What’s Liberal About the Liberal Arts?

Based on a Front Page Magazine review of Michael Bérubé’s ground-breaking book

“Ripped straight from the headlines! An authentic retelling of an all-too-common story.” – Jayson Blair
Mei-Ling Liszt and Chanterelle M'Shrumbe are brave graduate teaching assistants at People's Revolutionary State College.

One fine morning at the beginning of the semester, they brought a new group of undergraduates to meet the adjunct professor teaching PoliSci 101: Bush Is Hitler.

"Mei-Ling and Chanterelle," said Comrade Adjunct Professor, "your work so far is exemplary, and will not go unnoticed by the Dean."

Emboldened by the adjunct's praise, the two tackled a backlog of departmental procedure memos.
A week and a half into the quarter, Chanterelle and Mei-Ling were tutoring an undergrad when they were told the Department Chair was looking for them.

“Sisters!” said Comrade Department Chair. “Your work to blame Bush has been lauded in the Maoist Language Association newsletter!”

Mei-Ling and Chanterelle could scarcely believe their eyes. Attracting the notice of the MLA was a great honor.

“Remember, though, Mei-Ling,” said Chanterelle. “A focus on individual success is bourgeois. The important thing is the struggle to blame Bush for all ills.”
The next morning, noted Mideast Scholar Juan Cole came to People’s Revolutionary State University to meet Comrade Adjunct Professor during his office hours.

“I have been asked to address the plenary session at YearlyKos,” said Comrade Adjunct Professor. “I must leave the Bush is Hitler class to you two for a week.”

“You won’t regret it,” cried the TAs. “We will blame Bush for everything without hesitation.”

“Be careful,” he said. “This week is devoted to down-playing criticism of Bill Clinton. It will not be easy! Remember to seek the guidance of Comrade Department Chair!”
“Our obvious first step is to get the undergraduates all heading in the same political direction,” said Chanterelle.

Within moments the eager undergraduate students were following Mei-Ling’s lead, as Chanterelle coaxed a straggler...

...and before long had broken into cooperative study groups to discuss the wisdom of Ward Churchill and Noam Chomsky.

“Don’t forget!” said Mei-Ling: “A piece of writing may signify anything we deem politically important, except what the author says it means!”
“If I might offer some constructive criticism,” said Chanterelle, “I heard you blame Bush only twice in today’s class.”

“Tomorrow we’ll blame Bush more intensely,” said Mei-Ling, as the students ambled off onto the quad for lunch.

The next day’s class was productive at first, as the TAs introduced the practice of politically correct roleplay. They read a skit...

...and assaulted an effigy of David Horowitz, the one true greatest enemy of the progressive university.
On the other side of the campus, a wave of panic swept the Administration Building.

“We’ve been put in an online 'network' of subversives along with Alger Hiss and Bryant Gumbel,” shouted the Department Chair. “Our TAs must be warned of possible email insults!!”

“I’ll use this horse to find them even though there’s a perfectly good truck here,” said the adjunct professor, “because I just saw 'An Inconvenient Truth' at YearlyKos.”

And he rode off past the giant Kandinsky mural on the Student Union building.
But Mei-Ling and Chanterelle knew full well that trouble was brewing. The storm of reaction was plain to see.

The undergraduates began milling unconstructively. A few of them started to repeat Republican talking points.

Mei-Ling identified the ringleader, a conservative student named “John.” She attempted to engage him in corrective discourse.

The other students, resentful of the attention John was getting, tested Chanterelle’s pedagogical skills to the limit.
“I can’t reach John,” said Mei-Ling. “Can you try to show him his errors?” “Yes, sister!” cried Chanterelle.

But John was nowhere to be found.

“He must have gone to the Conservative Students Association office,” said Chanterelle. “I’ll go see if he, or the two other conservative students, are there.”

As Comrade Adjunct Professor searched for the TAs, the storm of conservative reaction grew ever more fierce.
A passing Law Professor crumbled before the onslaught of reaction, becoming incoherent and self-destructive. “Professor Althouse!” cried the adjunct. But it was too late to help her.

