

America-Lite: How Imperial Academia Dismantled Our Culture (and Ushered in the Obamacrats), by David Gelernter. New York: Encounter Books, 2012, 200 pp., \$23.99 hardbound.

The Airhead Ascendancy

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I admit it. I find David Gelernter to be a most intriguing man. His day job is teaching computer science at Yale University, as witnessed in his book titled *Machine Beauty* (1998). This interest in beauty and aesthetics is revealed in his calling—his true soul’s delight—his paintings. Both of these spheres are undergirded by his understanding of the world through the commitment and joy he finds in being Jewish, a deep sense of which is to be found in his *Judaism: A Way of Being* (2011).

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America-Lite: How Imperial Academia Dismantled Our Culture (and Ushered in the Obamacrats) is, quite frankly, unlike any other book of his I’ve read. If Gelernter is dismayed by the current state of America and its educational institutions, and he most assuredly is, it is because the state of the country strikes deep at all of those values he holds most dear.

In *Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (2008), Anthony Kronman (a fellow Yale) traces the arc of cultural descent from the sixties. Gelernter suggests otherwise; he sees the cultural revolution as commencing right after World War II and actually concluding by 1970.

In his breezy, insouciant yet richly poetic way—he cites famous poems as he goes along—Gelernter argues that this revolution was made of two developments: “the Great Reform of elite American colleges that changed them from society colleges into intellectuals’ colleges” and “the rise of Imperial Academia,” wherein “professional schools and graduate schools and the bachelor’s degree itself grew steadily more important.” Underlying this change was the post-WWII takeover of colleges and universities by the “intellectuals”—a

cohort for which Gelernter, like the noted historian Paul Johnson, does *not* have the highest regard.

The reason for this dislike is simple: intellectuals tend to live in a world of theory rather than blood and guts reality. They tend to view themselves as rebels, and are thus reflexively left-liberal. For them this left-liberalism is doctrinal, and, like a religious creed, above discussion. As Gelernter puts it, following Lionel Trilling: “Intellectuals do not think... they have already thought.”

In the universities, intellectuals teach their theories to “Airheads, who learn them and believe them.” There is a sub-group—Airheads-to-Be—who “simply sunbathe and without making any special effort, absorb a great deal of radiant theoretical wisdom.”

Before the revolution the cultural elite were the old-time WASPs. This group was basically conservative, believers in old-fashioned ideas such as the importance of religion, distinctions between formality and informality, private and public, and male and female. During the revolution, this group gave sway to “PORGIIs”—post-religious, globalist intellectuals—a subcategory of which is PORGI Airheads, “intellectualizers, who have passed through the schools and colleges and come out seeing the world just as they are supposed to.”

There is, however, a vast difference in the relationship of the WASPs to larger society in the past, and the relationship of the PORGIIs to larger society today. The WASP establishment saw itself as the nation’s “high end, at the top of a vertical spectrum,” whereas PORGIIs see themselves separated from the “Others” by a “Grand Canyon.” The result is that the intellectuals, having won the day, have charted the course for the country, all the while “despising the nation at large as much as the nation had once despised them.”

The change in America is related to what happened in Europe. Immediately following WWII, Europe essentially deposited Christianity in the dustbin of history and substituted (at least in Western Europe) a not-so-benign socialism. Having fought off the scourge of pagan Nazism and fascism, Christian Europe walked away from its victory (as American WASPS walked away from their position of eminence), leaving its legacy to eventual takeover by the faceless bureaucrats of the European Union—PORGIIs to a man, and woman.

And now the story takes an interesting turn, as Gelernter openly discusses the part Jews have played in the cultural revolution. In Europe, the Jews, though never perceived by their

host countries as being “real” citizens, served as “co-creators of European thought,” speaking “with authority on European arts and letters, history and science.” But they did so as intellectuals, and with all of the baggage that nomenclature brings with it.

In the Great Reform in America, the WASP ascendancy eventually acquiesced in the larger penetration into the culture and the academy of Jewish influence, which tended to be intellectually leftist in political orientation and which coincided with the arrival of Jewish refugee intellectuals from Europe following the war. As Gelernter argues, “Jewish intellectuals, *not as Jews but as intellectuals*, were an important part of the flood that washed away American culture as it used to be; and they ranked among the cultural revolution’s most sophisticated, intelligent, articulate and belligerent voices.” In this they were joined by other sophisticates, in particular self-hating WASPs such as Kingman Brewster, McGeorge Bundy, Mary McCarthy, William Sloane Coffin, and Robert Lowell, who also wished to bring the system down.

