

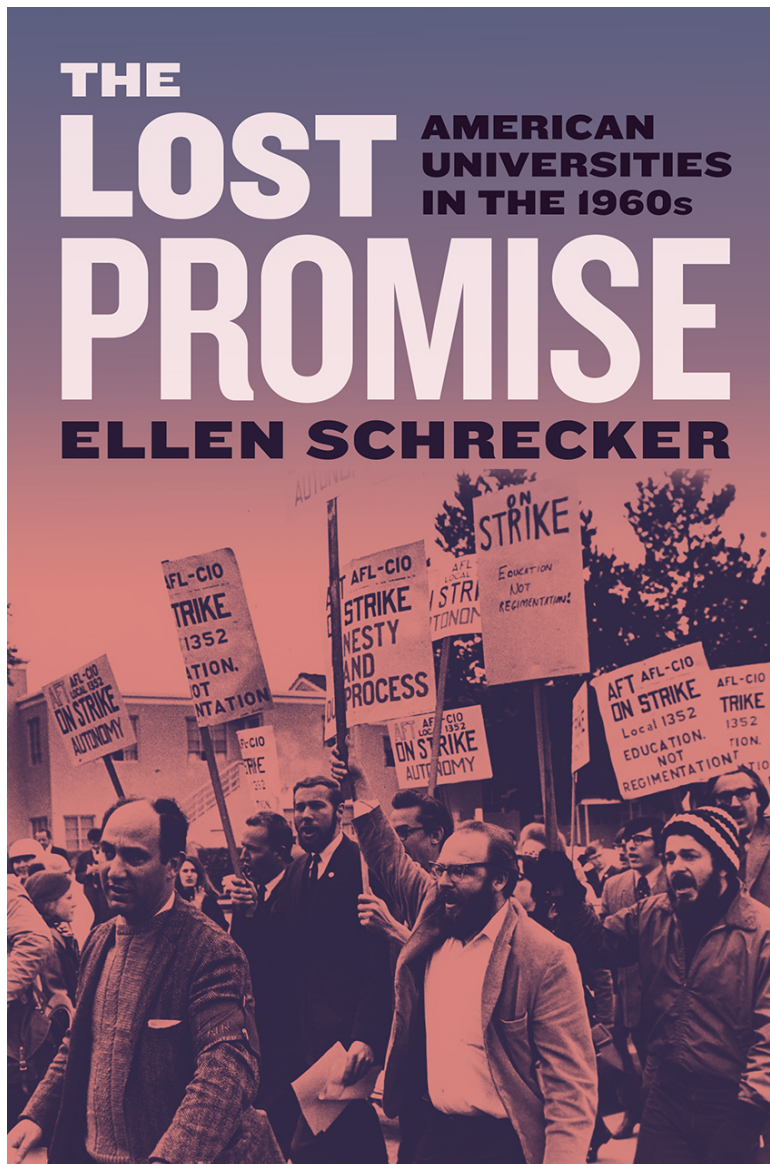
RADICAL TEACHER

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Review

The Lost Promise: American Universities in the 1960s

by Bill Miller



THE LOST PROMISE: AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES IN THE 1960S. BY ELLEN SCHRECKER (UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, 2021)

***The Lost Promise: American Universities in the 1960s.*
By Ellen Schrecker (University of Chicago Press,
2021)**

As someone who was an undergraduate, graduate student, and beginning faculty member during “the long Sixties” (late fifties to early seventies), I find *The Lost Promise* a depressing “chronicle of declension, a sobering story of how a seemingly indispensable social institution attained a position of power and approbation – and then lost it” (1-2). Post-World War II universities, growing along with an expanding economy and government activity, offered promises to administrators, faculty, and students. Sometimes these promises meshed, but other times they led to conflict. Though much has been lost, Schrecker reminds us that there have been some lasting legacies of the ferment of ideas and activities, especially in the impact on the methods and content of the social sciences and humanities and in innovative teaching practices such as encouraging students to question. Among the many books about sixties student movements, *The Lost Promise* stands out for its broad view of the activities of the three key actors in the university – administrators, faculty, and students.

In 1963 administrators endorsed University of California President Clark Kerr’s promise of the “multiversity.” A dynamic pillar of society that trained experts to cope with social problems, foster technical innovations, and educate citizens of a nation that had emerged from war at the top of the world. No longer an ivory tower, the multiversity would be a major contributor to the social and scientific progress that most Americans still believed in. Spurred by increasing enrollments of men under the G.I. Bill and women war babies and boomers, universities built new buildings and improved facilities, generated new campuses, and prospered from Cold War expansion of government grants not only for scientific but also for social-scientific research

This vision of the university did not reach everywhere: it was concentrated in the large elite institutions, both public and private. Administrators of public institutions had to deal with conservative politically appointed trustees and the politics of state legislatures. Public universities were founded to serve their states, but some people had a narrow conception of that service. Private universities were freer from political pressure, but still had to respond to trustees and alumni. Small colleges carried on older traditions of personalized liberal arts education for people for whom that in itself was a passport to leadership.

The expanded post-war universities, though, contained seeds of faculty and student discontent. They opened recruitment of faculty from a limited group of gentlemen to men (there were few women until the 1970s) of diverse social class and ethnic backgrounds. Many of these new faculty supported the new social role of universities and sought to update curricula in ways that conflicted with the agenda of more traditional faculty members, who often endorsed the new prioritizing of research over teaching, with “publish or perish” anxieties. However, as the Cold War wore on, they also questioned the nature of research that supported the “military-industrial complex.”

