

Convictions. By Sidney Hook. Buffalo, Prometheus Books, 1990. Pp. 310.

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Sidney Hook, philosopher and prolific writer, died in 1989 at the age of 86. During his lifetime he published more than 20 anthologies, 30 books, and 500 articles. He wrote on a wide range of topics, but his main (overlapping) focuses were (1) Marxism, democracy, freedom, and equality; (2) academic freedom and integrity; and (3) the philosophy of John Dewey and pragmatism.

Convictions is a collection of 29 previously published essays that represent Hook's most deeply held views. All but three of the essays were first published in the 1970s and 1980s (and mostly the latter). The three exceptions are "The Ethics of Suicide" (1927), "Reflections on the Jewish Question" (1949), and "The Faiths of Whittaker Chambers" (1952, a review of a book by Chambers on the communist movement in America). There are opening and closing essays, one on Jewishness and anti-semitism, three articles on death (provision of expensive medical treatment for the elderly, euthanasia, and suicide), eight on politics (democracy, equality, freedom, and communism), and fifteen on university education (the curriculum and academic freedom).

Sidney Hook was not afraid to go against the current. He was Jewish by birth, but -- from age 13 -- atheist by conviction. When a communist, he was critical of the totalitarianism of Leninism. When an anti-communist, he was openly critical of Senator McCarthy's

demagoguery (e.g., in a 1953 letter to the New York Times). And in the last ten years of his life he argued against the growing acceptance at universities of preferential hiring and admission practices, restrictions on freedom of expression to deal with problems of racial and sexual harassment, and changes in the curriculum concerning race, gender, and class issues.

It is to the last set of arguments that I now turn. Or rather, it is to the arguments as they appear in Convictions that I now turn. Hook has written widely on these issues, so I shall only be considering a subset of the arguments he has offered. My goal is not to refute his arguments for his position, but rather to identify some of the issues that deserve more consideration than he gives them in Convictions. Because of space limitations, I shall not consider his opposition to strong forms of affirmative action.

In response to recent problems of verbal racial, sexual, and ethnic harassment many universities have adopted harassment policies restricting freedom of speech. Hook firmly opposed such policies. We can agree with Hook that such policies should not restrict the expression of a view -- no matter what its content -- if it is expressed in a minimally intimidating manner in a context of rational inquiry. Some views -- such as that African Americans are less intelligent than white Americans -- may be intimidating

in virtue of their content, but in a context a rational inquiry that is not a good reason for restricting their expression. True views may be intimidating. At a university we should be constantly challenging views so as to achieve truth. In a forum of rational discussion restrictions based on content are therefore inappropriate.

If restrictions are appropriate, they must be based on the manner or context in which views are expressed -- not the content of the views. A given view can be expressed in a variety of ways, and it may be appropriate to restrict its expression in needlessly intimidating manners (such as using "nigger" or "faggot" instead of "blacks" or "African American", or "homosexual" or "gay"). Likewise, restrictions on the content of speech when such speech is not part of a context of rational discussion (as in a taunt from the street of "Nice legs!" or "Women aren't as smart as men!") may also be justifiable. Because the university is a center of critical inquiry, it must foster an atmosphere in which intimidation is minimized. For that reason, some restrictions on verbal harassment -- if they help promote an atmosphere in which all feel free to critically examine ideas (and of course they may not!) -- may well be justified. Hook, however, does not discuss these intricacies in the book.

With respect to the disruption of classes or talks, I agree entirely with Hook that it is wrong. If one finds the view expressed in the class or

talk abhorrent, one can find a forum, perhaps a demonstration, in which to criticize the view. Physical harassment should not be used to put down a view.

What about campaigning against inviting, or in favor of canceling an invitation to, controversial speakers (such as Jeane Kirkpatrick or Henry Kissinger)? Hook thought such campaigns were wrong on the grounds that all views must be heard. There seems, however, to be at least three distinct sorts of cases. One is where it is simply the view that is controversial, and not the speaker's past acts or manner of presentation. Here we can agree with Hook that it is wrong to campaign against an invitation. For if it is only the view that is problematic, a campaign against the invitation is a campaign against the opportunity to examine critically an idea. And that is not appropriate at a university. Of course, publicly criticizing the views -- perhaps while the person is on campus -- is another matter, and is entirely justifiable.

