Manifesto of a Tenured Radical

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Published by NYU Press

Nelson, Cary. 
Manifesto of a Tenured Radical. 
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/76358.
LESSONS FROM THE JOB WARS
DICHOTOMY IS WHERE THE MONEY IS

ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE UNIVERSITY

As I have argued throughout this book, higher education in America faces a future that is far from uncertain. For if faculty members and administrators continue as they are, we can predict with unwelcome confidence the basic shape of the educational environment of the next millennium—increased class sizes, decreased academic freedom, fewer tenure-track faculty, more part-time teachers, a shakeout and reduction in the number of full-scale research universities, and little time for research anywhere except at a small handful of private institutions. And universities, meanwhile, will be increasingly exploitive employers.

In the fall of 1995, after I made similar gloomy predictions at one of our most distinguished universities, the campus’s dean of liberal arts mounted the
stage to say he thought the future fairly bright. There would be ups and downs, but he found strong, mostly unwavering support among his donors and alumni and thus good reason to believe we could proceed with confidence. We needed to make our case more strongly than ever, but, if we did so, results would reward our efforts. At a cocktail party later that day I told him I was surprised that he was so sanguine. “Oh,” he replied, “I was talking about the four or five elite schools. The rest of you,” he allowed, “are finished.” So that is one blunt assessment of higher education’s brutally hierarchical future. Chicago, Harvard, Hopkins, Princeton, Yale on one thin end of the spectrum, everybody else heaped together on the campus of McDonald’s U.

Not, however, that the elite schools will be sites of uncompromised idealization. Yale, to take a surprising example, does roughly one-third of its undergraduate teaching with adjuncts, another third with graduate assistants. Its well-paid tenured faculty are responsible for a decreasing segment of the university’s mission. Meanwhile, with its financial planners more uneasy than its faculty, the university has declared a financial crisis based on the difficulty it has reinvesting as large a portion of its endowment income as it would like. Nice work if you can get it. Yale’s endowment has already grown astonishingly quickly over the last fifteen years. According to my New Haven informants, the local community has come improbably to the rescue, coughing up two or three hundred homeless people each year to do unskilled maintenance on campus. Yes, Yale now hires the homeless, not, you may be sure, out of compassion, but because they accept low wages and, needless to say, require no benefits. After all, they have no home addresses to which to send W-2 forms or medical insurance notices. At the other end of the spectrum, a community college in Florida recently raised its teaching load for full-time faculty to six courses per semester. This is, I would argue, all part of the same story, even though few faculty at either Yale or Dade County Community College have been in the habit of inventing narratives that encompass both sites.

The changes in employment policies being instituted by American educational institutions in response to both real and imagined financial pressures are making them less admirable institutions, less effective educationally, and more compromised ethically. Meanwhile, most faculty are far from articulate or thoughtful when confronting policy issues outside their disciplinary expertise. More than we would like to admit, there are problems—and frequent displays of ignorance—not only outside but also inside the university. As part of this effort to initiate an inquiry into how we got here (and what we can do about it) I would like to offer some observations about the relations between anti-intellectualism inside and outside the university. After demonstrating how academic life supports certain kinds of anti-intellectualism, I will conclude
by identifying some areas where academic intellectual leadership is currently much needed. That will lead me from suggestions about the constraints of disciplinarity to an account of current struggles over graduate student unionization and eventually to public discussions of race and financial support for the humanities.

Let me say initially that contemporary academics come to this topic, anti-intellectualism, as products of a history that makes us singularly ill-suited to address it. Two things in particular leave us relatively incapacitated: first, the gradual collapse of the secondary school system over several decades in many places in the country has left Americans without any common foundation of historical knowledge and led many academics to conclude incorrectly that both their students and the general public are intellectually empty, that they know nothing; second, the extreme academic specialization of the second half of the century, combined with the relentless careerism of postwar university culture, has led academics to assume that the question of intellectualism—of what an intellectual actually is—is always already settled, settled permanently and institutionally, settled by someone other than themselves, settled most often by their disciplines, whereas in fact the nature and relevance of the intellectual life is historically variable and a continuing site of struggle and redefinition. Most academics have ignored that struggle and now possess no workable cultural notion of the intellectual life beyond their subdisciplinary research commitment. In other words, I am an intellectual because I study this or study that. No doubt those who haven’t said anything new about what they “study” in a decade, along with those who are consistently wrong in what they say, would all consider themselves intellectuals if they gave it a thought. As for those who publish—whatever and whenever—well, they are self-evidently intellectuals.

