

Could Lee have won? That controversy continues today. Lee's detractors argue that it was folly for him to take the war north; that he should have adopted a defensive strategy, forcing the more powerful Union to exhaust and demoralize itself with attempted invasion. (Edward H. Bonekemper's *How Robert E. Lee Lost the Civil War*, out now, is the latest book to argue this case.) Yet Lee came close to wiping out the North's advantages. A few minutes difference in the race to control Little Round Top and the world might well be a different place. A successful Pennsylvania campaign by Lee might have ruined Lincoln's hopes of re-election.

The really haunting turn in the war, however, involves Lee's Lost Order. Entering Maryland in 1862, Lee issued an order splitting his troops. A Confederate officer wrapped his cigars in a copy of the order, then lost them. In the most improbable event in American history, the order found its way into Union hands, precipitating Antietam.

What if that had not happened? What becomes of the Civil War when one subtracts from it its bloodiest day? Can chaostory accommodate such an equation?

For many, the possible answers are less alluring than is the mystery inherent in the event and its consequences. Carlyle was right: Every event in the world is the offspring of all other events. But there can be no total history. Some dimensions of history remain the province of art.

Ferguson's definitional limits to the counterfactual may serve history well, but they appear to orphan counterfactual fiction. A word should be said in its favor, because as a literature of history's unrealized potentials, it is an expression of the inherently possible.

It is ever more apparent that one of the reasons for the West's immense success is that—unlike its predecessors and alternatives—it has accommodated chance and complexity, building them into its system. Our unending open carnival of expression and markets puts into play a panorama of concepts and things—vulgar, mediocre, sometimes sublime—that yields results that cannot be planned or predicted. Science writer James Burke calls it “the pin-

ball effect”; REASON editor Virginia Postrel terms it “dynamism.” History may have surrendered its shape, but in doing so it also surrendered its limits.

That is the subject of counterfactual fiction, only directed at the past: history without bounds. It is deeply popular genre, in that it willingly vulgarizes history's actors, great and evil: Hitler as a demented American immigrant pulp artist in one story; Disraeli as a Victorian gossip columnist in another; the poet Byron as the King of Greece in a third. But this is less a trivialization of historical role and causation, and more a boisterous, unrestrained inquiry into them. Though the process

may sometimes shrink a mythic past, the potential of the future expands.

“Footfalls echo in the memory,” wrote a wistful T.S. Eliot, “Down the passage we did not take/Toward the door we never opened/Into the rose garden.” But history's imaginers—Philip K. Dick, L. Sprague DeCamp, and their successors—have gone roaring down that passage and ripped open the door. Out in that rose garden, they've staged an anything-can-happen party to which everyone's invited. Bring your own History. ♦

Charles Paul Freund (cpf@reason.com) is a REASON senior editor.

The New College Try

By Nick Gillespie

In Plato's Cave, by Alvin Kernan, New Haven: Yale University Press, 309 pages, \$25.00

Failing the Future: A Dean Looks at Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century, by Annette Kolodny, Durham: Duke University Press, 298 pages, \$24.95

What's College For?: The Struggle to Define American Higher Education, by Zachary Karabell, New York: Basic Books, \$24.00/\$14.00 paper

Few topics inspire as much doom-saying, declinism, and nostalgia as U.S. higher education—a recurring motif neatly summed up in the title of the recent academic memoir, *Gone for Good: Tales of University Life After the Golden Age*. Not coincidentally, few institutions have proven as adaptable, open-ended, and robust as American colleges and universities. Indeed, it's nothing less than astounding that all the colonial colleges—Harvard, William and Mary, Yale, Pennsylvania, Princeton, Brown, Columbia, Rutgers, and Dartmouth—are still up and running more than 200 years after their foundings.