A second sort of case is where the person typically speaks in a significantly intimidating manner (e.g., with lots of slurs against Jews, women, or blacks). Here a campaign against the invitation may be entirely appropriate, and the rationale is the same as the rationale for a harassment policy restricting needlessly intimidating speech on campus. Needlessly intimidating speech interferes with the university's mission of critical

inquiry.

A third sort of case is where the person has engaged in grossly immoral acts (e.g., such as systematic violence against Jews, women, or blacks). Here too a campaign against an invitation is entirely appropriate. For an invitation bestows at least some honor from the university on the person, and the members of the university may not wish to do this. Of course, the group issuing the invitation should not simply give in to group pressure. They have a right to invite anyone they want to campus to speak (as long as it is not needlessly intimidating), and the university should recognize and protect that right. But that is no reason for those opposed not to voice their opposition.

The second big issue that Hook addressed over the years is academic integrity as it concerns how professors teach their courses and the content of general education curriculum requirements. Hook was vehemently opposed to using the university as an instrument of social change. The purpose of the university, he holds, is critical inquiry -- not social change.

According to Hook, "cultural leftists" hold that all teaching is indoctrination -- there is no objective truth -- and good teaching is simply indoctrination for a classless society. There are, of course, some leftists who hold this view, but I would be surprised if they were more than a very

small minority. In any case, even teachers -- on the right and the left -- who believe in objective truth can be guilty of teaching by indoctrination.

Indoctrination in the pejorative sense relevant here is the influencing people's beliefs by non-rational means (such as giving a threatening look when the wrong view is expressed) or by intellectually dishonest means (such as not raising important objections to one's favored view, or failing to even discuss alternative views). Hook is certainly right that indoctrination in the classroom in this sense is wrong.

We can further agree with Hook (and the American Association of University Professors) that the faculty and administration have an obligation to ensure that the classroom is not used as a forum for indoctrination. Teachers who insist on indoctrinating should not be allowed to teach.

But it's not clear, as Hook seems to think it is, that professors of literature, for example, are indoctrinating if they bring up issues of racism, sexism, classism, or imperialism in discussing their texts. For if done properly, there will be little non-rational or intellectually dishonest influence. And such issues can certainly shed light on a work. Of course, there are limits. If in a general course on Latin American literature a professor spent a whole semester on racism and never discussed a single piece of Latin American literature, that would be intellectually

irresponsible. But the mere fact that political issues (such as racism, etc.) are systematically raised in courses (such as literature courses) that historically have not included such discussions does not establish that indoctrination is taking place. Whether teaching is indoctrination depends on how it is done.

The last issue I will consider is the Western culture curricular requirement that many universities have. This requirement typically requires students to take specific courses that focus on the great texts of the Western tradition (of Plato, Shakespeare, etc). In recent years there has been agitation on many campuses (such as Stanford's) by some students and faculty to replace this requirement with one that requires courses on both Western and non-Western culture, often with emphasis on issues of racism, sexism, classism, and imperialism. Hook was strongly opposed to any such change. For he held that this was but one more example of "cultural leftists" using the university as an instrument of social change by imposing their political agenda on all students.

There are a number of intertwined issues here: The first is: Should there be any general education requirements at all? Hook rightly held that there are certain broad categories of inquiry to which all liberal arts students should have some exposure. Whether this is best achieved by imposing general education requirements (as opposed to simply ensuring

that most courses promote this goal) is more controversial. But let's assume that there should be some general education requirements.

A second issue is: Should there be a Western cultural general education requirement? Again Hook rightly held the affirmative view. One of the broad areas of which liberal arts students should have some knowledge is the important texts and ideas of their country's heritage. And Hook rightly denied that Western culture requirements imply the superiority of Western values, or of the status quo. Within the Western tradition there are subtraditions with radically different values and beliefs. Many of these subtraditions -- such as Marxism -- are very critical of the status quo in the West. There is lots of dissent within the Western tradition, and teachers of Western culture courses can, and perhaps should, bring these out. Furthermore, although many of our great texts do contain elements (sometimes significant elements) of racism, sexism, etc. (and this is just as true of other cultures as well), examining such texts does not imply that such views are correct. On the contrary, an examination of such texts can, and should, include the identification and discussion of such views. So merely having a Western culture requirement -- even in the absence of a non-Western culture requirement -- does not imply the superiority of the Western tradition, nor does it endorse the racism, sexism, etc. of many of the texts. It only implies that knowledge of the Western

culture is especially important for Western students.