The recent spate of media articles commodifying academics as public intellectuals—something the national media apparently believes academics can become by writing one book review for the *Nation*, the *New Republic*, or the *Village Voice*, without taking any ongoing, coherent, and strong stands on public issues—is evidence not of the vitality and relevance of university intellectual life but rather of its state of crisis. With no criteria for what an intellectual is—with no widespread, ongoing academic conversation about the nature of intellectual commitment and impact—we settle for sound bites or a de facto definition for a public intellectual: publishing outside the discipline. As a criterion for establishing significant intellectual impact it is as meaningless as the traditional imprimatur of disciplinarity. We need instead to recognize how difficult it is to specify what it means to be an intellectual—whether on campus, in business or politics, in ethnic or religious communities, or elsewhere. Such specific con-
texts—each both productive and constraining—suggest the impossibility of any universal model.

Is, for example, Newt Gingrich an intellectual or a demagogue? Assuming he was not aiming for ironic, self-critical synecdoche, I'm willing to say his insufficiently infamous prescription for the poor—let them eat laptops—amounted to demagoguery. Yet it is not easy to classify discourses that mix subtlety and simplification, let alone practices that opt only for the latter. On the other hand, I would argue that organic intellectuals who work in poorly educated communities and help them theorize their daily lives in terms they can understand merit the designation. Was Cesar Chavez an intellectual? Was Martin Luther King? Yes, in both cases, or so I would argue.

These are, of course, partly political judgments that I am making, an admission that does not trouble me, because I consider that inevitable. In any case, it is hardly necessary to declare oneself an intellectual in order to be one. In the wake of recent theory, you might reject the aura of unitary and self-sufficient identity the term suggests. On the other hand, you might be more focused on the aims and effects of your practices—the materiality of your work—than on savoring your own agency. You might also be a little leery of the honor, remembering that past intellectuals—from the Inquisition to Vietnam—have been ready to rationalize madness and murder. To the extent that anti-intellectualism means skepticism about (and wariness toward) intellectuals and others in power it is hardly a wholly unhealthy phenomenon.

But while we are making political judgments let us consider the case of a contemporary who tries to wear the mantle of intelligence, Lynne Cheney. Is Cheney an intellectual? Not by any criteria I can credit. Recently, in Telling the Truth and elsewhere, she has criticized the National History Standards for their avowed leftism. McCarthyism is mentioned over a dozen times, Teddy Roosevelt only a few. Repeatedly it has been pointed out to her that the multiple references to McCarthyism are clustered together in the brief section on McCarthyism, not scattered throughout the text so as to demonstrate an obsessive preoccupation, as her complaint is supposed to prove. She responds, as every right-wing public figure seems trained to do, by changing the subject and attacking from a different angle. If there is an appropriate contemporary ethic for intellectuals, perhaps it includes the traditional criterion of being willing to discuss objections seriously. Cheney, alas, repeats her discredited claim whenever she gets a chance. Unbeknownst to herself, a true postmodernist, she appears to believe there are no truths, that all representation is misrepresentation. I suppose we could ask her if she thinks she’s an intellectual, though I wouldn’t recommend taking her word for it. I’d call her an anti-intellectual ideologue.

Neither being placed inside the academy nor outside it, then, necessarily
offers the best test of intellectual status. On the other hand, I take as refreshing evidence of a willingness to open the question of intellectual identity for academics, as recognition of its social and political constitution and contingency, the fine effort among graduate students at various campuses to seek recognition for themselves as employees and to win approval for bargaining agents for graduate teaching assistants. In choosing to think about and challenge preconceptions about professionalism, intellectualism, the nature of labor, the meaning of community, the appeal of alliances that cross class lines, and the ethics of existing campus power relations, such graduate student groups are taking leadership in doing what the academy has needed to do for two and a half decades. I applaud them, offer them my support, and urge all faculty members to do the same. The effort to win fair benefits and working conditions for some of higher education’s lower-paid employees does not undermine higher education’s core values; it enhances them. Part of what is remarkable about such groups, as I suggested in my introduction, is their diversity. At few other sites on contemporary campuses could one find young intellectuals of different gender, race, ethnicity, and economic background working and talking together in productive alliances. Both higher education and the country as a whole need such alliances now and in the future. We should foster them. Instead, most faculty members and administrators reject such efforts with anti-intellectual irrationality.

