

# Notes & Comments: May 2017

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## *Academic follies (still cont'd)*

Attempting to plumb the depths of our contemporary academic follies is a bit like pressing down with your thumb on a piece of rotted wood. You expect at least some resistance. What you encounter is the slightly sick-making sensation of yielding organic deliquescence. In “The Wood Pile,” Robert Frost wrote evocatively about the “slow, smokeless burning of decay.” But even Frost omitted the further stage of incipient putrescence.

What is it about universities that makes them such hothouses of moral incontinence, intellectual stupefaction, and political infantilization? For more than thirty years, we have regularly chronicled in these pages various and sundry assaults on academic integrity that have taken place under the expensive aegis of our best, or at least our most famous, institutions. Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Brown, Stanford, Duke, Berkeley, Williams, Amherst, Bowdoin, Middlebury, Vanderbilt—those are just some of the glittering institutions we have had occasion to comment on over the years.

From the minatory hermeticism of “deconstruction”—how almost quaint that once-fearsome term seems now!—to the overtly politicized programs of “post-colonialism” and other forms of identity politics masquerading as an academic discipline, the sprawling, amorphous jelly of weaponized grievance has routinely featured in these pages. Like some entomologist of academia, we have sought to catch and anato-

mize these exotic specimens. How much had to go wrong for charlatans like Jacques Derrida or Edward Said to emerge as academic celebrities? What trust had to be violated before programs in “women’s studies” and “African-American studies”—to say nothing of the pullulating catalogue of sexual exotica that has swept like an influenza outbreak through academia—could install themselves at the center of the college curriculum? Consider, to take just one marker, the beginning of this communication from Inderpal Grewal, Chair of the Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program at Yale. Writing in the current Newsletter for the WGSS and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Studies Program (like Lady Bracknell and the Duchess of Bolton, they work together), Grewal notes that

Misogyny, patriarchy, racism, bigotry, Islamophobia, ableism, transphobia, homophobia, xenophobia [really, you cannot make it up]: these have emerged as speakable, visible, popular, and powerful themes in public and political discourse in the US.

The WGSS/LGBTs community at Yale stands against all the bigotry and hate that has been expressed [by whom?] during this election season. We resolve to work toward defending and protecting the communities that are now threatened by the authoritarian, white heteropatriarchy that will be the face of the nation-state, and we refuse to normalize its hateful powers.

“Heteropatriarchy,” eh? Is this what we signed up for?

Universities are accorded extraordinary privileges in our society, beginning with their tax-exempt status and continuing on through their sovereign force as repositories of social prestige. Why? When challenged, apologists revert to the tried and true formulations of Matthew Arnold, overlaid here and there with a bit of John Dewey—esque rhetoric about “critical thinking.” Universities are important and deserve their tax exemption (and your donations) because they preserve and transmit “the best that has been thought and said in the world.” They help form character and responsible citizens. They teach important skills and independent thinking. Etc., etc.

That’s what they say to prospective students and the tuition-paying machines that are their parents. But on the ground? There are vestiges of the Arnoldian tradition operating at many campuses. But at most institutions they are just that, vestiges. And the pressure of politicized alternatives increasingly poisons the well. More and more, it’s “heteropatriarchy” as far as the eye can see.

Nor is the trouble confined to merely intellectual corruption. As we have had many occasions to minute, there is also an enveloping hostility towards free expression and, behind that, towards free inquiry itself.

In one sense, there is nothing new about the politically correct attack on free speech. We’ve had many historical parallels, from the French Revolution through various totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century. The fond assumption is that free speech is a paramount value. Experience, that melancholy pedagogue, teaches us that the commitment to free speech is almost always negotiable.

Indeed, it’s worse than that. A little scratching reveals that, far from being a paramount value, free speech is often little more than a pariah, suffered to exist only when it makes no demands. To be sure, encomia to free speech are a dime a dozen. But they have purchase only when free speech is not purveying uncomfortable ideas. Challenge the received moral compact, question the prevailing dispensation, and see how quickly the commitment to free speech evaporates. Proof? Charles Murray at Middlebury College.