A third issue is: Should there be a world, or non-Western, culture requirement? Hook rightly held that (a) it was desirable that students acquire knowledge of other cultures, and (b) that this was less important than acquiring knowledge of their own cultural heritage. We should note immediately, however, that for American students -- more than 20% of whom have Asian, African, or Latin American heritages -- knowledge of American cultural heritage requires knowledge of non-Western cultures. So the apparent conflict between non-Western culture and the students' cultural heritage is largely illusory in the American context. The very same rationale that supports a Western culture requirement (the importance of knowledge of one's heritage) also supports -- but to a lesser extent -- a non-Western culture requirement. For that reason, it's not clear to me that a non-Western culture requirement is inappropriate.

A fourth issue is: For required courses in Western culture (or the Western-culture component of required world culture courses) is it appropriate to replace some of the classic texts with less significant works of the Western tradition by women or people of color? Presumably, Hook allowed that some less known texts may in fact be more significant. And so presumably he was open to the possibility that we might discover that past works of women or people of color are more significant than we have

taken them to be. But he was clearly opposed to adding texts simply because they are by women or people of color. Students should, he claimed, study the great works of our civilization, and the race or sex of the authors is irrelevant.

Of course, what factors determine the significance of a work is very controversial. Historical influence? Artistic merit in some abstract sense? Usefulness in helping us understand our present and past culture? Hook seemed to hold, and I agree, that all three of these factors (and probably others) are relevant for decisions about what texts are studied. But if that is so, and Hook didn't seem to recognize this, then there may well be good grounds for including texts of women and people of color -- even when they are historically less influential and have less artistic merit. For sometimes hearing a voice that has not been historically influential can be very effective in helping us understand our past and present culture. For example, if along with historically influential works of a given period, one also reads works of women and minorities, one could examine how they differed in outlook and why that was so.

So historical influence and artistic merit aren't everything, and it may well be appropriate to replace some more influential works with less influential works. And this is because the goal of a Western culture requirement is not merely knowledge of the great works of the past, but

also knowledge of our past and present traditions in all their forms.

As should be apparent, I am critical of a number of Hook's views. But on one point at least, I am in admiration. There are growing social pressures on American campuses to take the concerns and perspectives of women and people of color much more seriously than has been done in the past. On the whole I think this is good, but often these pressures reach the point of dogmatism and intolerance, and with Hook I think this is bad. It is important that those opposing the prevailing tendency not be bullied into silence. We must be constantly challenged to defend our views and practices -- no matter how clearly correct they seem. For that reason Sidney Hook has performed a great service by publicly challenging what he sees as unhealthy tendencies.

With respect to university practices Hook strongly favored hiring faculty and admitting students solely on the basis of academic qualifications. He supported active recruitment from all available sources, and the implementation of a speedy and effective grievance procedure. He also favored (1) special supplementary educational programs for individuals who have been unfairly denied educational opportunities in the past, and (2) increasing the number of colleges and professional schools, if the number of qualified applicants exceeds the number of available positions. So he favored weak forms of affirmative action, but he categorically rejected preferential treatment programs, which by definition involve hiring or admitting a less or equally qualified person over another on the grounds that he/she is a member of a group that has been systematically wronged in the past.

With supporters of affirmative action, Hook shared the ideal of a society of equal opportunity -- in which race, gender, and class, play no role in the allocation of positions. Hook denied, however, that preferential treatment -- a particularly strong form of affirmative action -- is a legitimate means for achieving the ideal of equality of opportunity. Preferential treatment (also known as "strong affirmative action" and "reverse discrimination") is the practice of admitting, hiring, or promoting a candidate who is equally or less qualified than some other candidate on

the grounds that the former, but not the latter, is a member of a group that has been systematically wronged in the past. Preferential treatment has many forms, ranging from various quota methods (which set aside a fixed number of positions) to extra credit methods (which simply treat group membership as one consideration). Hook, apparently, was opposed to all forms of preferential treatment.

