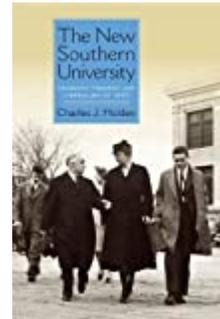


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Charles J. Holden. *The New Southern University: Academic Freedom and Liberalism at UNC.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012. 217 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-3438-3; ISBN 978-0-8131-3439-0.



Reviewed by Wayne Urban (University of Alabama)

Published on H-NC (May, 2013)

Commissioned by Judkin J. Browning (Appalachian State University)

Is There Hope for Higher Education in the South?

Readers of this review deserve an apology from this reviewer for its personal and rather morose tone. I hereby offer that apology. It is difficult right now to work in a southern public university, as I do, in a state with an intellectual environment that leaves one little room for optimism about the life of the mind. It is not that things are uniformly bad at the University of Alabama. In fact, we have fared well during the recent financial crisis in higher education, receiving regular raises in the past three or so years. At the same time, colleagues in other states like Georgia, where I used to work, have received nothing. Yet, the negative intellectual climate that I see, and feel, is real; and it moderates any positive vibrations I have because of relatively good salaries and working conditions. Whether the topic is evolution, abortion, education, public sector workers, or even public education, the difference between the consensus of public opinion as represented by our state politicians and the intellectual values I hold and the intellectual climate in which I function at the state university is stark. In conversations with colleagues from other states in the region, I do not

get a sense that the situation is much different anywhere in the region and this leads to a conclusion that the life of the mind is in an unhealthy state throughout the South.

The negative intellectual climate, I should say, is not necessarily just southern; in fact one can point to places like Wisconsin, surely an intellectual Mecca in the Midwest, which have endured economic and intellectual attacks on education and educators just as vigorous and more impactful than anything experienced in Alabama. It is just that in much of the South in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the anti-intellectuals are in full flower right now. They still seem just a bit more closeted, at least to an outsider, in other regions. Whatever the nuances of regional anti-intellectualism, the book under consideration here calls our attention to earlier, and more favorable, conditions for intellect in a southern state and at its state flagship university, both of which have earned the title "Top South" in the twentieth century.

The University of North Carolina is a storied institution with a storied history. It serves as a kind of beacon

for scholars in the rest of the South, a place that sets a standard to which other institutions in the region, especially their faculties, can aspire. The volume under review here outlines the situation in regard to intellectual freedom in North Carolina and at the state university in Chapel Hill as it developed in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. It reassures the reader with a liberal political outlook and/or a concern for the protection of academic freedom that these values were both preserved at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill in the first half of the twentieth century. The author accomplishes this purpose in a relatively economical fashion. The book has a little over 160 pages of text, organized into two parts, six chapters (including an introduction), and an epilogue.

In the introduction, Charles Holden sets the stage for the chapters that follow by discussing the situation regarding academic freedom, and liberal politics in the World War I era. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and John Dewey take center stage here, for establishing, if a bit imprecisely, the principle of academic freedom. Holden then highlights the ability in 1925 of UNC President Harry Chase to fend off the anti-evolutionists's bill in the legislature to ban Darwinism and the teaching of evolution in any tax-supported educational institution in the state. The issues of race and labor relations, however, which take up the rest of the volume, involved much more conflict and give-and-take on the part of the university administration and some of its leading faculty. The defense of academic freedom was hesitant but persistent, generally if not always effective.

The first two chapters of the book narrate the history of race and labor relations respectively in North Carolina, and at UNC, under President Chase in the 1920s. Neither topic saw as principled a commitment to academic freedom or as uniformly successful an outcome as resulted from the anti-evolution battle. Chase was not completely consistent in his grasp of the principles involved in academic freedom and was forced on occasion to retreat from his generally favorable stance by pressure from the state's power-brokers, most often its business interests, particularly in the textile industry. The study of race relations at UNC is the focus of Holden's chapter on the race issue in the 1920s, and he describes a situation in which academic advocates of such studies were looked on benignly, as long as their advocacy did not involve actual interference in the racial status quo in the state. Whether in race or labor, UNC held its own against those who sought to repress dissident views. It would be a stretch, however, to say that it did much more than that.

The next three chapters discuss the Frank Porter Graham presidency at UNC in the 1930s, beginning with his inauguration in 1930 and going through the beginning of World War II. Holden is clear in explaining that Graham was more of a consistent political liberal than was his predecessor, and also that Graham enjoyed great support on campus and off for his efforts in defense of academic freedom and liberal political views. He also notes the near religious fervor that Graham often engendered in his supporters, quoting terms like "Christlike" and a "Saint" that were used to describe Graham by politicians and journalists (p. 77). He highlights the strong support the president received from liberal faculty and undergraduate and graduate students as he labored on behalf of the university in the tumultuous decade of the 1930s. Graham was generally successful, though Holden points out that he did not always espouse a consistently liberal political position. In spite of this qualification, and the illustration often in the book that North Carolina was basically a conservative state, Holden has a tendency to reinforce the view of Graham as some sort of near supernatural figure. I want to demure from that point of view, as I'm sure Holden would want to, simply because Graham deserves a fuller description of his life and times to justify it, or at least to make it part of a more rounded portrait of the man and account of the institution he led.

In the chapter on race in the Graham administration, Holden frames the discussion with an invocation of the New Negro movement nationally. This more open advocacy of improvement by blacks themselves meant that Graham and UNC had to contend with more of a threat to the racial status quo than his predecessor did. The critique of Jim Crow was becoming more political, and voiced by blacks themselves, and reactions to it were more charged and pointed than they had been in the 1920s. Similarly, in the labor chapter, Holden shows that communism was becoming more open and prominent politically in the 1930s, in the labor movement as well as among some black activists. He also had to contend with a situation where UNC was more susceptible to charges of communism from its critics than it had been in the earlier decade. Graham often deflected the charges of communism as irrelevant. When he had to defend a radical faculty member who was, and was depicted as, a communist, he did this, relatively straightforwardly, though he still preferred to downplay communism as a real factor on his campus.

The epilogue discusses UNC in the World War II years, the last decade of Graham's presidency. It echoes themes from the two earlier Graham chapters, while

dealing more with Graham as a national actor. Graham's presidency ended in 1949 when he was appointed to serve out the term of a U.S. senator who had died. Graham's subsequent loss in an election for a full term in the Senate casts just a bit of doubt on Holden's positive discussion of Graham's statewide allure, as well as that of UNC. This is not an issue that Holden discusses at any length. He, instead, references an earlier (1950) discussion of that campaign by Julian Pleasants and Augustus M. Birns (*Frank Porter Graham and the 1950 Senate Race in North Carolina*).

It is clear that Holden has accomplished much in his account of UNC in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. While I have highlighted the presidential role in all three decades, Holden deals more with faculty involvement in the situ-

ation, including scholars such as Howard Odum, Eugene Bransom, and Howard K. Beale in the discussion. Still, I think his book is a bit top-heavy in its concentration on presidents. And UNC had some enormously distinguished presidents after Graham, most notably William Friday, who Holden describes as coming under the spell of Graham during his own (Friday's) student days on the campus in the 1940s. The problem with such a heavily presidential analysis is that it leaves the reader with an incomplete understanding of the institution. More discussion of faculty, and students (Holden does not neglect students either) would, I think, give us a better sense of what it means when Holden states that the faculty and the student body were more conservative than any of the university leaders discussed above.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-nc>

Citation: Wayne Urban. Review of Holden, Charles J., *The New Southern University: Academic Freedom and Liberalism at UNC*. H-NC, H-Net Reviews. May, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37675>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.