When I offered my support for the Yale graduate student union, GESO, at a conference held at Yale’s humanities center in 1995, my disciplinary colleagues took it upon themselves to stand collectively against the tides of such unreason. David Bromwich, on stage with me when I made my comments in support of unionization, reacted in such a way as to look for all the world like a vampire bat suddenly exposed to a shaft of sunlight; he lurched forward, flung his arms out, then slumped forward, burying his head in his dark wings in resignation. At the time I thought his reaction extraordinary; as I was later to realize, its visceral, wounded character was emblematic of the deep revulsion Yale faculty would feel as the university’s graduate student employees pressed their case more vigorously over the next year.

Bromwich himself was quite unable to speak at all when I came up to talk with him a few minutes later. His colleagues, however, soon spoke for him. The next day Yale English department faculty member Annabel Patterson rose to express her regret that the local media would no doubt cover my remarks about graduate student unionizing rather than the important issues addressed at the conference. In her own presentation Patterson went on to make the benighted suggestion that, instead of addressing academia’s problems in contemporary contexts, we would be much better off reprinting earlier texts that express sympathetic enlightenment values. She particularly recommended John Adams,
and quoted from him at length. Alas, only under pressure from the audience in the question period did she bother to admit that Adams later disavowed his progressive writings and became a reactionary. In fact he is one of Pound's sources in his overtly fascist phase. Bad choice, Professor Patterson. Finally, English department faculty member Paul Fry took the floor, sure that a bit of wit would slay the union dragon. "Students," he remarked, finding solace from the evident injustice of their cause in the polish of his rhetoric, "have cleverly decided to call themselves workers, which apparently explains the support they received here." His voice rose a good octave with the exclamation "workers," as if to extract every possible echo from such an absurdity.

What perhaps only one faculty member at Yale knew at the time was that the reprisals against GESO had already begun. Moreover, the shape of the administration's strategy had already been set by one of its senior members: single out GESO's leaders for individual punishment and seek to destroy their careers. The administrator in question was Richard Brodhead, A. Bartlett Giamatti Professor of English and Dean of Yale College. In July of 1995, long before the grade strike, he had written a letter of recommendation for the dossier of one of GESO's leaders. The last paragraph, one-third of the letter, was devoted to her union activities.

Brodhead opens his letter by praising the seminar papers she wrote for him, then begins his concluding paragraph by observing that both he and the student involved would agree that the union organizing effort has been a major focus of her graduate career. He makes it clear that he rejects GESO's goals but recognizes the goodwill of those involved. Then the axe falls. He reports that this particular student "is a poor listener on this issue" and "has on at least one occasion . . . shown poor judgment in the choice of means." He concludes the letter by once again praising her disciplinary work and by putting all readers on notice: she "will bring civic intelligence and concern about communal life to her future job." 1

The picture created here is unambiguous; she is bright but ruthless, a rigid ideologue who will not listen to reason when her political beliefs and "concern about communal life" are at issue. This paints a rather different portrait from the witty, reflective person I have met, but perhaps Brodhead can no longer see her that way. A genial fellow who has functioned well within Yale's paternalistic hierarchy, his seminars are popular and he has helped many students with their dissertations over the years. But the combination of his deanship and the union's affront to Yale's pecking order have been too much for him. Just before his final sentence, he makes clear that the poor judgment at issue was her decision to write to one of Yale's major donors. The effect of Brodhead's letter, I believe, would be to eliminate her from consideration from almost any job for which
she applied. I would remove any such letter from one of my student’s dossiers. Did Brodhead have a right to say these things? Well, the AAUP guidelines prohibit mention of a student’s political beliefs or activities, whether the writer is approving or disapproving of them. But equally problematic is the impression about the letter written to Perry Bass, one of Yale’s donors.