Of course, those schools barely resemble their former selves. It is precisely that ability to morph into new and varied forms that underlies the continuous pronouncements—from the right and the left, the old and the young, the smart and the

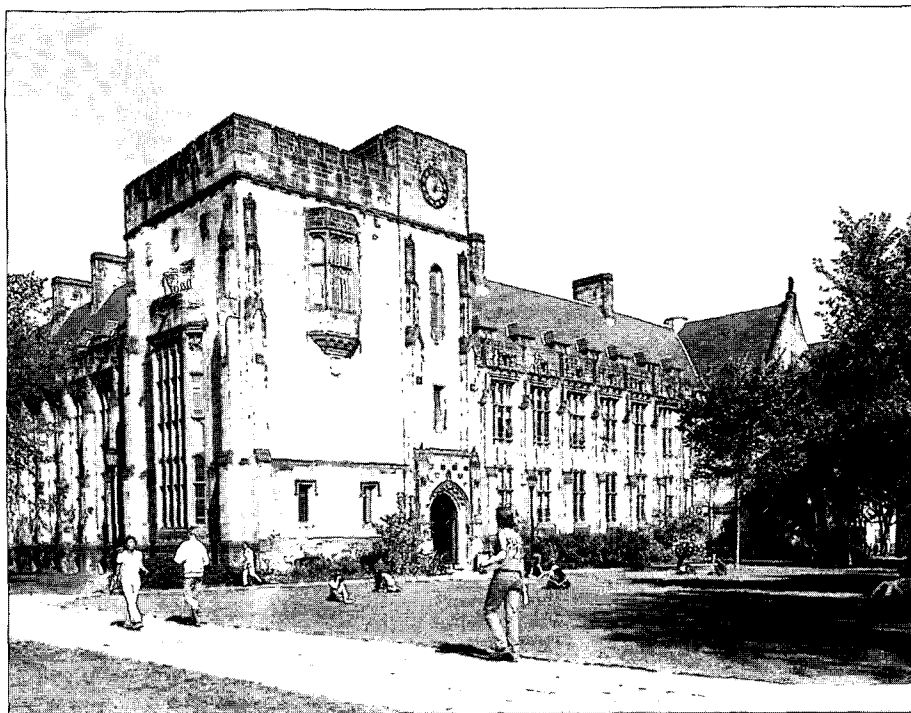
stupid—on the “death” of the university, the “decline” of college, and the ongoing “crisis” in higher education. Colleges and universities are always dying, declining, and lurching from one crisis to the next. But they are also always being reborn, getting restored, and resolving problems.

In the early 19th century, administrators wrung their hands over whether to teach modern languages and, even more scandalous, “modern” literature (e.g., Voltaire and other Enlightenment authors); in the late 19th century, they vociferously debated whether students should have the right to pursue elective courses and to study science; in the early 20th century, they fretted over the “Jewish problem” (i.e., too many smart Semites) and whether American literature was worthy of study; during the 1960s and '70s, they debated assigning letter grades, killing foreign language requirements, chucking frats and

ROTC and *in loco parentis*, and going coed. Nowadays, heated, intense, and ugly debates abound over every conceivable topic related to higher ed: corporate and state funding, curriculum, speech codes, academic standards, preferential admissions, campus alcohol policies—you name it. These ongoing battles are best understood as signs of life, however, not death.

Our country's loosely knit system of post-secondary education is a study in decentralized and continued change, a forceful example of Schumpeterian creative destruction, with all sorts of models proliferating and competing, some flourishing and others failing (some colleges even go out of business). In 1800, there were 32 colleges in the country, none of which regularly admitted blacks or women and most of which had religious affiliations. Today, there are more than 3,600 post-secondary institutions, including about 1,500 two-year colleges, 2,200 four-year colleges, and about 450 Ph.D.-granting institutions. The huge growth in schools has been more than equaled by a huge increase both in the sheer number of students and in their variation. In 1900, less than 3 percent of adult Americans aged 25 or older had a bachelor's degree; by 1970, that figure stood at about 10 percent. In 1997, it was about 25 percent. In the past, students were overwhelmingly affluent males. In 1997, according to *American Demographics*, fully two-thirds of graduating high school seniors—including 70 percent of women, 64 percent of men, 68 percent of whites, and 60 percent of blacks—immediately matriculated at a four-year college.

