's a Good Thing Too* (1994) earned him a reputation as a devotee of postmodernism and deconstruction.

While the reputation was not entirely undeserved, Fish remained his own man. He never produced the clotted prose typical of contemporary literary studies, instead cultivating a lively and entertaining style. And while he certainly read and absorbed cutting-edge theory, and in accord with it, propounded flamboyantly relativistic doctrines about human knowledge, he never took to invoking postmodern and deconstruction themes to advance partisan political agendas. He has preferred puncturing pieties to promoting causes, so much so that he has not been above spinning sophisticated arguments to confound and defeat his many and varied interlocutors. As a sign of his iconoclasm, if not his daring, he has occasionally agreed, if not with conservative reasoning, then with conclusions more common to conservatives, even while (as in this new book) caricaturing conservatism.

Save the World starts strong, with a question inadequately addressed by today's faculty and administrators: "What exactly is the job of higher education and what is it that those who teach in colleges and universities are trained and paid to do?" It's not that our institutions of higher education don't have an answer. Peruse the mission statements of colleges and universities across the land, Fish observes, and you will discover that they believe that it is among their main tasks to promote social justice in myriad forms and form good human beings and citizens. Fish emphatically disagrees. Endorsing a "narrow sense of vocation," he contends that the job of institutions of higher education is intellectual work, which requires students to acquire knowledge, not join movements or parties, and construct and evaluate arguments, not celebrate and embrace values or causes.

But this narrow understanding of the university's mission is not, he immediately points out, a modest one: "If you think about it, that's a lot to ask. It's at least a full time job and it wouldn't seem to leave much room for taking on a bunch of other jobs."

In so arguing, Fish opposes not only postmodern proselytizers who assert that intellectual inquiry is politics by other means, but also distinguished left-liberal educators such as the former Harvard president Derek Bok, who contend that the university has a responsibility to mold politically engaged citizens. Fish recognizes full well that, in practice, this generally turns out to mean citizens engaged in left-liberal politics. In Fish's eyes, however, neoconservative and conservative critics (he uses the terms imprecisely and interchangeably) of our politicized universities

are just as bad. Instead of undertaking to depoliticize the curriculum, contends Fish, they exacerbate the problem by seeking, under the cover of calls for intellectual diversity, to increase their political representation among faculty.

In Fish's view, moral education and civic education conflict with professors' academic responsibilities, and lie beyond professors' professional competence:

Teachers can, by virtue of their training and expertise, present complex materials in ways that make them accessible to novices. Teachers can also put students in possession of the analytical tools employed by up-to-date researchers in the field. But teachers cannot, except for a serendipity that by definition cannot be counted on, fashion moral character, or inculcate respect for others, or produce citizens of a certain temper. Or, rather, they cannot do these things unless they abandon the responsibilities that belong to them by contract in order to take up responsibilities that belong properly to others. But if they do that, they will be practicing without a license and in all likelihood doing a bad job at a job they shouldn't be doing at all. When that happens--and unfortunately it does happen--everyone loses. The students lose because they're not getting what they paid for (it will be said that they are getting more, but in fact they are getting less). The university loses because its resources have been appropriated for a nonacademic purpose. Higher education loses, because it is precisely when teachers offer themselves as moralists, therapists, political counselors, and agents of global change rather than as pedagogues that those who are on the lookout for ways to discredit higher education (often as a preliminary to taking it over) see their chance.

This is well said--except where Fish wrongly denies the moral and political benefits of professors' performing their academic duties scrupulously, and falsely insinuates that critics of the politicization of higher education typically have nefarious motives.

The university to which he wants to return, Fish stresses, would not be, as some of his opponents imagine, a sterile and dreary place, devoid of passion and indifferent to virtue. "No question, issue or topic," he maintains, "is off limits to classroom discussion so long as it is the object of academic rather than political or ideological attention." Such discussions--about the argument and action in Plato's *Republic*, the narrative sweep and cast of characters in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, the causes of the

American Revolution, changes in the social meaning of marriage, and the proper methods for studying morals and politics--are more than capable, as those who have experienced them can attest, of exciting students, focusing their attention, and arousing in them the hunger for knowledge.

And while in Fish's judgment any connection between college study and the exercise of moral and political virtue after graduation is remote and contingent--he goes so far as to deny that the study of literature and philosophy is edifying--he himself emphasizes that when they do their job properly, professors have every right to teach--indeed, can't do their job properly without teaching--intellectual virtues. These include clarity, rigor, innovativeness, and the courage to follow the argument and evidence where they lead. Professors teach these virtues not by lecture or exhortation but by demonstrating them in their conduct of class and in their carrying out of research.

When the aim of higher education is properly understood, Fish explains, it becomes clear that colleges and universities must not, as so many faculty are keen to do, declare, in the university's name, a foreign policy, domestic policy, environmental policy, or economic policy. The only kind of policy universities should have is an educational policy. Accordingly, Fish condemns "the vote by a major association of British professors to boycott Israeli universities and refuse to do business with Israeli professors until they had disavowed their country's policies and practices." Nor does he consider the boycott an aberration. The British professors' egregious politicization of academic life is "fruit of the same poisoned tree" as "announcing one's political allegiance in class, poking fun at the administration in power, railing against capitalism, giving the writing course over to discussion of various forms of discrimination."

