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The Academy's Assault on Intellectual Diversity

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"A university is among the precious things that can be destroyed." — Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*



Natalya Balnova for The Chronicle Review

It is tempting to describe the battles convulsing American campuses with epithets like "the politics of hysteria." More than a bit of hysteria was unleashed at Middlebury College this month, when protesters prevented Charles Murray from delivering a scheduled lecture. In spite of eloquent rebukes delivered by the college president and several prominent faculty members, some on the Middlebury campus defended the protest by citing the poisonous views expressed by Murray in his ugly and notorious book, *The Bell Curve*. Though it's a violent instance of so-called free-speech controversies lately ignited on the nation's campuses, the Middlebury incident doesn't begin to reveal the depth or virulence of the opposition to robust discussion within the American professoriate, where many self-described liberals continue to believe that they remain committed to "difference" and debate, even as they countenance a full-scale assault on diversity of outlook and opinion.

Confront contemporary left-liberal academics — I continue to regard myself as a member of that deeply troubled cohort — with a familiar passage from John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, and they will be moved at once to proclaim that Mill espouses what virtually all of us have long taken for granted. *Of course* we understand that "the tyranny of the majority" must be guarded against — even when it is our majority. *Of course* we understand that "the peculiar evil of silencing" — or attempting to silence — "the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing ... posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: If wrong, they lose ... the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error."

What can be more obvious than that? *Of course* we understand that there is danger in abiding uncritically with the views of one's own "party" or "sect" or "class." Who among us doesn't know that even ostensibly enlightened views cannot entitle us to think of those views, or of those who hold them, as "infallible"?

And yet a good many liberal academics are not actually invested in the posture to which their avowals ostensibly commit them. Mill noted among his own contemporaries, more than 150 years ago, what is very much in evidence in our own culture: that certain opinions have come to seem so important "to society" that their usefulness cannot be legitimately challenged. Thus a great many contemporary liberals subscribe to the belief — however loath they may be to acknowledge it — that certain ideas are "heretical" or "divisive" and that those who dare to articulate them must be, in one way or another, cast out. The burning desire to paint a scarlet letter on the breast of those who fail to observe the officially sanctioned view of things has taken possession of many ostensibly liberal people in academe, which has tended more and more in recent years to resemble what the Yale English professor David Bromwich calls "a church held together by the hunt for heresies."

When Mill wrote of the threat to liberty of "thought and discussion," he was responding, at least in part, to Tocqueville's idea that in modern societies the greatest dangers to liberty were social rather than legal or political. Both men believed that the pressures to conform, and the pleasures associated with conformity, were such that these societies would not find it necessary to burn heretics at the stake. Mill explained:

And thus is kept up a state of things very satisfactory to some minds, because, without the unpleasant process of fining or imprisoning anybody, it maintains all prevailing opinions outwardly undisturbed, while it does not absolutely interdict the exercise of reason by dissentients afflicted with the malady of thought. ... But the price paid for this sort of intellectual pacification, is the sacrifice of the entire moral courage of the human mind. A state of things in which a large portion of the most active and inquiring intellects find it advisable to keep the genuine principles and grounds of their convictions within their own breasts.

Sad to say, however, the expectations nowadays enforced with increasing and punishing severity in the academy are the basis for something rather more alarming than the regime Mill described. While dissentient views are today not always "absolutely" interdicted, and we do not hear of persons who are imprisoned for espousing incorrect views, we do routinely observe that "active and inquiring intellects" are cast out of the community of the righteous by their colleagues and formally "investigated" by witch-hunting faculty committees and threatened with the loss of their jobs. One need only mention the widely debated eruptions at Oberlin College, or Northwestern University, or others, to note that this is by no means a phenomenon limited to a handful of institutions.