These are healthy numbers and they reflect a basic health in higher education: More people can go to more schools that are more or less to their liking. That's not to say there are not problems with higher education, or that some trends are not better than others, or that there is no room for criticizing specific policies at specific schools. Rather, it is to underscore that precisely those issues are constantly being raised, debated, and worked through. Contrary to appeals to a fabled Utopian U. and jeremiads predicting certain and imminent doom, higher education in the United States must be considered a huge success, one inextricably bound up in colleges' and uni-



College Pep: Our system of post-secondary education is a study in decentralized and continued change, a forceful example of Schumpeterian creative destruction.

versities' willingness to change.

In different ways, Alvin Kernan's *In Plato's Cave*, Annette Kolodny's *Failing the Future*, and Zachary Karabell's *What's College For?* explore how schools adapt to new circumstances. These books document significant changes that have occurred, suggest possible directions for the future, and add something significant to the ongoing discussion about the future of college and university life. Anyone interested in the evolution of American higher education over the past 50 years will find much of interest here.

Kernan's memoir offers a view of the academy from the top: As an undergraduate, he was educated at Columbia and Williams on the G.I. Bill and, after getting a B.A., he did a stint at Oxford. He earned a Ph.D. in English from Yale and spent his teaching career in New Haven and at Princeton. He is a well-known critic who has written about topics ranging from satire to Shakespeare to print technology. Prior to his retirement in 1990, he occupied a series of high-level administrative posts at both Yale (where he served as

provost) and Princeton (where he was dean of the graduate school).

In Plato's Cave reflects on "seismic changes in American higher education since World War II," by which Kernan means primarily the "vast popularization of American higher education...[that] has made it possible for almost any American graduating from high school to attend college." That "democratization," along with technologies such as the Internet that have undermined monopolies on information, has resulted in nothing less than an "epistemological" shift. "Traditional concepts of what we can know and who can know it were questioned at all levels," writes Kernan. "Science set the scene with relativity theory, fractals, and the uncertainty principle, but in the latter half of the century deconstruction—the most descriptive name for a much broader 'post-modernist' movement in theory—took uncertainty to its nihilistic extremes in the humanities and social sciences, 'demystifying' traditional knowledge, replacing positivism with relativism, substituting interpretation for facts and discrediting objectivity in the name of subjectivity."

This opposition between the “old academic order” and the new is overdrawn. Since their founding about 100 years ago, literature departments have been hotbeds of disputes over critical methodology and canons; contemporary debates in most other disciplines similarly differ in degree, not in kind. Nor is postmodernism’s emphasis on the limits of knowledge nihilistic, either in theory or in practice. In many ways, postmodernism’s recognition of knowledge as provisional and partial participates fully in Enlightenment ideals of self-critique and scrutiny; similarly, it’s rare to hear a postmodernist actually assert that all choices are equal. But Kernan is certainly correct that the willingness to “question all authority” has grown over time and that this tendency is linked with greater access by a wider variety of people to the university. Even at elite schools, the reaction to being granted entry quickly moves from docile gratitude to confident demand, with a changed institution the inevitable result.

Such changes can happen more or less quickly and more or less rationally. On the irrational side, Kernan recounts how in the spring of 1970 Yale’s campus was filled with mania over the upcoming trial of Bobby Seale for the murder of a fellow Black Panther. Though the university had no connection to the case, a number of prominent activists, including Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman, urged Yale students to violent “revolutionary action,” and the school quickly became embroiled in the trial’s larger racial dynamics. Yale’s black faculty members, whom Kernan suggests were rightly less interested in Bobby Seale’s fate than in their own, took advantage of the charged situation to present the administration with a list of demands for “some very practical things: more tenure slots for black faculty and more money for African-American projects.”