Critics, Fish notes, will object that it is naïve or ignorant or both to ask professors to separate politics and ideas, either because of the psychological impossibility of setting aside one's formative and fundamental moral and political beliefs or because, in reality, everything is political. His pragmatism overriding his postmodernism, Fish will have none of it. While acknowledging that, from a psychological point of view, a perfect separation may be impossible, he points out that we successfully compartmentalize all the time, "making distinctions between contexts and the behaviors appropriate to them." And while assuming that knowledge is inevitably entangled with forms of power, he insists that the entanglements that emerge in the academic context do not commit one to positions on such questions as who should be president, whether taxes should be cut or increased, and when the nation should go to war.

Other critics will be quick to invoke academic freedom. But academic freedom, Fish rightly argues, is not a license to professors to say in the classroom whatever they please. Like the academic vocation, it is narrow, protecting professors' freedom to pursue academic inquiries where reason requires. Fish, however, does academic freedom no favors by declaring it "the freedom to do one's academic job

without interference from external constituencies like legislators, boards of trustees, donors, and even parents." For where professors are betraying their professional obligations by spouting off about politics in the classroom--and his book provides more than ample testimony that substantial numbers of professors are derelict in their duties--those who are paying the bills and have a formal responsibility for the institution have an obligation to ensure that the rules and standards that govern university life be honored.

It falls, in the first place, to administrators to call to account professors who refuse to honor the line between education and advocacy. But this, Fish also indicates, administrators have, all too often, failed to do. True, dealing with faculty can be daunting. Drawing on his own experience as dean at Illinois and approvingly citing the experience of other administrators, Fish reports that professors tend to be parochial, selfish and self-indulgent, narcissistic, ignorant of what administrators do and how universities actually operate, and scornful of the task of administration and those who choose it.

So one can sympathize with administrators. But one should not, as Fish is inclined to do, let them off the hook. Administrators have at their disposal carrots and sticks--including faculty salaries, promotions, and leaves--and, were they possessed of the understanding and determination, could employ them to combat professors' politicization of higher education.

But neither the understanding nor the determination have been much in evidence. And alas, after a prolific 40-year career involving appointments at great public and private universities and five years as a dean of a large arts and sciences faculty, Fish provides little in the way of useful advice on how to reform a university world that, he shows, is very much in need of reform. His principal suggestion to faculty and administrators is to improve themselves while standing guard against wily conservative intellectuals and meddling state and federal legislators, who wish to co-opt the university for their own political purposes. At all costs, he counsels, faculty and university administrators must avoid explaining or justifying the university to nonacademics who, in his view, cannot possibly understand the university's purpose or value.

What begins promisingly and unfolds entertainingly and incisively ends frivolously. From Fish's account you would never guess that Allan Bloom's bestseller, *The Closing of the American Mind*, which 21 years ago launched the conservative critique of the contemporary academy, makes the case for strict separation between the pursuit of truth inside the university and the quest for political advantage outside it. Nor is Fish persuasive that legislators and private donors ought to keep their noses out of university business.

Legislators should not write blank checks with taxpayer money. Particularly when professors use universities (as Fish vividly describes) to indoctrinate rather than educate, legislators have no respectable choice but to exercise greater oversight at

state universities over the expenditure of public funds. And private donors have an incentive to support neglected core classes through restricted gifts that oblige universities, if they take the money, to honor the giver's intent.

Contrary to Fish, faculty and administrators should not be less capable than plumbers and accountants, lawyers and physicians, kindergarten and grade school and high teachers, of explaining their profession's use to the public. Indeed, professors, whose professional lives on Fish's own account ought to be devoted to knowledge and reasoned argument, should be uniquely capable.

Moreover, just because intellectual work has its own rewards doesn't mean that it can't advance nonacademic ends. One benefit of liberal education--notwithstanding Fish's insistence that "fashioning citizens for a pluralistic society has nothing to do with the pursuit of truth"--consists in the contribution that it makes to the formation of free citizens. Seeking knowledge through the study of the humanities, social sciences, and sciences not only disciplines the mind but also improves understanding of the variety of human goods, and the range of arguments concerning their advantages and disadvantages.

Although liberal education does not guarantee virtuous citizens, it is reasonable preparation for prospering in a democratic and pluralistic society that provides individuals the freedom to pursue happiness as they see fit, provided they respect the right of others to do the same.

Fish is wrong again when he writes that "democracy, we must remember, is a political not an education project." Democracies--certainly those that seek to safeguard liberty--are political projects that depend on education projects. And liberal education is a culmination of democracy's education project. But to perform its work properly, and to justify its support by the state, liberal education must be governed, as Fish forcefully argues in the best parts of his book, by educational standards and not political considerations. To be sure, there is paradox in that notion. But the hard part is not, as Fish extravagantly fears, explaining the university's mission to the public. The hard part is explaining it to professors.

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford.

© Copyright 2008, News Corporation, Weekly Standard, All Rights Reserved.