The letter, sent from the GESO office, was signed by four people, among them the student at issue. It was part of a 1993–94 GESO campaign to arrange better compensation for and protect the quality of Yale’s highest-level writing course, “Daily Themes,” which reportedly includes Cole Porter and Bill Buckley among its graduates. The student, as it happens, did not even write the letter, though she did sign it. Moreover, GESO’s entire organizing committee was fully involved, including at least one other student for whom Brodhead has written a letter of recommendation but without criticizing the student’s union work. Some of this at least Brodhead knew, since the letter was copied to him; the rest of it he was responsible to find out before setting out to destroy a student’s career. Brodhead refers to his claims as “allegations,” which gives rhetorical indication of the significant weight he gives them. Meanwhile, one of his implicit allegations is that she made a willful, independent decision to contact Yale donors, when exactly the opposite is true.2

By the end of 1995 GESO’s grade strike was under way, and other Yale humanities faculty had joined the attack on graduate students seeking fair treatment.3 One reportedly responded to a teaching assistant’s announcement that she was supporting the strike by standing up and announcing “You are hereby expelled from Yale University.” “But professor,” the student replied, “you do not have the power of summary expulsion.” Instead the student was reported for disciplinary action. Sara Suleri, a brilliant postcolonial critic whose work I have taught in my own courses, urged disciplinary action against one of her teaching assistants who joined GESO’s 1995 decision to withhold undergraduate grades until Yale’s administration agreed to negotiate. Nancy Cott, a widely admired labor historian, spoke out against the union, and David Brion Davis, a distinguished historian of slavery, sought college guards to bar his union-identified teaching assistant from entering the room where undergraduate final exams would be given. Meanwhile, Annabel Patterson weighed in with more explicit anti-union sentiments, urging English department colleagues not to sign any petitions supporting the graduate student union, even petitions merely recommending against reprisals. After all, reprisals would be far more effective if the department faculty were united behind them.

Now what can we say about all of this? Patterson is quite right to argue that recovering and reviving forgotten texts can be an important contribution to contemporary debate. It’s one of the things I do, so I’d hardly debunk it. But
she serves no one well by trying to cover up the facts of her author’s career. Nor
is she helpful in intimating that it is unseemly for academics to engage directly
in contemporary cultural and political struggles. That reluctance is part of what
has brought us to the present crisis. Elevating our own preferences, practices,
and anxieties to moral imperatives is a typically anti-intellectual move, both for
academics and their countrymen, but it does not further the public scrutiny and
self-scrutiny we need so badly. Bromwich, Cott, Davis, Patterson, Fry, and
Suleri have all, notably, had some connections with Left theory, research,
pedagogy, or politics. Bromwich is a contributor to *Dissent*, Patterson has made
use of Marxist theory in her work. Cott, Davis, and Suleri are well-established
progressive scholars. Some supported the long-running struggle of Yale’s clerical
workers to win bargaining rights. But graduate students were future professors!
When it came to a challenge to their sense of professional hierarchies and
identities these progressive scholars stood unthinkingly with their more conserva-
tive colleagues. Moreover, each seemed to take it as a personal betrayal for his
or her teaching assistant to join the strike; so ingrained is the culture of
paternalism that it is impossible for these faculty to think of their assistants as
independent professionals with a right to define their own ethics and politics.

Davis’s case is actually rather saddening. Yale’s administration had written a
letter to the faculty inviting them to turn in strike participants for individual
disciplinary action. Davis decided to do so in a December 11, 1995, letter to
Graduate School Dean Thomas Appelquist. Ironically, the course at issue was
Davis’s “The Origins, Significance, and Abolition of New World Slavery.” If
Brodhead’s letter is in some ways the act of a scoundrel, Davis’s letter is the
testimony of a principled man who cannot imagine that GESO members have
alternative principles of their own. He has two teaching assistants, one of
whom—“my loyal Teaching Fellow”—turns in the final grades and one who
participates in the strike despite his kindnesses to her. Having turned in his
grades on time for forty-one years, he laments, now he is faced with the
possibility of being late! Meanwhile, he cannot recognize that turning in a
participant in a collective action for individual punishment raises its own ethical
questions.