If implied violence is hardly a preferred method for effecting change at a university, neither is it particularly common. More typical is the process by which Kernan and some colleagues created a new, “relevant” course to revive flagging interest in literary studies. “Even skeptics [of new critical methodologies] like myself understood...that the old regime of Romantic

literature had become in many ways a museum, filled with great works but removed from its human context to a world of hushed reverence, separate from normal human activity,” he writes. “If literature was to be saved from oblivion, [we needed to provide] a more open, less idealized context for literary study that located the canonical works, *Oedipus Rex* and *The Aeneid*, *King Lear* and *Madame Bovary*, in the middle not of perfect art but of a continuing, ever present human activity of making up stories that give meaning to events and sort out the perplexities of human life.”

That desire to reach indifferent students led to a popular interdisciplinary course team-taught by scholars in English, German, French, and other languages, and course materials that juxtaposed previously unthinkable combinations: “Tarzan of the Apes with Conrad’s Mr. Kurtz; Superman with Achilles; advertisement with sonnets.” Traditionalists cringed at such fare (and still do), but the course proved hugely successful. “The students took to the idea, and it was all very lively,” reports Kernan, who adds that the course became the basis for the major in comparative literature, “where it has continued to flourish.”

Kernan is himself a traditionalist, but he understands that change is inevitable. Reflecting on the shift in the second half of the 20th century toward “a new kind of democratic university,” he writes, “Though my heart is with the old academic order in which I was trained, my argument is not that this radical change is, as many of my contemporaries believe, an educational catastrophe. The new democratic universities will in time make necessary compromises and settle into their own institutional forms to educate people to their own ends.”

Annette Kolodny’s *Failing the Future* describes in detail some of those compromises and new institutional forms. Kolodny is a high-profile feminist critic of American literature, best known for the influential 1984 study, *The Land Before Her*. From 1988 to 1993, she was dean of the College of Humanities at the University of Arizona in Tucson, a position that made her responsible for an annual budget of about \$18 million, 200 full-time

faculty, and 22,000 graduate and undergraduate students (she is now a professor at Arizona). Though her focus is on the public research university, the major issues she discusses—budget constraints, tenure reform, curricular change, and the like—have wider relevance.

Any of course hails the democratization of the university. But even as she celebrates increased access to higher education, she is resolute that it’s all imperiled by the usual suspects—“vicious corporate downsizing for the sake of short-term profits, a fraying social safety net, and widening inequalities in income distribution”—all of which “have turned the nation sour and cynical.” Similarly, she clings to the hope—not fully done in by decades of 70-percent-plus personal income tax brackets—that “a truly progressive tax system” will finally bring about “social justice.” Reality in the form of low unemployment, heightened standards of living for virtually all Americans, increased spending on higher education, and, perhaps most relevant of all, the huge and continuing enrollment in colleges just can’t cut through such canards.

More disturbing, Kolodny often personifies the worst trait of political correctness: intolerance of criticism or open debate. She puts forth a definition of what she calls “antifeminist intellectual harassment” which is so broad and vague that it precludes the possibility of any legitimate critical engagement with feminism or feminist scholarship. By her lights, such “harassment” includes “any policy, action, statement, and/or behavior [that] has the intent or the effect of discouraging or preventing woman’s freedom of lawful action, freedom of thought, and freedom of expression.” Such harassment occurs “when any policy, action, statement, and/or behavior creates an environment in which research, scholarship, and teaching pertaining to women, gender, or gender inequities is devalued, discouraged, or altogether thwarted.” Such an outrageous, pre-emptive position is not only the polar opposite of legitimate academic debate and inquiry; it is also far removed from the best feminist scholarship, which seeks critical engagement, not special standing.

