

# OREGON ASSOCIATION OF SCHOLARS



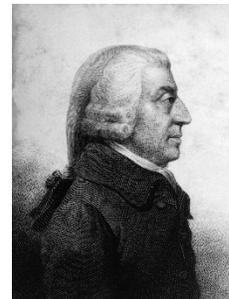
## Trail Notes, Fall 2018

Dear Colleagues,

The costs of belief in a free society are rising in Oregon as elsewhere. At the same time, positive things are happening in our state to reclaim the classical liberalism of limited government and a flourishing civil society and market economy on which the American republic is founded. A lot of these trends begin in higher education and intellectual debates more generally before migrating into society and ultimately politics. In the past six months, various assaults on the rights of students, scholars, and citizens to pursue truth in Oregon have showed that democracy is more precious here than “anti-fascist” mobs could ever begin to understand. Yet Oregon is a remarkably resilient state when it comes to keeping at bay the sorts of fanaticisms that have plagued our California neighbors and which our current generation of Robespierres would impose here.

Smith, Hayek, Burke, Arendt, Rawls, Mill, Locke, and Strauss – the icons of this fall’s newsletter in order of appearance -- differed in many ways. But these canonical figures of Western political philosophy shared an abiding faith in a free society in which the loss of social autonomy to the state or to social mobs would undermine the basis of human flourishing. Rawls might seem a strange inclusion given his support for a strongly redistributive state, but I read him more as a classical liberal with a pragmatic

side. His ideal government never told people which pronouns to use. He is today one of those liberals who is berated in the academy for being a conservative. Welcome to the fold.



Assaults on democracy and a free society come from both directions of the political spectrum. In the area of higher education and the intellectual vocation, alas, the attacks are mostly one-sided despite the occasional vaporings from right-wing politicians promising to impose order on this most unordered of human endeavors. The University of Oregon student union in the spring banned certain hummus, bottled water, and forklifts from its purchase plans on the grounds that the cited companies worked in Israel. As the fall quarter opened, the university’s librarian offered a pathetically misguided criticism of students who defaced a library mural. She said that doing so “will obscure the evidence of racism and sexism in the history of the university that many of us want to confront head-on.” In other words, she prefers verbal vandalism to physical vandalism. Apparently,

a student government and a university librarian feel no need to remain politically neutral because of the positions they hold, dissenters be damned. It will come as no surprise that the Oregon library does not hold many important conservative books of the last decade – for instance the Filipino-American journalist Michelle Malkin’s provocative if unconvincing 2004 book *In Defense of Internment: The Case for "Racial Profiling" in World War II and the War on Terror*. Why would the head librarian at our state’s flagship research university want to encourage debate on such crucial issues when she is so candid in viewing her job as advancing her own political goals and “confronting head-on” viewpoints and historical artefacts that prompt her to anachronistic and shallow outrage?



Threats to a free society come from without as well as within. In September, the OAS [issued](#) the first of what we hope will be an ongoing series of short issue briefs. This one looked at the Government of China’s Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms in the state. The National Association of Scholars report in 2017 on this insidious presence in American education prompted serious debate for the first time. The Portland State University faculty senate voted in June this year to end their Confucius Institute unless major

changes were made, although the administration demurred. No debate has taken place yet at the University of Oregon. The OAS issue brief called for both institutes to be closed and for the Confucius Classrooms in grade schools in the state to be closely monitored.



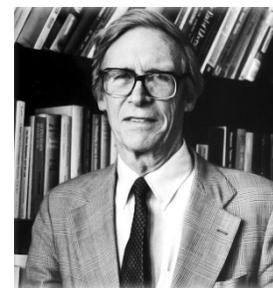
As a native of Canada, I have watched with dismay as that country’s great liberal heritage as a parliamentary democracy has been attacked by native Indian groups who suppose that their lives would have gone better under the Stone Age tyranny, starvation, and warfare that was their lot before European settlement. I am alarmed to see that the “apologia” for European settlement that now plagues Canada has spread to Oregon. I heard such an apologia first at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival this past summer before a performance of *Romeo & Juliet*. The theater was on land “stolen” from native groups, an announcement informed us before the Prologue. Actually, the theater is on the site of the original Chautauqua building erected in 1893, a rural entertainment movement that employed large numbers of natives and on which no tribe appears to have settled. Now at my home institution, I read on our websites and documents a long list of groups with claims on our obscure parcel of land in downtown Portland: “We acknowledge the ancestors of this place and understand that we are here because of the

sacrifices forced upon them.” Putting aside the historical distortions of such a statement, it is enough, I think, simply to say that a free society does not impose group guilt and group entitlement on individuals without descending first into farce and then into tragedy through an endless cycle of victimization and entitlement. “From ancient grudge break to new mutiny, where civil blood makes civil hands unclean,” the Prologue reads.