The fact that these eruptions have drawn wildly inaccurate and misleading coverage in the right-wing media should not distract us from the serious implications of the kinds of intolerance promoted by ostensibly liberal faculty. Such show-trial-like events are the leading edge of efforts to create the kind of total cultural environment the critic Lionel Trilling described as built upon "firm presuppositions, received ideas, and approved attitudes."

What does such a total cultural environment look like? In the university it looks like a place in which all constituencies have been mobilized for the same end, in which every activity is to be monitored to ensure that everyone is "on board." Do courses in all departments reflect the commitment of the institution to raise "awareness" about all of the approved hot-button topics? If not, something must be done. Are all incoming freshmen assigned a suitably pointed, heavily ideological summer-reading text that tells them what they should be primarily concerned about as they enter? Check. Does the college calendar feature carefully orchestrated consciousness-raising sessions led by "human resources" specialists trained to facilitate "dialogues" leading where everyone must agree they ought to lead? Check. Is every member of the community primed to invoke the customary terms — "privilege," "power," "hostile," "unsafe" — no matter how incidental or spurious they seem in a given context? Essential.

Though much of the regime instituted along these lines can seem kind and gentle in its pursuit of what many of us take to be a well-intentioned indoctrination, the impression that control and coercion are the name of the game is really hard to miss.

Of course there are those who will defend the emergent total culture by arguing that we know very well how devastating bias and other forms of abuse or violence can be, and thus that we have an obligation to mobilize to prevent them. And of course it is impossible to deny that such things continue to exist, and that efforts to raise awareness about them in an academic setting are indispensable. Even those of us who are worried about the future of liberal education, and about regimes of intolerance on the nation's campuses, have often acknowledged that speech codes can be a good and necessary thing.

I've never met an academic — liberal or conservative — who believes that we should give a pass to racists who openly spread their poison in a classroom. When Donald Trump complains of the protocols and protections mandated to ensure that workplace and academic environments protect their citizens from flagrant abuse or intimidation, and declares these safeguards a laughable species of political correctness, we observe that he and his friends do not understand the relationship between freedom and responsibility, between open discussion and the civility that alone makes real discussion possible.

But things have gotten out of hand. The desire to cleanse the campus of dissident voices has become something of a mission. Shaming, scapegoating, and periodic ritual exorcisms are a prime feature of campus life. A distinguished scholar at my own college writes in an open email letter to the faculty that when colleagues who are "different" (in his case, nonwhite, nonstraight, nonmale) speak to us we are compelled not merely to listen but to "validate their experiences." When we meet at a faculty reception a week or so later and he asks what I think of his letter, I tell him I admire his willingness to share his thoughts but have been puzzling over the word "compelled" and the expression "validate their experiences." Does he mean thereby to suggest that if we have doubts or misgivings about what a colleague has said to us, we should keep our mouths firmly shut? Exactly, replies my earnest, right-minded colleague.

In the last year or two, those wishing to restrain real talk or, God forbid, actual debate, more and more deploy terms like "entitlement" and "privilege" to suggest that people who stir the waters inevitably create a "hostile environment" and intimidate their colleagues, some of whom — so it is said — are thereby made to feel "powerless."

In this context, the term "entitlement" refers to people who have the confidence to speak with conviction and independence. The implication, unmistakable here, is that only those with power can speak, and that when they do so, they inevitably silence or strike fear into the hearts of everyone else, which includes the overwhelming majority of those who acquiesce in the established consensus. Not acknowledged in this scenario, though it ought to be obvious to anyone who actually values debate and difference, is that the "entitlement" belongs to all of those willing to speak out, and to take the heat, and to proceed without taking for granted that what they say will be applauded. The puerile notion that only those who are powerful and secure will ever feel entitled to speak out is one of those unfortunate assumptions promoted by those who want to be protected from actually having to confront controversy or discomfort.

