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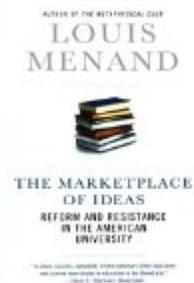


Louis Menand. *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2010. 174 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-393-06275-5; \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-393-33916-1.

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Beyond Slogans: Examining the State of Higher Education

The Marketplace of Ideas is a compelling book that makes an important contribution to current debates about higher education generally and, more specifically, the place of the humanities in that enterprise. Louis Menand writes a brief but substantial examination of four key questions: “Why is it so hard to institute a general education curriculum? Why did the humanities disciplines undergo a crisis of legitimation? Why has ‘interdisciplinarity’ become a magic word? And why do professors all tend to have the same politics?” (p. 16). Menand provides an accessible introduction to the academic world that is helpful both for members of the academy and those outside of it, who often find it to be an inscrutable and frustrating domain.

In the chapter focused on the problem of developing a widely accepted approach to general education, Menand traces the move to bring professional education under the auspices of the universities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the ensuing separation of it from liberal education. He argues that the almost impermeable wall established between the two was a “devil’s bargain” that worked to the detriment of both (p. 52). He contends that “any practical field can be made liberal simply by teaching it historically and theoretically,” and practitioners who are trained to think for themselves, a key mission of liberal education, only enhance their professional practices (p. 57). Menand follows his own advice by using history as the principle lens in an effort to help readers understand why “things are as they are” in

the academy and why they can be different. As he says, “one of the lessons of historical inquiry is that there is no one way that things must be” (p. 20).

In his seminal book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (2006), Benedict Anderson makes the point that state actors often create an imagined and mythological past for the nation to give it a sense of both inevitability and legitimacy. Menand argues that something akin to that has also occurred within academic disciplines in the university. He writes that “professions create traditions that exceed their own histories” (p. 116). For example, universities and the departments within them often trace their origins to ancient (or at least medieval) sources to bolster their claims to longevity and legitimacy. They arose, it is claimed, as part of the natural order of society and represent the best traditions of human intellectual activity.

Menand undercuts this mythic conception of higher education by showing how the modern research university emerged largely as a pragmatic response to the social and political forces of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. “The American university,” he writes, “is a product of the nineteenth century, and has changed very little structurally since the end of the First World War” (p. 17). Far from being a natural or inevitable evolution, universities were shaped by key actors, such as several “crusading presidents” of Harvard University or English professor John Erskine (p. 37). Erskine was the key

figure behind Columbia University's Literature Humanities requirement that later became an influential model for approaches to general education across the United States.

As with all good institutional histories, Menand's work raises questions about taken-for-granted assumptions that drive policy and practice. For example, a key theme of the book is a challenge to the assumption that substantial change to higher education can be wrought by tinkering with institutional structures. He takes this on most directly in the chapter on interdisciplinarity. "Interdisciplinarity stands for the notion that what is holding things back is disciplinarity, the persistence of the academic silos known as departments, and that if colleges and universities could get past that outmoded dispensation, a lot of their problems would disappear" (p. 95). Menand takes issue with this, contending that interdisciplinarity is neither innovative nor particularly subversive. It is, he argues, "simply disciplinarity raised to a higher power. It is not an escape from disciplinarity; it is the scholarly and pedagogical ratification of disciplinarity" (pp. 96-97).

For Menand, the potential for substantial reform lies not in altering the way universities and the disciplines within them are structured but in transforming the way in which academic professionals are educated. He writes that "the key to professional transformation is not at the level of knowledge production. It is at the level of professional reproduction. Until professors are produced in a different way, the structure of academic knowledge production and dissemination is unlikely to change significantly" (p. 121). Menand argues that a number of factors, including the substantial (and growing) length of time that it takes to complete a PhD (longer in the humanities than in the natural and applied sciences and professional colleges), the uncertain job market, and the conformist nature of much of graduate education, effectively exclude candidates who are not already very committed to academic culture as it currently exists. This lessening of diversity, he contends, is potentially devastating for

the field. "The academic profession," he worries, "is not reproducing itself so much as cloning itself" (p. 153).

While he raises serious questions about the current state of higher education and the growing ideological homogeneity among academics, Menand writes as a friend of universities. He begins the book by arguing that they are key institutions for undergirding and fostering democracy, and ends with a stirring call to maintain academic freedom. While acknowledging the need for institutions of higher learning to be attentive to the wider public culture and do work that is relevant to it, he acknowledges the danger of a potential loss of independence. "But at the end of this road there is a danger, which is that the culture of the university will become just an echo of the public culture. That would be a catastrophe. It is the academic's job in a free society to serve the public culture by asking questions the public doesn't want to ask, investigating subjects it cannot or will not investigate, and accommodating voices it fails or refuses to accommodate" (p. 158).

In her 2001 Massey Lectures, "The Cult of Efficiency," Canadian academic Janice Gross Stein suggested that the discourse of crisis is ubiquitous in contemporary public debate.[1] She argued that public discussion of health care and education, in particular, is often overtaken by a cult mentality that precludes meaningful dialogue about thoughtful and effective reform. A cult mentality blindly commits to simplistic slogans and dogma while remaining unreflective about attending assumptions, implications, and alternatives. Debates about higher education have certainly not been immune to cries of crises and the resulting move to quick and simplistic fixes, though. Therefore, in his book, Menand effectively employs the history of higher education to move beyond cultic discourse to provide a nuanced and thoughtful contribution to an important area of public policy.

Note

[1]. Janice Gross Stein, *The Cult of Efficiency, CBC Massey Lectures* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2001).

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