Despite warnings from reactionary journalists, many tenured radicals appar-
ently present little challenge to the academy’s dichotomous hierarchies. Many
combine progressive scholarship with an unreflective, unyielding sense of profes-
sional identity and self-importance. Many are unable to recognize, let alone
analyze, the contradiction between holding a progressive position in one area of
their professional life and a repressive one in another. We need to give credit for
this where credit is due. The contemporary university, combined with disciplin-
arity and its attendant professional organizations, is an interlocking late twenti-
eth-century morphing technology: it turns dissenters into careerists, intellectuals into anti-intellectual professionals.

Let me make one final opening point about campus anti-intellectualism, illustrated with a minor local anecdote. Some years ago, one of my graduate students was walking down the hall carrying a large reference book he had borrowed from my office. One of my faculty colleagues noticed the book and asked to look at it. Leafing through the book, he remarked, “Wow! This looks really useful. I could use this book. But, say, tell me, how do you go about buying a book these days?” Flabbergasted, my student mentioned the location of a nearby bookstore and explained how to place an order for a book that might not be in stock. I take this story as concise evidence that not all members of the university community are fully devoted to the intellectual life, at least if we consider occasionally buying and reading books as one of its likely components for humanities professors.

It will not do, then, in speaking of anti-intellectualism in America to assume, speaking from any university, that anti-intellectualism is located decisively elsewhere. Indeed, anyone who has watched faculty members debate budgetary or curricular issues is unlikely to conclude that intellect and reason always prevail in higher education. Campus debates include demagoguery, misrepresentation, exaggeration, intimidation, self-delusion, and no lack of high and low theater. Scholarly writing, including my own, regularly entails polemicism with similar components. Contrary to the idealizing self-promotion universities sometimes engage in, the intellectual life on campus clearly exhibits some of the very flamboyant tactics of debate academics tend to deplore in the public sphere. Nor are universities necessarily good places for intellectual conversation and interaction. Many departments are notorious as places where faculty members never talk to one another and have no time for their students. Universities in larger urban centers are sometimes particularly fragmented; what intellectual life takes place is collective and collaborative only in the classroom; among the faculty themselves, at least those who are not running labs, intellectual work is often solitary.

That is not to say that I do not treasure my conversations with students and faculty or the time for intellectual reflection provided me by a university professorship. I do, but I also make choices about where I can give my time and often that means devoting less thought and care to interactions than I should. There is, in short, little to gain from imagining that we live in the New Jerusalem. We know that universities are places where faculty can babble green thoughts about the literary canon in the morning and harass their students in the afternoon. We know that institutions of higher education are compromised, imperfect sites that sometimes deploy disingenuous idealization to preserve
campus inequities. Debates about student unionization are one of the places where idealization is deployed that way.

Nor, finally, can academics fairly deplore all dichotomous simplification and theatricalized rhetoric. There are moments in scholarly and public life when we need dichotomy and simplification. There are political occasions where the intellectual life must be compromised, both on campus and elsewhere. Thus in, say, thinking about the early 1940s, to take a stark example from modern history, I would not argue that a full understanding of the historical roots of fascism was essential at the time. It was not essential that the American public understand why the German people were drawn to Hitler. What mattered was how best to kill German soldiers, a challenge that was solved on the Eastern front. Positing democracy as a good and fascism as an evil, however simplifying, seems to me to have been a historical necessity. It would not, say, to pursue a purely hypothetical alternative, have been the most relevant moment to be preoccupied with our own national history of genocide.

Now, however, is a time when such a preoccupation—with our national history of both genocide and racism—is imperative and a necessary component of an American intellectual life. For we are likely to pay an increasing price for its legacy as the black urban poor are increasingly impoverished and criminalized. Some conservative commentators—notably William Bennett in a series of talks and television appearances—would have us stop focusing on this desperate history so that we can miraculously and instantly become color blind. To suggest, as the Right does, both in the television appearances I discussed in chapter 6 and elsewhere, that both the general public and the educational institutions that serve them should suppress or minimize the importance of the slave trade or the slaughter of Native Americans, is to adopt the anti-intellectualism of historical forgetfulness. On the other hand, it is equally unwise to assume, as the Left often does, both that what bearing these events have on the present is self-evident and that present-day persons can unproblematically or entirely embody this history. As I argued in chapter 3, the relation between our memory of the past and our present actions and responsibilities is open and unresolved. It is properly an area of discussion, reflection, debate, and action. Lack of knowledge undermines the potential for informed debate and impoverishes action in the present.