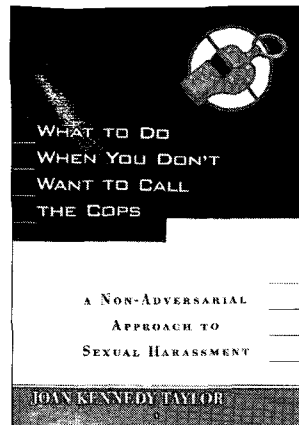
Still, *Failing the Future* is instructive on how colleges are adapting to changes in both student body and faculty. Kolodny's chapter on recognizing and responding to "cognitive diversity"—different styles of learning—contains some practical insights. She tells of working with the director of the basic language program in German and the head of Arizona's Language Research Center to develop a "learning mode profile" that would indicate whether a particular student responds more quickly to large conceptual frameworks or to an "aggregate of details." In other words, writes Kolodny, "will the student learn German more easily if she is first introduced to the theory and structure of an inflected language, or will she do better with some basic grammar rules and vocabulary-building?" Given rising enrollments—and competition among colleges for students—Kolodny is certainly correct that "the next generation of Ph.D.s... must be prepared to teach a more inclusive everyone, and they must be prepared to teach everyone well."

Curiously, for someone who seems to detest markets ("they are," she claims, "notoriously unreliable as protectors of the common good"), Kolodny understands incentives extremely well. That's rare among college administrators, who typically rule by decrees that often fail to actually change faculty and student behavior. As dean, Kolodny instituted competitive grant programs that motivated faculty and staff to develop or rethink curricula to interest students while maintaining academic rigor. These incentives ranged from a \$5,000 grant for developing new curricula to free lunches to support a "buddy" system for new faculty, in which two tenured faculty met informally with new hires.

As her views on "antifeminist intellectual harassment" suggest, though, Kolodny's calls for "bottom-up" and "decentralized" decision making have definite limits, as does her appreciation for institutional experimentation. Generating new course offerings, say, is all to the good, while any tampering with the far more fundamental (and static) academic institution of tenure is merely a sign that you've been influenced by nefarious "conservative forces," whose attack on tenure she im-

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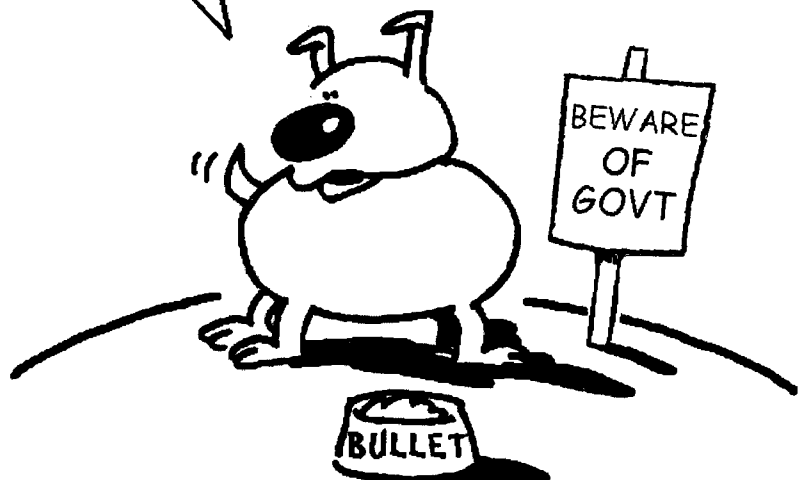
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plausibly claims is really aimed at discouraging minorities from aspiring to academic careers.

That would be news to Zachary Karabell, author of *What's College For?* Like Kolodny, Karabell is a conventional academic leftist. Yet his nonideological attitude toward tenure exemplifies the main strength of his book. Karabell, a Ph.D. who has taught at the college level, spent time talking to students, professors, and administrators at schools ranging from community colleges such as Los Angeles' Pierce College to massive state universities such as Texas A&M.