Hook's main opposition to preferential treatment centered on his claim that individuals should be treated on the basis of their individual merits -- and not on the basis of their membership in some group. This is surely correct for a wide range of cases, but I shall now question whether it establishes that it is wrong for universities to take a person's race or sex into account for hiring and admissions.

Hook's reasons for holding that preferential treatment in hiring and admission is unjustifiable seem to rely on two claims: (1) that, except where the university owes compensation to individual applicants, the most qualified deserve to be hired or admitted; and (2) that universities typically owe no compensation members of historically disadvantaged groups.

Consider the second claim first. Hook certainly believes that many, if not most, universities practiced some form of invidious discrimination in the past. (The extreme form, of course, was simply refusing to admit or hire the better qualified candidates because of their race or sex.)

Presumably, Hook would be willing to grant that those universities owe compensation to the people they wronged, and perhaps to their offspring (if they have been disadvantaged because of this wrong). So presumably, Hook would be willing to endorse this very limited form of preferential treatment. But he would insist that it is only the people wronged (and perhaps their offspring) that are owed this compensation -- not all the members of the relevant social group.

To determine whether any stronger form of preferential treatment is justified we need to address Hook's first claim above. Do the most qualified deserve to be hired/admitted by a university? We don't think that time on a public tennis court should be allocated on the basis of qualifications, so one could question -- at least for student admissions -- whether positions at public universities should be. Perhaps other criteria are relevant -- such as reducing oppression, inequality, or social conflict. Less radically, many people hold that it is legitimate for universities to admit less qualified war veterans, even though the university may owe them no compensation for their past sacrifices. This suggests that it may be appropriate for universities to give special preference as a means of providing compensation owed by members of society -- even though the university itself may owe no compensation. This view (which of course may be mistaken) is incompatible with Hook's claim. Finally, one could

question the extent to which the qualifications of applicants are the results of their past efforts (for which we can grant they deserve a reward) -- as opposed to simply favorable familial or social environment (for which it is less obvious that they deserve any reward). So, the claim that the most qualified deserve the positions is not as unproblematic as Hook makes it appear.

Suppose, however, that Hook is correct that preferential treatment in university hiring and admissions is wrong. It may still be legitimate to give special preference to race or sex in university hiring decisions. For not all preference is preferential treatment. Preferential treatment in the context of affirmative action discussions is defined as hiring or admitting a less or equally qualified person over another on the grounds that he/she is a member of a group that has been systematically wronged in the past. When preference is given to members of a group, and membership in that group is a relevant qualification, then that preference is not preferential treatment in the stipulated sense. It is simply a matter of taking into account one of the relevant qualifications. So the issue here is whether group membership could be a relevant qualification.

With respect to the hiring of faculty one main qualification teaching ability. For the assessment of teaching ability one can plausibly argue that (1) universities should aim to provide to the students they admit

an equal opportunity to learn, and (2) an equal opportunity to learn is often -- although certainly not always -- better promoted when the composition of the faculty better reflects the composition of the student body. This latter claim could be defended by claiming that in general the effectiveness with which a teacher communicates with his/her students depends in part on the extent to which he/she is familiar with the students' culture and the extent to which students identify with the teacher. All else being equal, African American (or women) teachers may be better able to teach African American (or women) students. Of course, this is but one of many factors, and it is contingent on there currently (not necessarily inevitably) being significant cultural differences in America between whites (or men) as a group and blacks (or women). If this is so, then the underrepresentation of African Americans and women on the faculty is a legitimate concern of the university (since it may produce unequal educational opportunity), and so a person's race or gender may be legitimately counted as one of many (and perhaps only a minor one at that) of the relevant qualifications.

This argument supports the claim that race or sex may legitimately be counted as a relevant qualification of university faculty. It does not justify preferential treatment in the strong sense defined above in which group membership is taken into account even when it is not relevant to qualifications. And it may not apply to non-instructional hiring practices,

or to admission practices. As applied to the hiring of teaching faculty, however, it is an important argument in favor of taking race and sex into account. [NOTE: This approach could make heterosexuality, whiteness, maleness relevant qualifications!]

Hook would reject this argument, I think, on the grounds that we have no evidence that African Americans (or women) learn any better when their teachers are African American (or women). The issue obviously can be answered only by careful empirical study. As far as I can tell, however, Hook had little evidence for his view.