It is a colossal failure of our educational system that most Americans have little or nothing to say about the founding acts of genocide and racism that underlie and constitute our history. Yet neither the absolute positions of the Right or the Left—say nothing, say everything—present intelligible alternatives. We do not actually know how to do either. Between two impossible extremes—the Left’s present wholly entailed by the past and the Right’s present
altogether unencumbered by it—lies the more uncertain and ambiguous present in which we live and in which university intellectuals must function.

What would it mean for us now to adjust our daily lives to acknowledge and fully account for the relentless slaughter of our continent’s Native Americans? What would it mean for present-day Germany to be wholly entailed by memories of the Holocaust? What would it mean for no Germans to acknowledge any memory of it? How should American and German personal identity and national political life be encumbered by responsibility and memory? According to some conservatives we can jettison a dishonorable past in one fell swoop—just deny all special benefits to the poor and minorities. Self-reliance will take over, and we will enter the promised land chosen for all of us. Remarkably, I could wake up the next morning, drive through the South side of Chicago, and not notice that there are any black people there. The problem, of course, is not whether we should be entailed by our history, but how we are and should be.

Such messy and historically contingent conditions for advocacy and analysis, along with the material conditions of campus life, need to be confronted and reflected on if we are to revive some culturally significant role for campus intellectuals. Such a role, of course, would have to go beyond the media’s current limited use of academics—as experts in narrow disciplinary areas—to encompass general social commentary and specific observations about the state of higher education. That we need to do so is clear, given conservative antagonism to any commitment to broad access to higher education.

At the same time we need to realize that there can be a high price paid in public debate for honesty and complication of the sort academics often prefer. It was decades ago that the novelist William Burroughs recognized that we had entered a playback public culture. The media brings a tape recorder to party A and says “What’s the nastiest thing you can say about party B?” The recorded critique is next played back for party B, who is then given an opportunity for a rejoinder. And so forth. Such a system does not reward admissions of weakness and often refuses to play back complex or subtle arguments. In such a system differences become absolute, everything is precipitated into dichotomies.

Political life has to some degree been like that for much of American history, with no public space available outside opposing positions, though the most readily available discourse exemplifying positions has surely become more and more compact in recent decades. Academics often assume they can articulate positions independent of the opposing sides in a controversy, that such independence is the hallmark of the intellectual life. Yet it is more often the case that there is neither meaningful outlet nor audience for discourse not committed to one side or the other. In other words, to have an impact on his or her contemporaries an intellectual may have to identify explicitly with one side of a
cultural or political controversy. For some that may seem partly anti-intellectual, but it is often the only alternative to irrelevance.

Where there may be space for change, however, is in the structure and disposition of arguments supporting a particular position. Thus the ongoing meaning and impact of an apparently fixed stance may be subject to significant revision. Some arguments and meanings can be discredited, others brought newly into play and given prominence. The ongoing work of rearticulating and transforming a position is work available to intellectuals in the public sphere if they choose to take it up. But this often entails stark political commitments of a sort many academics find unsettling or unpalatable.

There is also space for articulating and disarticulating issues to and from broad political positions. And my ethic for intellectuals of both the Right and the Left includes a responsibility to resist multiple pressures for ideological conformity. Over the long run both the Right and the Left lose by assembling a laundry list of issues and demanding allegiance to a fixed position on all of them. Certainly on campus, pressures for conformity sometimes slide into genuine intimidation. The recent term for this long-standing anti-intellectual phenomenon is political correctness, a practice having no inherent politics. For a taste of it try arguing for abortion rights, gay rights, or the rights of welfare recipients at a campus Young Republicans meeting. Try arguing against hazing at fraternities that practice it. I don’t know that we can create campus environments that preclude intimidation — either from the Right or the Left — but I do believe intellectuals can identify it forthrightly when it occurs. That can go a long way toward defusing it.

