1994

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Ben Lockerd
Grand Valley State University

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol10/iss1/7
EVERYTHING IS POLITICAL

Ben Lockerd

Suddenly about five years ago, the whole academy seemed to have accepted as axiomatic the assertion that "Everything is Political." This self-evident universal truth came to be uttered frequently in response to complaints from a few recalcitrant professors who objected when other professors used their scholarly publications and their courses to promote their political views. The response was that, since everything is political, all scholarship and all teaching inevitably promote political views. Those who pretended to be objective and non-political in their writing and teaching were implicitly and unconsciously promoting a conservative position. It is preferable (the argument concludes) to make the political assumptions of one's courses explicit, allowing the students to consider consciously the ultimate political consequences of the materials on which the professor has chosen to focus. Because this argument makes some sense, and because some of our best teachers have adopted it, it deserves some careful consideration as we think about our general education curriculum.

Last year one initial proposal for a core curriculum explicitly adopted this assumption as one of its basic principles. The proposal spoke of "the inevitably political dimension of culture—the senses in which any cultural expression is also an expression of power relationships based on race, class, gender, religion, and nationality." I would argue that this is a dangerous half-truth which should not be adopted as the core idea of a core curriculum.

As I thought about why this concept disturbed me, I recalled that it is not entirely unprecedented to give this kind of prominence to the political dimension of human life. In fact, old Aristotle, in the Nichomachean Ethics, calls politics "the master science." But he sees it as such from a strictly practical point of view, for the science of politics, he says, "determines which sciences ought to exist in states, what kind of sciences each group of citizens must learn, and what degree of proficiency each must attain." When we deliberate about our curriculum, what we are doing is political in this way, for we are deciding what sciences (or disciplines) students should learn before they take control of our world. Although Aristotle calls politics the master science in this sense, however, it would never have entered his mind to focus a whole educational program on political issues. If politicians must determine the place of the other disciplines in the state, I believe he would agree, they must know those other disciplines in themselves, not merely as manifestations of power relations. As a matter of fact, Aristotle wrote works on every subject imaginable at the time, from biology to poetry—but he never wrote a work on politics (his comments on politics being part of his work on metaphysics).

Similarly, Plato, in the Republic, sees the whole educational process leading toward just governance. Only the best philosophers will rule in his republic. But this does
not mean for him that political issues are given pride of place in the fundamental course of studies his future Guardians pursue. The preparation for becoming wise rulers is an education in mathematics, music, and the rest of the liberal arts. The education concludes with training in philosophy, dialectic. There is no course in politics.

Now, even in this classical version the elevation of politics may be one-sided and deceptive. I am inclined to think that it betrays a Western bias. If I turn to Lao-Tzu, I find a very different valuation of politics. He says, "Whoever takes the empire and wishes to do anything to it I see will have no respite. The empire is a sacred vessel and nothing should be done to it. Whoever does anything to it will ruin it; whoever lays hold of it will lose it." The Eastern sage further proclaims, "I take no action and the people are transformed of themselves; I prefer stillness and the people are rectified of themselves." Perhaps the difference is not so much between Eastern and Western philosophies as it is between secular and religious ones, for Lao-Tzu seems close to Jesus in his attitude toward politics. In any case, it is worth mentioning that not everyone agrees to giving politics the highest prominence in any sense. But for now I will assume some agreement in considering politics central to human concerns. The question then becomes how this realization should affect our curriculum.

I am not suggesting that we follow only Plato and Aristotle in our approach to education. I merely want to point out that educators from Plato's time to our own have made a distinction between the role of politics in human society and its role in liberal education, affirming continually that, precisely because politics is an art which encompasses all others in practical life, it must be distanced from a liberal education. In other words, wise rulers will be ones who have studied the academic disciplines in a relatively disinterested way (in an "academic" way), so that when they practice the art of politics they will be guided by a principled understanding of human beings and their world.

This distinction has remained fairly clear in the Academy, but a couple of serious challenges to it have arisen in our century. The National Socialists in Germany and the Marxists in the Soviet Union both attempted to make political ideology central to their educational systems. In response, the McCarthy movement in the U.S. attempted to do the same. Our traditions of tenure and academic freedom are designed to protect us from such attempts to politicize higher education. They are not designed, however, to protect us from retribution as we politicize education.

Curriculum changes that have been made at other universities recently, make it clear that the threat of politicizing the curriculum now comes primarily from within the academy. It is based on the assumption that everything about culture must be discussed in terms of the will to power. Devotees of Nietzsche should support this reductive approach; the rest of us should oppose.

It may be true, as the rationale for the Political Core suggests, that nearly everything about human life has political ramifications. We are, by one definition,
political animals. But this is a half-truth at best, for there are several other functions which are inherent in human nature and hence in virtually all human activities. For example, we are sexual beings, and it might be said with equal truth that "everything is sexual." All human experience might be studied from a psycho-sexual perspective. We are also religious animals. Carl Jung, along with many other thinkers, has asserted that even atheists have some ultimate value which is numinous for them. For hundreds of years theology was considered the master discipline in the university, and one could still profitably study cultures from that standpoint today. Everything is political, but politics isn't everything.

An exaggerated emphasis on politics in the curriculum causes academic disciplines to cease functioning as they should. As the word implies, a "discipline" trains us to think in certain ways and with a certain control. Our disciplines may narrow our field of vision, but they also clarify our insights. They help keep us from making wild, unsubstantiated generalizations about our material. The disciplines try (with some success) to make our thinking more precise, reasonable, and objective. Some general education programs set the disciplines aside—not in the interest of achieving a bigger interdisciplinary picture but in the interest of making precisely the kinds of oversimplified, doctrinaire claims which any academic discipline tries to prevent.

The highly political atmosphere in the academy today leads students to expect courses designed to promote political doctrines. On the first day of my Introduction to Liberal Studies course this term, I asked the students why they had chosen that course to satisfy the Values and Ideas category of our general education program. Many had chosen it because it fit their schedules. Some had the idea that "liberal" promised a relaxed course in which there would be little work and high grades. One student, however, said that she expected it to be a course in which we would study liberal ideas and question the conservative ideas prevalent in west Michigan. I explained that "liberal" here meant something about the free search for truth wherever it might be found, that it meant we would, in fact, try to free ourselves from doctrinaire assumptions so as to seek that truth. She dropped the course.

As the course has progressed, the political leanings of the students and the professor have become fairly evident. We cannot, in practice, drop our basic political assumptions, and they do affect our thinking on all topics. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to design courses and curricula to focus on political assumptions as the ultimate and only meaning of all academic inquiry. Our approach should remain liberal in the educational sense, the free search of the mind for truths about ourselves and our world.