Under the old WASP ascendancy, elite colleges were places for the social elite to gather before heading off into the world. In contrast, Jews argued for merit as the primary criterion

for entrance into the elite institutions, and then all institutions. But a meritocracy can’t last; eventually some elite vision of how society should be arranged comes to prevail. Before the Great Reform, it is said that universities discriminated in favor of WASPS and men. Now they discriminate against whites of all religious persuasions in favor of “people of color” and in favor of women through affirmative action, which, for Gelernter, “is the greatest prejudice creator ever devised.”

Like Kronman, Gelernter finds that after World War II America in general, and the universities in particular, became enamored of science. Scientific research, in tandem with our race against the Soviets as a result of Sputnik, contributed to the emphasis on the intellect and on intelligence as measured by IQ scores. If Ford and Edison stood for the importance of technology, Einstein was and is the icon of the age for sheer brain power.

In tandem with this heightened regard for pure intellect and IQ came the increased professionalization throughout academia and the working world as well. Self-learners and self-made men were replaced by credentialed men. General knowledge, or broader knowledge based on a quest to answer that pesky question alluded to in Kronman’s

book title—what is the meaning of life?—gave way to specialization.

Thus aspiring teachers, who used to study the liberal arts, now found themselves in education schools. Those who would have gone into business, learning through doing, and/or from the bottom up, now went to business school. Journalists, who previously would have hardly called what they did a profession (or been insulted if told it was!), now went to journalism school. Academia replaced learning by doing with, what else, learning theories about what you would eventually do. Gelernter sees nothing particularly beneficial in this: “The idea that everyone needs a college education was always silly. That nearly everyone should then proceed from college to graduate school is even sillier.” But all of this contributed to the elevation of academia as an institution of prime importance in American life.

The postwar years, particularly the fifties, were, contrary to popular belief, a pretty good time for ordinary people. People lived well, enjoying life’s simple pleasures after the war. Self-confidence and optimism filled the air. The sixties came in with a bang, with the Students for a Democratic Society’s Port Huron Statement of 1962, the Free Speech

Movement at Berkeley in 1965, and eventually the student antiwar movement galvanized by President Lyndon Johnson’s commitment of tens of thousands of American troops to fight Communist North Vietnam in 1965. These movements all began in *universities*—home to the PORGIs who readily countenanced and eagerly promoted these actions.

This brings us to today: the age of Airheads and Obamacrats. If in the past leftists were governed by ideology, Obama and his ilk are “the post-cultural revolution PORGI elite,” governed by sheer, unadulterated ignorance. Sadly, Obama also represents the failure of American higher education, where a left-liberal ideology has replaced real thinking and learning. Our students no longer learn history, economics, or the arts, but instead learn the *correct* theory of history, a supposedly moral stance for every economic situation, and that any and all human artistic expressions are equally valuable.

President Obama’s ignorance is, for Gelernter, displayed in his complete lack of understanding of Guantanamo, Israel’s border situation, EPA regulations, small business as exemplified by Joe the Plumber, and the qualifications for a Supreme Court judge. The theory he was guided by in this last instance is that a minority would make a better and wiser judge,

because, as his nominee Sonia Sotomayor herself stated: “A wise [no lack of self-esteem here] Latina woman with the richness of her experiences would more often than not reach a better conclusion than a white male who hasn’t lived her life.” The theory of course is idiocy, as “impartiality is what justice has meant to Western man since the Bible.” But Obama supported her and this nonsensical approach to what is the core value of our judicial system. Gelernter’s conclusion from all of this is that the President doesn’t know enough to be president and is typical of an educated but ignorant generation.

Is there any hope for the future? Gelernter is pessimistic about the prospects for change in our universities. And since more students are being pushed into the university environment all the time, they will be filled with the prevailing left-liberal ideology. “*In modern American, the Left gets its way not by convincing people but by indoctrinating their children*” (italics in original).

Does Gelernter have a solution? Indeed he does, and like Tom Cruise’s character in *The Firm* says, “It isn’t sexy, but it has teeth.” The solution is Internet education across the board, so that students and parents can take control of educational content and

bias, from grade school through college, and find mentors who really know something, who understand that this is a great nation under God, based on the goodness of Western civilization, which has brought us our notions of freedom and justice, our sense of liberty, as well as science, math, medicine, engineering, painting, sculpture, architecture, literature, and music. The PORGIs have taken away history and ethics, but these can and should be restored. For our primary problems are not “economic or political. They are social, cultural, educational, and (above all) spiritual.”

At the end of his book Kronman asks for a return from the present postmodern stance to the previous one of secular humanism. In his closing, Gelernter makes clear with his use of the term “American Zionism” that he calls for a reintroduction of the spiritual. He proposes that the American enterprise, like the true Jewish one, is not about America as a place for pedestrian human activity, but about human activity as a purposeful, holy endeavor. An American people who return to living with and for this ideal will continue to be a source of goodness and a beacon to the nations. He concludes, “We have barely begun to bloom.”