On the practice of disarticulation and rearticulation — terms taken from the British cultural studies tradition discussed in chapter 4 — let me give one important example of a site where academics need to work. What broad public support for higher education still exists in America is linked to education’s credentialing function and to its potential to increase graduates’ status and income. Affirmative action, diversity, and multiculturalism on campus are concepts now linked not to these values but rather to rhetoric about special interests, to efforts to remedy past injustice, and to complaints about political correctness. What academics who support these efforts now need to do is, for example, to disarticulate diversity from arguments about injustice and rearticulate it to arguments about economic gain. In other words, we need to convince people that education that puts students into contact with diverse populations best prepares them for the contemporary workplace and maximizes their income-earning potential. In other words, employment and population trends suggest that students who do not become knowledgeable about (and learn to work with) different ethnic and racial groups will have less successful careers.
The same thing applies to efforts to open up the literary canon, which the Right has articulated to special interests and political correctness, rather than to concepts of democracy, historical accuracy, and adaptability to a changing cultural and economic landscape. Here a multiple project of rearticulation is necessary, one that not only enables progressive scholars to win back control of popular notions of democracy and historical accuracy but also disarticulates historical recovery projects from special interest pleading and rearticulates them at once to practical self-interest and objectivity.

These changes involve both reasoned analysis and competitive advocacy, but like it or not, there are many public and campus occasions when nondichotomous dialogue is of no use, when stark oppositional conflict is the only game in town. When the opponents in a debate are interested in victory and not mutual enlightenment, an academic intellectual may have to play by their rules. Failure to do so means losing the game.

The continuing debate over defunding NEH and NEA exemplifies the failure of academics to accept these realities. If Congress severely cuts or eventually eliminates funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities, the endowment’s academic supporters will be partly to blame. Throughout the Reagan and Bush presidencies the endowment’s heads—William Bennett and Lynne Cheney—consistently politicized the granting process and undermined the agency’s reputation for fairness and impartiality. Bennett, so NEH staffers privately report, kept a blacklist of progressive scholars whose applications he routinely rejected. Cheney instead packed review panels with political conservatives to assure the results she wanted. Her impact on awards for individual fellowships, where staffers could often ignore recommendations for evaluators, was inconsistent but on larger institutional projects it was substantial.

While there were occasional news stories about the conservative politics of the endowment, neither the higher education community as a whole nor its key disciplinary organizations pressed for congressional inquiry into these unethical practices. Only by placing lower-level NEH staffers under oath could Bennett’s and Cheney’s politicization of the endowment have been fully exposed.

As a whole, the scholarly community instead opted for passivity, friendly discussion, and a policy of cooperation—partly out of naive faith that a scholarly agency would automatically retain scholarly rather than political values, partly out of fear of reprisals, partly out of greed (the desire to continue receiving as many grants as possible), and partly because academics assumed reasoned dialogue was the proper intellectual behavior. As a result, Bennett and Cheney and their conservative allies have remained credible national commentators on the NEH and the general state of the humanities; Bennett indeed now reigns as a kind of public prince of virtue. They should long have been discredited or at...
least more successfully marked as controversial figures. If they had been discredited NEH and NEA would now have a better chance of surviving. Bennett and Cheney were not interested in conversation; they were interested in winning. And winning is what they appear to be doing.

As it happens, I approached both the president and the executive secretary of the Modern Language Association several years ago to suggest that the organization speak out against NEH policies. The executive secretary said we had more to gain from cooperation than conflict. MLA’s president told me—to my astonishment—that Lynne Cheney was actually a very reasonable person with whom we could work. In short, I believe this particular cultural and political struggle required more combative and antagonistic participation by university intellectuals. It required taking sides forcefully; it required harsh criticism of individuals and their practices. It required translating university research into accessible language for broad public consumption so that it could not be so easily discredited by conservative commentators. Some academic intellectuals are actually taking up tasks like these, even though what they say and write may not resemble what they might publish in a scholarly journal.