For many faculty, the promise of the university was that it could serve to educate students and the public about reform issues that came to the surface during the late fifties. They fought the remnants of McCarthyism like loyalty oaths, protested military recruiting and university research on weapons of destruction, and supported the Civil Rights movement. Teach-ins during the early years of the Viet Nam War were a major result of faculty and student demands for information on the war’s origins and nature. Many faculty rallied behind colleagues whose leftist publications and teaching of American society, politics, and history caused them to be fired or denied promotion by administrators or conservative professors. Many faculty and graduate students saw academia as a place where radical ideas could flourish free from outside interference and could reshape their own disciplines. Others sought to take these ideas outside academia to change society. For them, the university would serve as a base for action as well as for ideas about social change.

Many undergraduate students shared these ideas with faculty, but they also sought an education relevant to the changing society around them, and they used the university as a recruiting ground for social activism. By relevance they meant not only the subject matter of courses but also the response to the needs of women and people of color who were increasingly admitted to universities by the later sixties. This response, initiated by students through peaceable and sometimes not so peaceable demonstrations, led to new courses in Women’s Studies and Black Studies, and more courses about the history, literature, and culture of groups who had not been previously part of university curricula. Yet as universities grew larger and more socially diverse, faculty became less committed to teaching, and students began to resent, as Mario Savio later put it, being cogs in the machinery. Others objected to administrative control of their personal lives, revolting against parietal rules dictating their social activities and limitations on organizing political protests. They also protested the firing or failure to promote popular teachers. For many students during the sixties, being a student was the center of their identity, and they sought to assert that identity both as part of the university and against its limitations and restrictions.

Most of Schrecker’s book is about why these promises of genuine social change, including the democratic vision of universal mass higher education, largely, though not completely, failed. She does not blame any one of these groups: all shared in creating a divided university that was blindsided by right-wing attacks on administrators, faculty, and students alike which undermined the prestige of learning, especially liberal arts education. Administrators were divided about how to handle protesting students; some were punitive or tough on protesters, like San Francisco State’s S.I. Hayakawa, while others attempted to steer a moderate course between conflicting groups, like Yale’s Kingman Brewster. Whatever course they took, they faced criticism from the left, the center, and the right. The opaque quality of many administrators’ deliberations did not help to settle disputes: too often decisions (firing professors, banning activities, punishing students, calling in the police) came down with little warning to faculty or students. Having emerged from the scarring attacks of McCarthyism,

administrators were not well-prepared for the civil disobedience protests of the sixties.

Faculty were deeply divided. Most did not support student protests, and many objected to the general politicizing of academic life. Conservative and moderate faculty defended traditional curricula and what they saw as rationality against irrational and sometimes violent students. Angry rhetoric and the appearance of Black Panthers with guns at Cornell tipped the scales against the students in the eyes of many faculty. Sometimes fisticuffs resulted, as in the CCNY history department's conflict over curricula and open admissions. Many faculty agonized about the future of the university, some forming a national organization to counter the protests in the name of reason, the University Centers for Rational Alternatives, in 1969.

Like faculty, most undergraduates did not engage directly in protests, whether against the university itself or the Viet Nam War or in sympathy with African Americans. Those who did were often divided over tactics, the most significant difference being between the Civil Rights movement inspired non-violent Berkeley protestors, and the third-world revolution inspired students in the later sixties, as at Columbia University, disrupting classes, occupying buildings, and holding occupants of university offices hostage. The two factors that changed the nature of protest were the escalating Viet Nam War and the violent repression of African American urban uprisings. The stakes seemed much higher, and the rhetoric and action reflected that. Schrecker's discussion of the student movements is probably familiar to readers: her significant contribution is her description of how a divided and conflicted university, at the height of its promise, tried to cope with unexpected crises.

Fortunately for readers' remaining hopes, Schrecker does cover lasting accomplishments of the sixties protests. Radical Caucuses within disciplinary professional associations permanently reshaped content and methodology in their fields. Social history, even Marxist history, became acceptable (as in the still-surviving *Radical History Review*); the literary canon was broadened to include works by more women and people of color. Other disciplines like sociology and economics were shaken by critical analysis of topics previously ignored. Programs dedicated to the history and culture of women and minorities proliferated, and multiculturalism became part of the establishment academic thought. Academics began to be concerned about how to teach students effectively, as well as the content of their courses (you need not look far for an example). Unfortunately, these changes we see as positive have often isolated academics from the rest of society.

Schrecker's last chapter and epilogue return to the book's grim picture. There were others invested in the academic crisis besides the three groups (administrators, faculty, and students) immediately involved - right wing and centrist critics of all three. Schrecker devotes a concise chapter to the reaction against the protests and leftist trend

of many universities, pointing out how it diminished respect for higher education in general and how the recession in the seventies gave an excuse for cutting funds for public institutions. It also prefigured the corporatization of higher education, about which Schrecker has written a previous book (*The Lost Soul of Higher Education*), to which this is a prelude. In some ways the corporatization of higher education designed to provide student "customers" with jobs rather than the supposed luxury of a liberal education reserved for students who could afford it, returns to the multiversity on a much narrower basis. It is still serving society, but a society whose promise has curdled.

Schrecker ends with a call for universities to turn away from inequality and vocational emphasis to restore teaching of critical thinking. All true, but it is more a plea than a hope or a plan. The university remains an embattled liberal enclave, attacked by the right from outside and the left from within.

If you remember the "long sixties," read this book for its deep and comprehensive picture of academia and, if inclined, mourn lost hopes for a better world. If you do not remember the sixties, read it to gain a broad and nuanced view of a vital aspect of an era that has entered textbooks along with "the Gilded Age" or "the Progressive Era."



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