



***The Crafted Crisis in Higher Education Threatens
our Democracy: A Review of After the Ivory Tower Falls
by Will Bunch***

*After the Ivory Tower Falls: How College Broke the American Dream
and Blew up our Politics— and how to Fix it* by Will Bunch.

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Abstract

In After the Ivory Tower Falls, Will Bunch argues that one of the root causes of the current political divide in the United States is the growing disparity in educational attainment amongst Americans, specifically one's ability to access (and pay for) higher education at America's colleges and universities. Bunch's argument shines a light on the surface-level conditions, such as skyrocketing tuition, that have contributed to limited access to higher education resources, but he also reveals additional motivations, some unintended, many intended, that undermine lower- and middle-income American's access to college. Bunch's blueprint for fixing this problem is worth consideration as he lays out important factors that need to be addressed, but the reviewer argues that perhaps most important, those who value American democracy and its system of higher education must reconceptualize and re-brand college as an essential institution in a functioning civil society and must convince those who now hold an anti-intellectual worldview that higher education is in their best interest.

Keywords: college tuition; college loan forgiveness; privatization; college debt; higher education

It seems the United States is more divided than at any time since the Civil War. The failed coup attempt of January 6, 2021 revealed the extreme nature of that division and the fragility of our democracy. In *After the Ivory Tower Falls*, Will Bunch argues that one of the root causes of this political divide is the growing disparity in educational attainment amongst Americans, specifically one's ability to access (and pay for) higher education at America's colleges and universities.

According to Bunch, the story of America's current political divide begins in a post-World War II United States where access to American colleges and universities was viewed as a "public good," necessary for integrating returning veterans back into society and expanding social mobility (chapter 2). Many Americans benefitted from this expanded access to higher education, but many others were altogether excluded from the economic and social benefits it provided. Likewise, those who had access to colleges and universities took part in cultural changes that those on the outside came to view as hostile to their way of life. By the first decades of the 21st century, the

vision of higher education as a “public good” turned into widespread “resentment of college” and a rejection of knowledge by those who were financially excluded from participation (chapter 7).

Bunch argues America’s societal division is best categorized into four distinct groups. The base of the American population who now resent college and reject knowledge is made up of 1) Baby Boomers and GenXers “Left Behind” by expanded access to higher education and the changing economics of globalization and 2) younger Americans “Left Out,” who have been blocked from accessing a college education due to limited resources and higher costs (p. 159). On the other side of the divide are 3) younger Americans who gained a college education but are “Left Broke” from the debt they incurred trying to pay for it (p. 158) and 4) their parents who benefited from an era of low-cost higher education, who benefitted economically from the opportunities that education provided, but who are now “Left Perplexed” as to why so many Americans resent the politics that protect and proliferate their economic and social status (p. 158). This, of course, is an oversimplification of society, but Bunch’s work here frames the consequences involved in a system that has left 63 percent of Americans without post-secondary education (p. 258) and those who went to college with a collective debt that totals more than the entire credit card debt for the entire country (p. 5). Disaffected by a system that seems to work against their best interests, Americans “Left Behind” or “Left Out” of higher education have turned to an anti-intellectualism and anti-democratic worldview that now threatens American democracy; those who are “Left Broke” with college debt live disconnected from their neighbors who do not share that education, and there’s an entire segment of the population “Left Perplexed” wondering why everyone else is so angry. Bunch argues that Americans need to address the role of colleges and universities in creating these divisions if we wish to maintain a functioning civil society.

The economic statistics Bunch provides deliver a clear picture for what’s fueling this divide. For example, today’s Millennials who do not hold a college degree earn just 62 percent as much as college grads (p. 255), and those who have gained access to a college education carry (as of the beginning of 2022) a collective student debt of over \$1.7 trillion (p.5). America’s current system of higher education has “Left Out” almost two-thirds of its people (p. 258), “Left Broke” those who have attended college, and “Left Behind” a generation of older Americans struggling to survive in a globalized economy (p. 158-159). Today, higher education in America appears to be a “rigged system” locking in “America’s gross inequality” (p. 7); a system that proliferates a divide that threatens American democracy.

Difficulty gaining access to and paying for college, the economic side-effects of being blocked from that education, and the deluge of attacks on the college liberal-arts curriculum have ended with 54 percent of working-class Americans in 2016 feeling that college education today is a “risky gamble” - two-thirds of those Americans voted for Donald Trump in that year’s election (p. 233). Needless to say, access to higher education and its economic benefits have a direct impact on American politics and the course of the nation. Bunch is clear that universal access to higher education, specifically a liberal arts curriculum, is essential for the functioning of a democracy and that a system which blocks a large segment of the population from accessing that education is dangerous to the future of the nation.

Bunch’s argument shines a light on the surface-level conditions -- skyrocketing tuition, suffocating student debt, limited access to prestigious colleges, the economic and social status attached to a college diploma – that have contributed to limited access to higher education resources, but he also reveals additional motivations, some unintended, that undermine lower- and middle-income American’s access to college, including a conservative backlash to civil unrest and the fight for civil rights (chapter 3) and societal racism and misogyny towards women and people

of color looking for equal opportunities (chapter 5). He also blames college trustees looking to attract the children of high-income earners by building campuses with resort-like amenities (p. 245) and Wall Street bankers “who found a way to monetize young people’s hopes even while crushing them” (p. 258).