Finally, on the list of democratic assaults that came across my desk this fall was the remarkable discovery while attending my son’s middle school back-to-school night that the Portland Public School District has adopted the Marxist-Leninist writer Howard Zinn’s *A Young People’s History of the United States* as its U.S. history textbook. It might be sufficient simply to state that Zinn’s work of “history” has been most seriously critiqued by the American Left because of its insistence that nothing good has ever happened in this country, which tends to deflate the passions of social justice warriors. Even in our connected world, apparently the message has still not gotten out about how terrible life is in the U.S. since people keep coming and no one is migrating to Venezuela (or even to guilty Canada). “Depressive progressivism”, the *New York Times* called it, pointing out that it taught our children never to strive, to learn, to invent, to create, because it was all

pointless and would just line the pockets of the wealthy oppressors. Or as *Dissent* magazine put it: “The doleful narrative makes one wonder why anyone but the wealthy came to the United States at all and, after working for a spell, why anyone wished to stay.” Of course, I can remediate the harms to my son with alternative readings and ideas. But for the poor and disadvantaged in our society in Oregon to be told that anything they try is doomed to failure because of the schemes of wily elites is as devastating to social opportunity and advance as educational harms come. It is also, frankly, inaccurate. I am reminded of the late Tom Wolfe’s 2000 essay “In the Land of the Rococo Marxists” that satired this tendency to downplay American achievements: “It got to the point where if you couldn’t reach your tile mason or your pool cleaner, it was because he was off on a Royal Caribbean cruise with his third wife...But our intellectuals dug in like terriers...They saw through El Dorado and produced the most inspired adjectival catchups of the twentieth century.”



Whether Oregon can pull out of the California-like spiral into fanaticism will depend largely on the left-wing moderates in our intellectual and scholarly life. In January 2017, the board chair of the state’s largest post-secondary institution, Portland Community College, Gene Pitts, resigned because of the college’s decision to declare

itself a “sanctuary” campus for illegal immigrants (not, alas, for law-abiding Americans). This was an opportunity to make the case that a state-funded college had no business taking a stand on such a political matter. Yet Pitts did not resign because he disagreed with the declaration in substance. Rather, he felt it was dangerous because so many PCC students rely on federal financial aid and because the college was about to go to voters with a bond measure. The measure passed and the federal aid keeps flowing. And PCC remains a sanctuary campus.



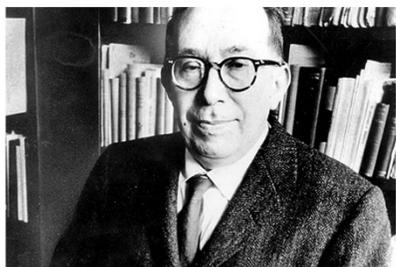
Another example of unsuccessful attempts to restore freedom of inquiry and the idea of the non-partisan university in Oregon comes from my provocateur colleague at Portland State, philosopher Peter Boghossian. He was the faculty who brought fired Google engineer James Damore to Portland State in early 2018 despite much official resistance from the university. His real passion, however, is exposing the irrationalities and intellectual obscurantism of his colleagues on the left and his chosen mode of argument is hoax articles. This method has an old pedigree, of course, going back to New York University physicist Alan Sokal’s absurdist “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity” that got the editors of *Social Text* excited in 1996 until they learned that the whole thing was

nonsense. Dr. Boghossian has hoaxed twice recently. In 2017, he and a colleague published “The Conceptual Penis as a Social Construct” in *Cogent Social Sciences*. He struck with more force this past summer with “Human Reactions to Rape Culture and Queer Performativity at Urban Dog Parks in Portland, Oregon” published in the more prestigious *Gender, Place, and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*. Like Sokal, Boghossian is providing a badly-needed service by calling attention to the basic failures of reasoning and evidence inherent in fields like “gender studies” which disable and disarm our women far more than any sexist male could do. Alas, he has struck so deeply that the university is trying everything in its power to remove him from his position, which would in a stroke take away one of Oregon’s most refreshing and important public intellectuals. Rather than celebrating or debating his much-needed interventions into the stale world of gender studies, he is being hunted down. We will follow his case closely.



We at the Oregon Association of Scholars have our little contributions to make to this effort. In June, following our meeting with Senator Dennis Linthicum, we submitted to his office a policy brief on actions that could be taken at the legislative level to

protect and expand freedoms in higher education in Oregon. Our memo, entitled “Rebuilding Individual Freedom and Political Pluralism In Higher Education in Oregon” identified four critical needs, namely to: (1) Protect the rights of individual students to express different viewpoints and have their work treated based on its merit rather than its viewpoint; (2) Rebuild academic programs so that students are introduced to a variety of reasonable viewpoints on various issues and so that campus events reflect a variety of viewpoints; (3) Rebalance the political pluralism of faculty through attention to viewpoint diversity in hiring; and (4) Protect faculty and students from the imposition of mandatory viewpoints of contentious social and political issues. The memo suggested a role for the legislature in strengthening the oversight role of university and college boards of trustees, in creating legislation to require institutional neutrality modelled on North Carolina’s “An Act to Restore and Preserve Free Speech on the Campuses of the Constituent Institutions of the University of North Carolina”; and in upholding transparency and due process in campus operations. The full memo is now [on the OAS website](#).



This year, we launched the [Oregon Campus Freedom Awards](#) to recognize student leaders in our state who during the current academic year have worked fearlessly to

preserve and expand freedoms on campus. I am pleased to report that we have secured funding to run the program for at least three years, and we hope it will gain more attention with each iteration. The NAS headquarters ran our [press release](#) and we held a conference call among state affiliate heads to discuss spreading this model to other states.

Fearless. It is the slogan that my university attaches to publicity posters highlighting the work of students who, in the social and political realms at least, heave closely to radical orthodoxies. What does a truly fearless student, scholar, or public intellectual look like? We can’t wait to find out when we recognize our first Oregon Campus Freedom Awards winners in June 2019. Please try to join our event in Portland, details to come.

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[www.oregonscholars.org](http://www.oregonscholars.org)