Pace Kolodny, Karabell views tenure not as an "absolute good" but as something that "has so distorted the academic labor market that any benefits to free speech are more than outweighed by the distortions in the economy of higher education and the stultifying intellectual and professional orthodoxies that tenure promotes." Most critics of tenure, he points out, are chiefly concerned with the corrosive effects that guaranteed employment has on job performance. Where Kolodny hugely underestimates the "deadwood" in most academic departments at between 3 percent and 5 percent, Karabell's figures suggest that even if that low-ball estimate is accurate, underperforming faculty are very well protected by tenure.

"Out of nearly nine thousand tenured professors in public colleges in Texas, only eight were fired between 1990 and 1995, three for poor performance," he writes. "In the past twenty-five years, UT-Austin [the state's flagship school] has fired only one tenured professor for incompetence. In the entire United States, only fifty [tenured] professors are fired annually." The main effect of tenure, particularly at relatively uncompetitive institutions in which there is no collegial pressure to keep up in one's field, is to protect faculty from working too hard.

That's not to say Karabell is against tenure per se. Rather, his larger point is that if higher education is to remain vital and strong, schools must be free to experiment. "It may be that at places like Bennington and New College [which have gotten rid of tenure], academic freedom will disappear, consumerism will dictate course offerings, and academics will be

underpaid and overworked. But only if these experiments are encouraged and carefully studied will we know. We could envision hundreds of variations on tenure, from its abolition in some places to a far easier granting of it at others. And it may be that variety would best meet the needs of a higher-education system that encompasses thousands of different schools."

Academia is, of course, crawling toward precisely that sort of variety: Some schools are doing away with tenure, while others are instituting new "post-tenure reviews" or expanding the use of full- and part-time, non-tenure-track instructors. Critics typically paint such developments

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in apocalyptic terms, but Karabell properly contextualizes them as useful responses to changed economic and educational realities.

Karabell's understanding of competition as a necessary discovery process infuses *What's College For?* with energy and insight. Echoing a theme that runs through Kernan's and Kolodny's books, Karabell argues that students are the ultimate engine of change in higher education; their changed makeup and the demands they make inexorably change the schools they attend.

At all but a few very well-endowed private schools, he notes, tuition dollars are necessary to keep the operation running; at state-assisted institutions, healthy numbers help keep public-sector funding levels up. Karabell worries about that need to placate students. He argues that in an age where employers and workers alike increasingly view a B.A. as a prerequisite for

a "decent" job, students and professors are more likely to find themselves at loggerheads. That's because, he says, "professors believe that a college diploma represents the culmination of an education. Students, however, increasingly see the diploma as a credential that will lead to a better job. In an ideal world, education and credentializing would be compatible, but in the world of higher education today, they are often at odds." He further frets that such "commodification" of education erodes standards and skills.