However, Bunch also identifies the various parties that have intentionally shaped these institutions to achieve their particular exclusionary ends. It was policies promoted and enacted by people like James McGill Buchanan, co-author of the book *Academia in Anarchy* (p. 94), Ronald Reagan, who as governor of California raised tuition in a university system that was once free to any Californian and as president enacted changes that devastated federal funding of colleges and universities (chapter 4), Lewis Powell, who prior to his appointment as a Supreme Court justice, wrote a memorandum warning that higher education is “the single most dynamic source” undermining laissez faire capitalism (p. 95), Rush Limbaugh, who fanned the flames of America’s “culture wars” for decades on his radio show (p. 104), and Wisconsin governor Scott Walker, who in 2015 proposed a state budget that included language that would have changed the mission of the University of Wisconsin from a “search for truth” to “meet the state’s workforce needs” (p. 216). In short, higher education has divided the nation along lines of wealth and privilege rather than serving as the primary institution ensuring meritocratic economic and social mobility for all citizens in a democratic society, but Bunch is clear that the year-over-year decline in public funding for American colleges and universities and the correlating increase in exclusivity at those institutions did not happen by chance; it was organized and orchestrated by those looking to achieve their own financial and political goals.

Many of these same actors took other actions that would have long-lasting impacts on American’s abilities to pay for college, namely paving the road to globalization with economic policies that would leave most Americans unable to pay for college. Bunch does acknowledge Wall Street’s role in creating the nation’s college debt crisis (chapter 6), but corporations’ role in gutting out America’s well-paying unionized manufacturing jobs and leaving both rural and working-class urban Americans unable to pay the increasing price of college is worthy of emphasis. The impact this had on working class resentment toward college educated people cannot be overstated.

Similarly, Bunch does not give much attention to private for-profit colleges that preyed on Americans seeking access to the benefits of a college education, but the role of private education companies in this problem deserves scrutiny. For example, in 2021, the Federal Trade Commission placed 70 for-profit higher education institutions, including household names like Corinthian College, ITT Tech., and the University of Phoenix, on notice that it would investigate their false promises to would-be students (Nietzel, 2021); the Biden administration canceled \$1 billion in student loan debt for tens of thousands of Americans who had been defrauded (Sheffey, 2021). Nothing undermines the perceived value of higher education like private companies selling snake oil in the guise of the American Dream.

One solution offered by Bunch is expanding access to community college as a means for allowing all Americans access to job training and liberal arts instruction (chapter 8), and the author also argues for a program of national service for young adults as a way of bridging this growing divide (chapter 9). In Bunch’s vision, free two-year college is one vehicle for bridging the economic gulf that now divides this country, and programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps, Americorps, and Peace Corps would provide models for how to rebuild a functioning civil society able to communicate across racial, gender, socio-economic, and political lines.

The implication of this last point is perhaps Bunch's greatest contribution to the conversation as the author acknowledges that a "quick fix" such as student-loan forgiveness, or "free" tuition, are not the solution to long-running systemic problems, and certainly not the solution to conservative animosity towards college educated Americans and their more pluralistic worldviews (p. 257). The divisive reaction to Biden's plan to forgive student debt in August 2022 is just one example of how this problem needs a more nuanced approach if we wish to bridge the divides that now separate American society.

For over 50 years, conservatives have worked to undermine the structures that support the American system of higher education, and it may take 50 years or more to get that system back to full strength if it is to return at all. Bunch's blueprint is worth consideration as he lays out important factors that need to be addressed: America needs a more affordable system of 2-year and 4-year colleges, a youth service corps can bring together neighbors with differing politics, and something must be done about the privatizers looking to profiteer from the American education system. But perhaps most important, those who value American democracy and its system of higher education must reconceptualize and re-brand college as an essential institution in a functioning civil society and must convince those who now hold an anti-intellectual worldview that higher education is in their best interest.

That work must include addressing the "culture war" narratives that place a wedge between people who otherwise would share a common interest in fighting for economic justice. Bunch argues (chapter 7) what Richard Rorty predicted more than two decades ago (Illing, 2019; Rorty, 1998), that the perception that American colleges are focused on identity politics and a leftist narrative obsessed with America's failures, has turned off white rural working class and non-degree middle class Americans (rural, suburban and urban), and driven them to vote for candidates who promote this anti-intellectual ethos.

For many Americans today, the liberal arts curriculum is viewed as a vehicle for Marxist / socialist indoctrination and going to college is perceived as an "un-American activity" (Bunch, p. 221) that unmoors young people from their communities' traditions and values. Social justice issues are important and colleges must stand as beacons for equal treatment consistent with democratic principles. However, political leaders who care about the future of American democracy need to do a better job addressing the economic concerns of all citizens, and they need to place these efforts at the center of America's higher-education mission. As Rorty (1998) suggested, policy makers in higher education must return to bread and butter economic issues and not let the Right and far Left fear monger and divide the nation over identity politics. They must organize American colleges as the vehicle for achieving the American Dream for *all* Americans and re-brand the liberal arts curriculum as an essential mechanism for the promotion of healthy civil society in a democracy. Without this reorientation of its mission and a concerted re-branding effort, for many Americans, the idea of attending college, regardless of cost, will remain taboo, and the chasm between cultures will continue to grow.

It is clear that the narrative of American college as a means of economic and social mobility, as a "public good" for promoting a vibrant civil society, has transformed into a narrative where college is merely job training for those who could afford it; any other liberal arts instruction is "un-American" indoctrination. Conservatives' decades-long efforts of privatizing and dismantling the entire system of public funding for high education is all but complete; *After the Ivory Tower Falls* should remind all readers of the value of higher education in a democracy and it should remind all readers of the work that must be done to protect this institution so that democracy can survive.

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