Following a trail of Scaife Foundation paychecks, Chanterelle set off to find the Conservative Student Association.

A worried Department Chair heard the news from a student in Professor Althouse’s Dress For Success class. The brave TAs were in danger!

Acting quickly, he formed a committee to investigate the issue.
Chanterelle came back with upsetting news. “We’ve lost John,” she said. “He’s left school to write a book for Regnery.”

Rage blinding her, she shook her fist at the sky. “Damn you, Regnery!”

The TAs had lost precious time.

They were nearly through the week already but had not even mentioned Unocal’s Afghanistan pipeline, let alone the Bin Laden family evacuation.
The remaining undergraduates were restless. “Why haven’t you told us what happened to John?” one asked. “His frat was having a party tomorrow night!

As she did from time to time, Chanterelle struck a social-realism pose to collect her thoughts.

The committee was making great progress. “It has been decided, then,” said the Department Chair...

“We will suspend the agenda at tomorrow’s faculty meeting to draft a proposed MLA resolution in support of our graduate assistants.”
Having restored constructive calm among the undergrads, Mei-Ling and Chanterelle led an orderly discussion on the signifiers of Bush-hating in the work of Sontag.

The students’ participation was lackluster. Chanterelle felt their apathy was a heavy blanket smothering her fervid correctness.

But she shook herself awake. “I must remember the brave example of Stanley Fish,” she thought. “Boredom is a bourgeois construct!”

Suddenly the classroom roof fell in, the result of short-sighted budget cuts by an ignorant tax-obsessed public.
As they TAs led the students out of the room in orderly fashion, Chanterelle gasped. "It's John!"

No student should ever be given up, no matter how conservative or wrong-headed. Chanterelle leapt up to attempt to re-educate the errant conservative student.

"You must see that your whiteness has granted you privilege, and that privilege blinds you to the nature of power" she said to John.

But John resisted her simple and correct line of argument.
The Maoist Language Association had informed the Department Chair that the draft resolution had been referred to the proper committee. “The TAs must be informed of this victory with all haste!”

“I will compose the appropriate memo,” said the Department Chair. “Now I need a few volunteers to write combative letters to the Chronicle of Higher Education.”

The committee agreed to reconvene that evening at the Olive Garden.

Chanterelle’s remonstrations with John had attracted other undergrads, who listened in. “And that’s why feminism both is and is not the primary contradiction!” she said.
Mei-Ling greeted Chanterelle with joy. “You have brought John back into the fold! Truly you have served the people’s movement by re-educating its conservative opponents!”

They exchanged a sisterly embrace deemed appropriate and within the bounds of the University Employees Code of Conduct.

“But what’s this?” Mei-Ling gasped. “Your struggle with the forces of reaction has harmed you, sister!”

“You have suffered a chilling effect!”
“It is time I emulated your heroism,” said Mei-Ling as she took on Chanterelle’s course load.

Together, they bravely struggled on through the syllabus.

“Comrade Department Chair!” shouted the adjunct. “Look what I’ve found!”

“It is just as I feared,” said the Department Chair. “The stress of reactionary backlash... This frivolous, patriarchal footwear... they may be experimenting with ‘choice feminism.””
Mei-Ling did not falter, but instead heroically redoubled her efforts to promote Bush-hating to her students.

Most inspiring of all: John and his friends had become the TAs’ closest allies. Weeks of late-night reeducation sessions had paid off.

The entire class agreed to travel to a lecture by Howard Zinn. They met a surprised Department Chair at the train station.

Institutional support was finally a possibility for our tired, heroic teaching assistants.
“These young women are exhausted! Get them to Student Health immediately!” said the Department Chair.

And four hours later, when their benefits under the Graduate Student Union health plan had been used up, he returned to take them back to work.

Soon, Mei-Ling and Chanterelle were ready to work on the course readers for the next two weeks of class.

But first: Spring Break!