
REVIEWS

John James Axtell. *The Pleasures of Academe: A Celebration and Defense of Higher Education*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998. 292p.

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Part personal memoir, part factual corrective, part polemic; sometimes excessively rhapsodic, sometimes excessively defensive; and always traditional and conservative, James Axtell's *Pleasure of Academe* is certainly a unique contribution to the currently vigorous genre of academic critique and self-examination. The book's organization (chapters 1-5 under the heading "Academic"; chapters 6-11 under "Pleasures"), its wide range of subjects (from the work load of college professors and the value of scholarship, to academic family lives and the lure of college towns), and the "Preface" openly announce the somewhat patchwork nature of the book. In fact, it is made up of a variety of Axtell's previous addresses, award acceptance speeches, and some new essays. While the book advances no central, continuous argument, the essays nevertheless provide a coherent background for a concluding chapter that systematically addresses five of the most important attacks on higher education.

The unusual mixture of memoir, fact, and polemic is clear from the opening chapter ("[Mis]Understanding Academic Work"), which sets out, as do many academic self-justifications, to demystify the work professors actually do, arguing that the number of hours in the classroom, the common public notion of professorial work, is wholly inadequate. Axtell acknowledges two sources for more accurate data: "representative statistics" from formal studies (5) and "personal experiences of working professors," especially his own (6). This interweaving of personal experience and statistical data from research studies to shape an argument occurs both within individual chapters (as here) and across chapters in the text as a whole. The chapters in part two ("Pleasures") are mostly personal narratives and reminiscences, but which Axtell intends will inform and exemplify the argumentative chapters of part one ("Academic"). And to an extent they do: for example, his discussion of his own interdisciplinary scholarship ("Between Disciplines") which also describes changes in the nature of academic research, and his account of family trips which also further the academic parent's research projects ("Family Vacations") both put a personal face on earlier chapters on academic work

("[Mis]Understanding Academic Work") and his defense of research ("Scholarship Reconsidered").

Axtell is always clear and jargon free, but his rhetoric sometimes shades into the clichéd extremes on both ends of a scale from the excessively romanticized to the bitterly invective. Of college towns he says, "But generous benefactors with a *taste for memorial grandeur*, presidents seeking to leave their material mark, and architects who took their models from *the Classical, Romanesque, or Gothic piles* of Europe have also contributed to the *noble elevations and weighty fabrics* of campus buildings" (175; emphasis mine). And he describes his childhood discovery of the public library this way: "When I happened upon it, the library occupied a long, high-ceilinged, ill-lit room in the village municipal building. The limp wooden floors creaked and smelled of linseed oil, a smell I still associate with libraries. . . . The uneven lighting and hushed quiet of that place made the process of culling the week's reading a special, if not yet sacred, enterprise" (102). At the other end of the scale, he describes those attacks on the professoriat for focusing on research at the expense of teaching as the "ill-informed hits of budget-conscious legislators and dyspeptic critics on the Right and the Left for our alleged neglect of America's youth as we chase the Golden Fleece" of research (43). Both rhetorical excesses detract from the cause of defending higher education that Axtell professes.

Axtell is clearly and openly traditional in his scholarship and his view of higher education. In fact, he views American higher education from a point of view which is both conservative and privileged. He reveals a conservative resistance to change, for example, in his judgment that scholars "will probably remain restrained users of the Web and cling to familiar methods for the mental processing of their newfound facts" (39), a judgment that is daily being disproved — you could be reading this review in the RMMLA e-journal accessed through a web page. And in what at first appears to be a gesture of up-to-date-ness, he reveals a more deep-seated traditionalism when he assumes that postmodernism, and the new theories and methodologies associated with it, are merely fads: "Like it or not," he says, "the postmodern challenge has forced us to re-examine our fundamental assumptions and first principles. Ultimately, such close self-scrutiny will serve to *restore confidence in*, as well as banish cocksureness from, our disciplinary pursuits *as soon as the dust settles*" (35; emphasis mine). Axtell's reliance on memoir invites a somewhat personal interpretation. His traditional views may be deeply rooted in his own privileged academic background, from Yale and Cambridge to his current endowed chair at the College of William and Mary, as well as his entry into the profession before the job crisis that began in the 1970s.

There is much to like and to learn from in Axtell's book, and I do not mean to dismiss it because of its rhetorical excesses or its traditional and even romanticized view of higher education in America today. In fact, I share his belief in the value of liberal education and his belief that it is under siege. It is differently under siege, however, in the second and lower tier public institutions than in elite institutions, and it probably needs some different defenses, particularly more pointedly economic and social ones, than those he offers. But his research is impeccable and his use of facts and data is excellent throughout the book. His last chapter is particularly useful to all defenders of higher education. In it he identifies the five features of the university which most need to be explained to the public and defended from attacks, which come largely from the popular media and the political right. On faculty politics: he refutes the claim that faculty are on the far left and cites surveys of faculty political views to support his point. He also attacks the "PC myth" (218) as a creation of the conservative media. On curriculum: he argues that changes of the past few decades are natural responses to changes in student populations, and he points out that curricula by nature are contested and change almost constantly, a "historical and desirable norm" on campuses (222). On tenure: he reasserts the position of the original AAUP statement making tenure necessary for academic freedom; argues that universities should not be compared to businesses in this regard, since they are in fact "nonprofit service organizations" instead (228); and points out that tenure is not unique, as its opponents argue, but is quite similar to the work conditions of "the judicial bench, medical practices, legal partnerships, orchestras, and unions" of all sorts (228). On research: Axtell argues for the ideal of the scholar/teacher and rejects the critics' claim that useless, forced research is a national norm by citing studies showing that most college teachers "neither publish nor perish" (237), so this charge is another trumped up one. He also points out that it does not, as critics assert, take time away from the teaching function. On teaching: he cites the many studies which demonstrate that teaching is not neglected at colleges and universities today and that no data exists to support the claims of poor teaching nationwide (243), that it is in fact the number one professional commitment of faculty and their first love and reason for coming into and staying in the profession. In short, Axtell explains each issue succinctly and defends each persuasively. That alone is a significant contribution to the debate. ❀