

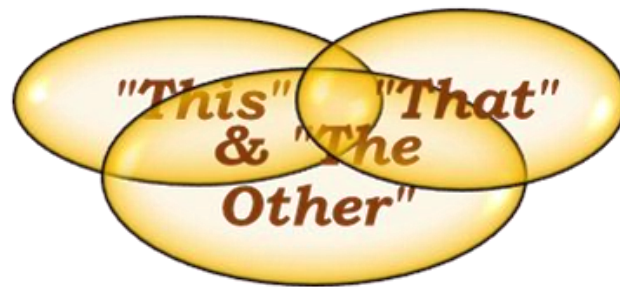
JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Book Notes #157

September 2023

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

'This,' 'That,' and 'The Other'



For the past several weeks I've said this week's **Book Note** would be a short one. Not at all surprising to my editors, I've only met that goal with middling success.

This week, for two reasons, I've set myself the challenge to come in under 2,000 words. The first is that I want to give Olivia Wickline, who in another time would have been called the compositor, a breather from the challenge of fitting my squirrely notes with their photos, other odd illustrations, and poems with

sometimes byzantine spacing into the tight constraints of Constant Contact, the email platform the Jefferson Educational Society uses to distribute our daily/weekly publications. The other is simply to see if I can do it!

So, just as a week or two ago, this will be a **Note** of “Notes”. Reader feedback to either myself at roth@jeserie.org or to Publications Director Pat Cuneo at cuneo@jeserie.org is encouraged, again for two reasons: I value your opinions, even from those of you who seem to think I am short a synapse or two and, secondly, for some of the following **Notes** I would like your guidance on how to proceed.

NOTE #1: Regarding guidance on how to proceed, recently Ben Spегgen, vice president of the Jefferson Educational Society and one of those tasked with editing my weekly musings, and I discussed whether the title “Book Notes” needed to be changed. I brought up to Ben that for many years C-SPAN hosted a Sunday evening program titled “Book Notes” and now offers a podcast series BOOKNOTES+. (Confession time: I’ve never watched or listened to either. No excuse.)

Steve Scully, who has been immensely helpful to the Jefferson Educational Society and its annual Global Summit speaker series, has never mentioned it to me or to anyone else at the Jefferson, as far as I know. Steve is the former political editor, host, and senior executive producer at C-SPAN and currently hosts “The Briefing with Steve Scully” on SiriusXM POTUS channel 124, and is the senior vice president of communications at the Bipartisan Policy Center. Still, when the **Book Notes** name connection occurred to me a month or two ago, I wondered, “Should we change the title?” When the entire project began three and a half years ago, we plugged the title in as a kind of afterthought thinking it would last only a couple of weeks until the pandemic ended – oh, how wrong we were on multiple counts! We certainly never intended to infringe on anyone’s space or to ride on anyone’s coattails.

So, my question to you is “Should we change the title?” If yes, then to what? I am open to all suggestions.

NOTE #2: What to do about immigration?

Lately, I’ve found myself in several conversations about our current immigration crisis as New York City Mayor Eric Adams has joined the chorus of two or three southern governors saying the cities and the states can’t solve it alone. Setting aside the bleats of multiple wannabe demagogues on the issue, Adams is correct.

What to do?

A good place to begin is to learn a bit of history to try to understand the current situation. Regarding history, I never fail to be amazed at how little people

actually know about, to borrow a phrase, “How we got to now.” Recently, delivering presentations from my new series “Americans and Their Games: Sports in American History and Culture,” I was tentative and a bit wary speaking to audiences about “Sports and the Quest for Women’s Rights” only to have numerous women come up to me afterwards saying “You need to do this – people, including most women, have no idea who these people were and what they did.”

So, too, immigration: America is a nation of immigrants, almost all of the descendants of whom are clueless about what their ancestors did, the abuse they encountered, and the laws designed to thwart their arrival. A good place to begin correcting that void is to read Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Baher Ghosheh’s “New Americans: Demographic Trends and Immigration Patterns in Erie, Pennsylvania (1960-2023),” which can be ordered at www.jeserie.org

Or, you can attend my presentation of Part IV of “Americans and Their Games: Sports and the Immigrant’s Quest for Inclusion” on Thursday, Sept. 28, at 7 p.m. at the Jefferson Educational Society, 3207 State St. In addition to introducing you to the late Lou Bierbauer, an Erie native and the son of German immigrants – he gave the Pittsburgh Pirates their nickname “Pirates” – you’ll learn how the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 banned Asian immigrants. You’ll also hear about how the Immigration Act of 1924 was specifically designed to radically reduce Italian and Eastern European immigration, and how the Immigration Act of 1965 unwittingly threw open the door brought us to where we are today asking, “What to do about immigration?” It’s an old, old, old American question.