In the struggle over NEH we may see the future of support for humanities research at public universities writ small. For in 1995 a new argument surfaced in Bennett’s and Cheney’s congressional testimony. Previously, their purported concern was over funding the wrong kind of humanities research; now they’ve gone on to argue the endowment should be defunded because the humanities as a whole have so deteriorated that they no longer merit public support. The issue for them, of course, was not quality but politics. Politicized under the Republicans, NEH under the Democrats is now giving out awards in a reasonably even-handed fashion. But Bennett and Cheney do not want such results, for that gives too much support to progressive research. With conservative think tanks funding the only cultural commentary they think it essential to see published, it makes sense to cut their losses and defund all university-based humanities scholarship. Where Congress has not feared to tread, state legislatures may follow.

Elite private institutions with large endowments may be able to sustain the status quo indefinitely, though even they appear to be increasing the percentage of their enterprise dependent on exploited labor. Public higher education, however, is in political and financial danger. If it is true, as I believe it is, that America needs all its research universities as sources of alternative social critique, historical reflection, and basic research, then significant numbers of academics need to devote part of their time to either multidisciplinary or more public intellectual activity.
Multidisciplinary research and writing, one of the categories in which *Manifesto* itself falls, is designed to reach academics in a variety of disciplines. It is designed to encourage reflection, build common knowledge, and work toward consensus within academia, an activity that is absolutely necessary if academics are to begin identifying anew with the general enterprise of education and begin speaking for it effectively in public. It is also an activity that recognizes academia itself as an important segment of public life, something faculty members are often inclined to deny.

Increasing attention to the public sphere does not, however, mean that we should speak with one voice, as University of Virginia English professor Patricia Meyer Spacks has argued in public talks in 1996. She has identified me as one of the “critics of the university” whose remarks may further undermine public confidence in education. That confidence can only be restored by cleaning up our own house, a metaphor that embraces the need to eliminate the limited amount of waste in university budgets and the need to treat our employees fairly. Only the proper internal conversation, then, can lead us to the public sphere effectively. That conversation must include principled internal criticism, not only because it can help rebuild public trust but also because an ongoing campus conversation would be a sham without it. The corporate mentality of enforcing uniformity on all issues is inappropriate for higher education; it undercut both our self-understanding and what others admire in us. Of course there are some issues, like academic freedom, where a united front in academia is appropriate, but we can hardly speak out for academic freedom while trying to stifle internal debate and criticism. As a graduate student at Yale remarked during the Local 34 strike in February of 1996, “We have an obligation to ask for more of this university than prestige and resources. We have a right to ask for this university to be the thing that we believe it should be.” A commitment to community and collective morality is a prerequisite to restoring the university’s public image.

As I implied at the outset, that next step also means learning to respect the alternative knowledges that students and the public possess. Like other academics, I despair when my students clearly do not know the things I think they should know, including much of anything about history. But I also realize they are not empty; they know other things—not only those things they need to know to survive but also, often, their special areas of interest and passion. Some of us at least need to speak to such audiences outside academia. That will not always be easy, and it cannot be done without pain. There are genuine rewards in making our work more accessible, but there are also losses. For some of our ideas need not only to be simplified for public consumption but also abandoned.
And sometimes the process feels like self-betrayal, like willing self-extinction. Cultural struggles are often compromising. But now the only alternative is the end of higher education as we know it.

In any case the present configuration of academic identities is untenable. The simple, unexamined assumption that scholarly publication automatically certifies intellectual authenticity and confers and constitutes an intellectual identity can no longer be sustained. Does a book read, say, by less than a score of people matter? Such books are published all the time. What about an essay read by no one? We have assumed for decades that disciplinarity inherently confers worth, a comforting fiction that economic forces are rendering increasingly hollow. But if we abandon publication within a discipline as an unreflective, virtually sacralized source of meaning and value, what do we put in its place? It is an astonishing and immensely revealing fact that most academics have absolutely no answer to such a question. That points to a certain further anti-intellectualism in academia, an anti-intellectualism more problematic and pervasive, more disabling even, than the type exemplified by my colleague who had forgotten how to buy a book. For it points to a community of people who read and write without having any deep sense of why they do so. In a broad cultural sense, their disciplinary identity has protected them from the necessity of thinking. Whatever it means to be an intellectual, that surely cannot be it.