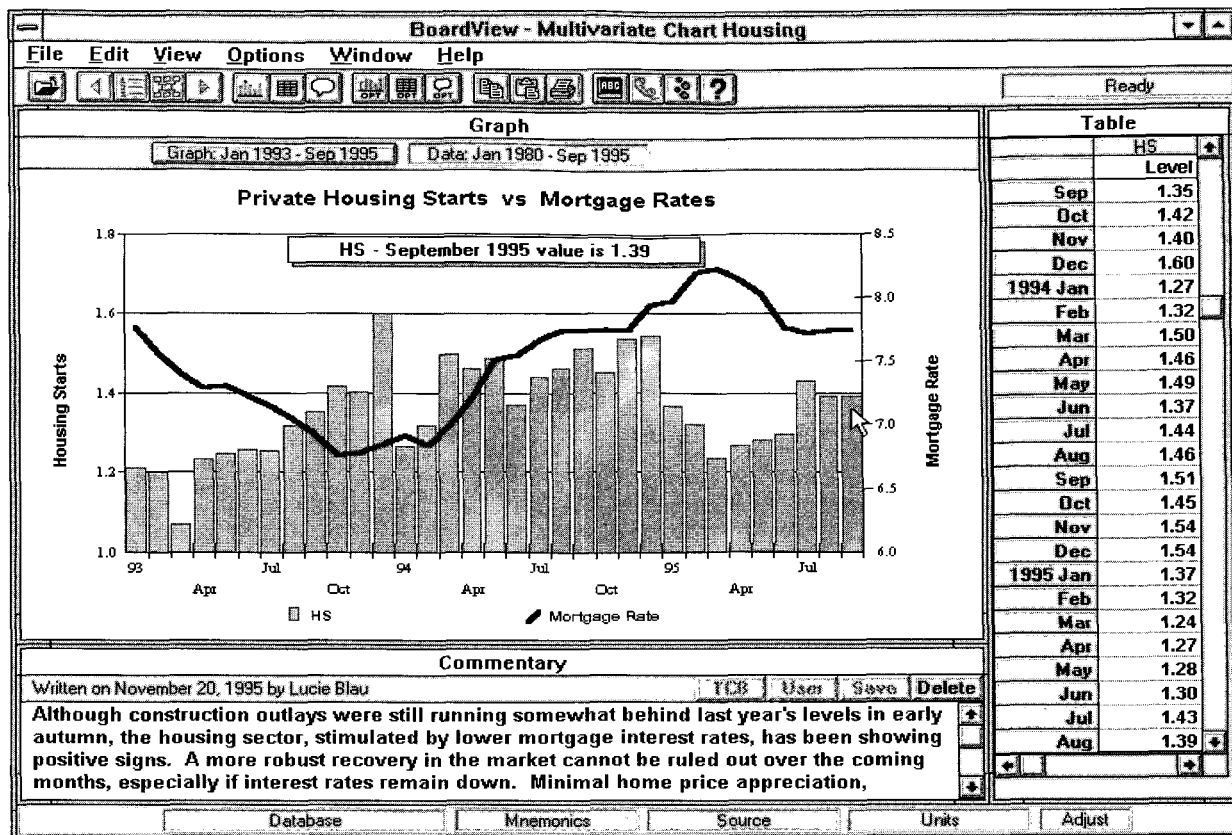
Karabell grossly overstates the mismatch. Certainly, students want a diploma and, at least since the Middle Ages, most have tried to get it by doing as little work as possible. But they also recognize that few employers (or graduate programs) uncritically accept any given degree, even from a prestigious school. Students know they will be hired less on the basis of a piece of paper and more on the skills and the potential it represents. Your grades, your institution's reputation, your related experience, your references, your self-presentation, and a host of related concerns all have a huge impact on your prospects. All also work ultimately to push standards up precisely because employers are ultimately more interested in specific skills rather than a general degree.

Karabell is on much firmer ground when he explores a different mismatch, one also touched on by Kolodny. Doctoral candidates, Karabell points out, are trained at institutions usually very different from the ones at which they end up. Although they are trained primarily as research scholars—and typically receive no formal pedagogical instruction—they are likely to find themselves in teaching-intensive schools where research is either de-emphasized or discouraged. The very professors at Ph.D.-granting schools who are responsible for training future faculty members, writes Karabell, are attempting to "maintain a definition of the university that excludes more than it includes." The "guild mentality" among faculty at research universities doesn't just exacerbate tensions by leaving new professors unprepared for the actual classroom experience that will largely define their professional lives, says Karabell. It "often impede[s] the efforts of individual professors, students,

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and schools to innovate.”

Yet, as Karabell himself acknowledges at various points, that innovation has proven to be irresistible, and his own book underscores that anxiety over the fate of higher education is simply a sign of a lively debate. In the end, he strikes just the right note. If Kernan looks back to the past too elegiacally and Kolodny to the future too fearfully, Karabell recognizes that “the strength of American higher education is its variety, and any attempts to homogenize the experience are not only bound

to fail but also undermine the system’s strengths....The result [of decentralized experimentation] may not be neat; it may be unwieldy. But it will serve an American society that has since the beginning been messy, contradictory, and at its best, incredibly vibrant and astonishingly creative.”