Though it must seem odd to those who spend little or no time in the academy to hear that academic intellectuals are notoriously susceptible to groupthink, there are several compelling ways to account for this. For one, as Jonathan Haidt has pointed out in *The Righteous Mind* (Pantheon, 2012), academics are much like other people in "trying harder to *look* right than to *be* right" when they conduct an argument. Within the confines of a community that prides itself on its disciplined commitment to a consensually agreed upon set of "enlightened" views, deviations once regarded as signs of a robustly diverse intellectual culture come more and more to seem intolerable.

Though new ideas, new evidence, unfamiliar works may now and then briefly challenge the comfortably accredited views underwriting the official stance of academic institutions — think of the creative turmoil provoked by the writings of Thomas Kuhn, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Elaine Showalter a generation ago — the "confirmation bias" described by the psychologist Peter Wason will typically ensure that new ideas, no matter how compelling, will be received only in ways that confirm the enlightened consensus. A wide range of psychological tests conducted by Wason and others cited by Haidt provide no evidence whatsoever that the professoriate is any more likely than a less educated cohort to think independently, that is, to process fresh ideas and to draw from them anything but the officially sanctioned conclusions.

As Haidt notes, academics tend to have higher than average IQs, and are predictably "able to generate more reasons" to account for what they believe. But high IQ people like academics "are no better than others at finding reasons on the other side." This is especially troubling — or ought to be especially troubling — in the culture of the university, where diversity of outlook and ideas, and resistance to accredited formulas, is at least theoretically central to the institutional mission.

But academics today are increasingly behaving like members of an interest group, whose opinions they hold and value primarily as tokens of membership in the high status, politically virtuous elite to which they subscribe. It was once possible to suppose that this particular interest group — given its ostensible commitment to education — would want to promote genuine diversity of opinion, if only to weaken the confirmation bias we all share, "a built-in feature" of what Haidt calls our "argumentative mind." But ideological intolerance makes the confirmation bias seem to most academics not a danger but an entirely desirable feature of our collective enterprise.

The intolerance is disturbing in a variety of ways, and represents a threat to institutions of higher learning and to the work we hope to do as educators. But it is well to remember that, like other intellectual formations, our present troubles have a history. In the early 1950s, Isaiah Berlin identified what he called "a common assumption" informing the work of Enlightenment thinkers: "that the answers to all of the great questions must of necessity agree with one another." This "doctrine," Berlin argued, "stems from older theological roots," and refuses to accept any suggestion that we must learn to live with irresolvable conflicts. The consequence? John Gray calls it "a monistic philosophy that opened the way to new forms of tyranny."

The word "tyranny" is perhaps just a bit extravagant as a description of tendencies at work in the contemporary academy, and yet, when we speak of the attempt to create a total culture, dedicated to promoting a perfect consensus, we may well feel that we are confronting a real and present danger. The danger that context and complexity will count for nothing when texts or speech acts become triggers for witch hunts, and that wit and irony will be regarded as deplorable deviations from standard protocol. "Tyrants always want language and literature that is easily understood," Theodor Haecker observes.

At my own college, when a senior colleague at a public meeting last fall uttered an expression ("in their native habitat") felt by some to be "offensive" — though clearly not intended to be so, and followed by a clear apology when a complaint was voiced — there were calls for her to resign from the faculty. And though she is, and will remain, with us, the incident prompted a volley of abusive and self-righteous rhetoric, drove more than one faculty member to advise students away from courses taught by "that woman," and stirred a renewed emphasis on "re-education" and "rehabilitation."

Astonishing, of course, that those very terms — "re-education" and "rehabilitation" — do not scare the hell out of academics who use them and hear them. That they do not call to mind the not so distant history of authoritarian regimes in Europe, or lead on to the thought that "diversity," for many of us in the academy, has now come to mean a plurality of sameness. More important: The words, apparently, do not suggest how vulnerable we are — all of us — to error, slippage, and hurt, and how the protocols, tribunals, and shamings currently favored by many in the academy have distracted us from our primary obligation, which is to foster an atmosphere of candor, good will, kindness, and basic decency without which we can be of no use to one another or to our students.

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