NOTE #3: At a recent discussion of Matthew Desmond’s “Poverty by America,” the subject of a universal minimum basic income arose. The concept is old. Julius Caesar gave each plebian, the common Roman citizens not members of the patrician class, 100 denarii. It has been considered on and off again down through the millennia finding an unlikely trio of supporters again in mid-20th century America: Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard Nixon, and Milton Friedman. Friedman, darling of the right, first promulgated the idea of a “negative income tax” in his 1962 book “Capitalism and Freedom.” During his War on Poverty, Johnson supported the notion of a guaranteed income for all Americans, as did Nixon who saw it as a benefit for the elderly and disabled and as an incentive for the poor to work. (I always like to knot the shorts of both my right-leaning and left-leaning friends by pointing out that Nixon, he of the scowling silent majority and bane of the progressive left, was arguably the last liberal president).

In any event, a universal minimum basic income is one of those ideas whose time never seems to come, but, yet, never goes away. To learn more about it, you’ll want to check out Jefferson Raimy Fellow and current Erie City Council member Susannah Faulkner’s presentation “Poverty is a Policy Choice: A Framework for a Guaranteed Income Pilot in Erie County, Pennsylvania”

available [here](#) and her discussion with Joel Natalie, Tia Epps and Dr. Lee Williams on [TalkErie.com](#) available [here](#).

NOTE #4: What is the purpose of a higher education?

That I am interested in this question should come as no surprise. I spent my entire adult life working in higher education. In fact, I am one of those, with a few minor side excursions, who went to college after high school and never left. What intrigues me, however, is the number of other people who seem keenly interested in what once upon a time was a rather esoteric question only batted about by members of the academy, that pretentious sounding phrase by which some, not all, higher education professionals refer to themselves.

“Higher” education itself smacks of more than a bit of snobbery. It derives from Robert M. Hutchins’ “The Higher Learning in America.” Hutchins sought to reestablish the liberal arts and humanities as the basis for undergraduate education, assigning specialization and research to graduate and professional schools. He would have been horrified at programs like business administration, healthcare administration, and accounting, not to mention hotel, restaurant management, or parks and recreation management, as legitimate undergraduate studies. In short, Hutchins believed the purpose of an undergraduate education was to learn how to learn while at the same time being inculcated into a culture. He would not have countenanced career training as part of a “higher” education. He is intellectually a direct descendant of John Henry Cardinal Newman’s “The Idea of a University.”

I am going to stop myself right here before I get too entangled in explaining my own theory of the purpose of a higher education. What interests me is the public fascination with this once rarified question. That the public is interested is not surprising. During my lifetime, “growth oriented” college administrators and naïve public policy wonks have made college the mandatory passport to the American middle class and graduation from a handful of 50 or fewer (actually closer to 15 to 20) institutions the portal of entry to America’s hegemonic elite.

At the same time, driven by forces both out of their control and easily within their grasp to manage, those administrators and policy mavens oversaw the cost of a college education explode. While a general problem, at my alma mater, to use only one of numerous possible examples, tuition increased from the \$30 per credit hour (I’d like to say I paid, but it was my parents who paid it) charged when I first matriculated to \$1,313 today! Or, an increase of 4,276.67%!!! Now, I received a terrific education from my alma mater – in addition to my parents’ work ethic that education largely made me who I am – but I doubt very seriously that the quality of that education has increased 4,276.67%.

It should be quickly added, that no one (or very few) actually pay that absurd amount. Like all of its peer institutions, my alma mater discounts its tuition by almost two-thirds through institutionally funded financial aid (which I assume is largely unfunded discounts against base tuition, or what businesses call discounts against sales). Still, most people outside the inner sanctum of a college's enrollment office do not understand the alchemy by which that discount occurs. The resulting lack of understanding of colleges' baroque pricing practices combined with the necessity of attending college to have a realistic chance of prospering in 21st century America has generated an intense resentment in many quarters against the entire enterprise.

The other source of rising resentment stems from the debate about the purpose of an undergraduate college education. Is it, as Hutchins and others have maintained since antiquity, to learn how to learn and to become acculturated to one's culture's presiding values, or is it something else?

If something else, what?

Nowadays, I suspect the answer is career preparation in order to get a job. Since most colleges have long ago conceded most, if not all, of that point, what else is causing the current consternation?

In short, it's cultural acculturation, which leads immediately to the question, "To which (whose) culture ought the young be acculturated?" In our culture war times, it is a fraught question. Just ask Christopher Rufo and those remaking Florida's New College in the image of Hillsdale College and those outraged by the transformation.

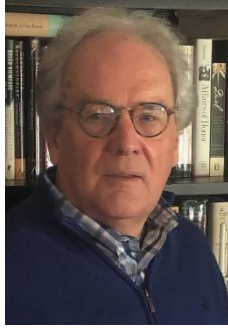
I am going to stop now, admittedly somewhat arbitrarily, because I want to hold to my promise to keep this Book Note under 2000 words.

So, I'll close by re-asking two questions – one anodyne, and the other fraught with all the angst of our culture warring times.

The anodyne question: Should the name of these **Book Notes** be changed? If yes, then to what?

The fraught question: From your vantage point, what is the purpose of a higher education, or less pretentiously phrased, what is the purpose of a college education?

Send your responses to me at roth@jeserie.org.



-- Andrew Roth, Ph.D.
Scholar-in-Residence
The Jefferson Educational Society
roth@jeserie.org

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