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News from Nowhere

By Jesse Walker

The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy, by Russell Jacoby, New York: Basic Books, 236 pages, \$26.00

Apocalypse Pretty Soon: Travels in End-Time America, by Alex Heard, New York: W.W. Norton, 360 pages, \$24.95

A utopia is, by definition, a fantasy: The word literally means “no place,” and the classical utopias existed only in the imagination. Sometimes, they were enchanting literature. Political scientists may sneer at the French socialist Charles Fourier, in whose utopia the planets copulate and the oceans turn to lemonade, but the surrealists loved him.

Their enthusiasm certainly makes more sense than that of those 19th-century Americans who actually tried to found Fourierist “phalanxes.” There’s a reason why most utopias remain placeless, as Fourier’s fans and the other utopian colonists of the era quickly discovered: It’s pretty hard to design any community from scratch, let alone one that overturns dozens of social conventions. Even the colonies that succeeded for a sustained period of time—the towns founded by the American anarchist Josiah Warren, for instance—were soon either absorbed into the society around them or destroyed by the sort of outside forces that could erase any community, whether or not it was baptized by idealists.

America still has hundreds of intentional communities, some more successful than others, along with elaborate plans

for even larger colonies—the “new country” fantasies that periodically flicker in the libertarian press, for example. But most new settlements today are commercial developments, not utopian communes; they’re governed by condo boards and CC&Rs, not socialist or religious visionaries. The dream of a world without exploitation has persisted, but the smart money is invested in worlds without pets.

Literary utopias, on the other hand, have flourished, especially if you include the sort of writing that is concerned less with designing a new order than with simply imagining how—to borrow historian Russell Jacoby’s definition of utopia—“the future could fundamentally surpass the present.” Modern utopianism includes virtually every tract about the alleged New Age, every Luddite proposal to erase the last two centuries, every call for a religious reawakening, every manifesto on the transformative powers of cyberspace. It includes Web sites, science fiction novels, and essays in xeroxed zines.

Even conspiracy theories can be utopian, since a dystopia is also a kind of utopia. I’m not talking about allegations of crimes in high places (many of which, we’ve learned, turn out to be true); I mean

the wild stuff, the tales of alien implants and Masonic mind control, of cabals always just poised on completing their long march toward global rule. From Swift to Orwell, dystopian writers have exaggerated social trends they dislike, forging those artful distortions into satires. Conspiracy folklore does the same thing for the same reason, except that most of these dystopians actually believe in the worlds they’ve invented.

Given all this, it’s amazing to hear Jacoby claim that utopianism is “stone dead.” But in *The End of Utopia*, he does just that.

Jacoby is a leftist intellectual with a reputation for bashing other leftist intellectuals. He’s good at it: His last book, *Dogmatic Wisdom*, made a strong case that the left, far from “subverting” the academy, has actually been absorbed by it. *The End of Utopia* continues the thought. With the left reduced to a socially irrelevant faction of the professoriate, Jacoby argues, it has become less interested in transforming society than in tinkering with it. It has stopped dreaming of different, better worlds and, without those utopian fancies to fortify it, has lost its spine. “Can liberalism with a backbone exist if its backbone turns mushy?” Jacoby asks. “Does radicalism persist if reduced to means and methods?”

Apparently not, as far as at least some leftists are concerned. The good parts of Jacoby’s book describe the sort of material those erstwhile radicals have been reduced to producing. My favorite is the semiotician who managed to draw out an analysis of *The Cosby Show*’s opening sequence for seven pages. Her conclusion: “The syntagmatic structure of the opening credits might be described as a theme and variations, where Cosby is the theme and each child—and his wife—appear as variations.” (And you thought the *show* was dull.)

But it’s a long jump from the decline of the left to the death of utopia, not least because leftists are hardly the only utopians in the world. Jacoby seems unaware of this. He even drafts F.A. Hayek into the anti-utopian camp, citing the economist’s sardonic reference to socialist and fascist totalitarianism as “the great utopia.” But