Campus culture and its effect on conservative activism

By Glenn C. Altschuler
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

“This is an accurate portrayal of the nightmare.” The announcement for the 2011 annual meeting of the National Conservative Student Conference in Washington, D.C., added, “For most college students, this is an accurate portrayal of their professors and peers and the left wing ideas they espouse.” For a nominal fee, conservative students were invited to spend six days and five nights learning how to “stand up for their left wing ideas they espouse.”

Generally regarded as bastions of the left, college campuses these days have their fair share of right-wing organizations and activists. In “Becoming Right,” Amy Binder, an associate professor of sociology at the University of California, San Diego, and Kate Wood, a graduate student, provide an in-depth and informative examination of who the conservatives are, the impact of campus culture on the formation of their identities and activist styles, and the implications for the direction of US politics.

Since 2001, Binder and Wood indicate, more college students identify themselves as either liberal or conservative (and fewer as moderates). Although conservatives make up the smallest portion of the three political identities at an (unnamed) Western public flagship university and an Eastern private elite university the authors studied, they represent about 20 percent of the population on their campuses. This conservative group is sufficiently small in numbers to justify feeling isolated and marginalized, but big enough to constitute a critical mass.

Binder and Wood claim that the structures and culture of a given campus play an important role in determining whether these young conservatives adopt confrontational tactics (holding “Affirmative Action Bake Sales,” where blacks and whites pay different prices, “Empty Holsters weeks” to protest restrictions on bringing weapons to campus, and “Straight Pride Rallies”) or a more reasoned style, based on a commitment to “civilized discourse.”

Confrontation, the authors suggest, is the preferred mode on large, bureaucratized campuses, where relatively few juniors and seniors live in dormitories, and where conservatives feel they do not get respect and need or want “an expressive, sometimes joyous self-preservation technique.” As one student told Binder and Wood: “If you wake up and come to school in the morning and someone calls you a bigot, you know you’re going to have a good day.”

The civilized style tends to be the norm at elite institutions with small classes, university-sponsored nonpartisan organizations, where gifted and ambitious students feel part of a special community, believe their academic experiences are positive and productive, and do not want to diminish their social capital or their future prospects by engaging in “lowbrow” forms of provocation.

The authors’ findings are no more conclusive. But if they’re right, we need to pay a lot more attention to the impact of campus cultures on virtually every aspect of the lives of students. After all, as Binder and Wood point out, style matters. While they are not ready to make a causal claim that partisan battles in Congress “are the direct outcome of young conservatives’ experiences as students,” the authors do make a compelling case that campus culture can — and should — play a formative role in developing, defining, and modifying identities and expressive styles.

Binder and Wood conclude with a timely reminder that although, at the moment, the confrontational style dominates our politics, it is “not simply a given; styles emerge and are shaped by people, even as they shape the world around us.” If we want to return to a more civilized politics, we will have to help create it, starting with the socialization provided by parents, and including the important signals young people receive while they’re in school.

Glenn C. Altschuler, the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin professor of American studies at Cornell University, can be reached at gca1@cornell.edu.

BOOK REVIEW

BECOMING RIGHT: How Campuses Shape Young Conservatives
By Amy J. Binder and Kate Wood
Princeton University, 422 pp., $29.95

MOVIE STARS

New releases

★★★½ The Central Park Five
A scrupulous, singeing documentary by Ken Burns, his daughter Sarah, and her husband David McMahon, that reconstructs the notorious series of events that occurred in the spring of 1989 after a young white investment banker was beaten and raped while running in Central Park. The film focuses on the five teenagers — four black, one Hispanic — who were rounded up, sentenced, and convicted after falsely confessing to the crime. (119 min., unrated) (Wesley Morris)

★★ Cheerful Weather for the Wedding
If you simply can’t wait for the third season of “Downton Abbey” to begin, and you need to experience English people all clenched up on the day of two people’s nuptials, try Julia Strachey’s novel about a bride-to-be (Felicity Jones) and her cold feet. This movie adaptation has a lot of nattering but little tension, wit, or heat. With the usually wonderful Elizabeth McGovern, so-so as the bride’s mother. (92 min., unrated) (Wesley Morris)

★★½ The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey
Title notwithstanding, almost exactly as expected. More Middle-earth — the first third of Tolkien’s prequel story to “The Lord of the Rings” — Peter Jackson’s film has lots of sound and fury and not enough narrative momentum. Ian McKellen’s Gandalf and (joy) Andy Serkis’ Gollum return. The 48 fps digital version in theaters looks like high-end video. With Martin Freeman. In 3-D. (169 min., PG-13) (Ty Burr)

★★½ Hyde Park on Hudson
A work of historical embroidery about Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s possible affair with his sixth cousin, Margaret Suckley; this paints the 32d president as both a creepy sexual predator and a heck of a guy. It’s as tone-deaf as movies get. Bill Murray is actually quite good as FDR, but Laura Linney gives a defeat performance in an impossible role. (94 min., R) (Ty Burr)

★★ Wagner & Me
Beloved British personality and major Richard Wagner fanboy Stephen Fry goes to Bayreuth to marvel at the composer’s musical legacy — much too gingerly — come to terms with its anti-Semitic dark side. Fry hears Wagner, but he doesn’t really see him. Opera fans will enjoy the backstage access. (89 min., unrated) (Ty Burr)

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