Here’s an empirical question: is there a point of no return, a straw that breaks the camel’s back, a critical mass of dereliction that eventuates in the implosion of the Higher Ed establishment and its replacement by some more vigorous and responsible alternative? How many students at Yale have to be captured on video screaming at the master of their college over the issue of safe spaces and Halloween costumes? How many times does Charles Murray have to be shouted down and later be set upon by an angry mob that sends one of his companions to the hospital? How many outbreaks of violence at Berkeley must there be because—*Racism*? How many buildings or programs need to be renamed because the judgment of the moment outweighs the commendation of tradition?

The answer might be: there is no tipping point. The assault on common sense, to say nothing of the assault on our (once) common moral and intellectual tradition, can go on indefinitely. Unpopular opinions can be shouted down and censored until the cows come home, which is about when the reign of Title IX insanity will end.

Although the evidence of the last couple of decades might seem to support this conclusion, we have our doubts. In the end, we suspect, Glenn Reynolds had it right when, in *The New School*, he paraphrased the economist Herb Stein: That which cannot go on forever, won’t.

There is much about academia, we submit, that cannot go on forever. There is the cost, for one thing, which for decades has far outpaced increases in the cost of living. Looking back a couple of decades, we see that we raised an eyebrow about college fees that tipped the scale at \$30,000 per annum. What an extravagant waste! The number today approaches \$70,000 at the most elite schools. Where will it end? We do not know. But end it will. Glenn Reynolds adduces many signs that we are fast approaching a limit, as more and more schools cut tuition and make other concessions to attract an apparently more standoffish pool of applicants and alternatives like online universities grow in popularity.

Still, there is plenty of countervailing evidence. Brown University, a poster child for flaccid political correctness, recently announced that they admitted only 8.3 percent of applicants. This

makes Brown one of the most selective schools in the known universe. Brown touts that statistic, but we sense some trouble in paradise. As James Freeman notes in a column for *The Wall Street Journal*, the Dean's letter of acceptance, addressed to "Parent/Guardian," referred to prospective students not as "he" or "she" but as "they" and "them." Simple illiteracy? Not at all. It is ideological warfare. A college spokesman explained. "[O]ur admission office typically refers to applicants either by first name or by using 'they/their' pronouns. While the grammatical construction may read as unfamiliar to some, it has been adopted by many newsrooms and other organizations as a gender-inclusive option." Freeman quotes the reader who brought this minor monstrosity to his attention: "Mind you, our daughter has always been clear what her biological gender and identity is—she's a woman." Brown wanted to "make it clear that only left-wing extremists are welcome at Brown. Fine with us—good riddance."

"Good riddance." We suspect that more and more parents are going to respond thus when asked to fork over nearly \$300,000 for a four-year course in politically correct, sexually exotic, anti-American indoctrination. A future historian of academic life might well settle on the decade between 2015–2025 as the period when a confluence of forces—economic, intellectual, and political—came together to force a sort of regime change in the character and delivery of higher education.

As we write, the Illinois-based enterprise Open the Books, whose aim is to document for public consumption all government expenditures, federal, state, and local, has just revealed that the eight colleges of the Ivy League—institutions with endowments in the billions (Harvard's endowment, the world's largest, is more than \$35 billion)—received in recent years a smorgasbord of taxpayer subsidies and federal payments totaling more than \$41.5 billion. Inquiring minds will want to ask, Why?

Also as we write, the Oregon Association of Scholars reports that colleges and universities across the country "have begun to impose requirements for prospective and current faculty to show their commitment to the partisan ideology of 'diversity, equity, and inclusion.'" Schools are

"pouring millions" into "diversity training" and "diversity action plans." The announced goal is a more "globalist" faculty. But in effect, the report notes, these initiatives are "a *de facto* tool to weed out non-left-wing scholars." One widely cited article from an anthropology professor at the University of Oregon advised that faculty diversity statements include discussions of "how to keep the white students from dominating all classroom discussions," how not to "thoughtlessly reproduce the standard white and Western model of legitimate knowledge," and how to "reflect a commitment to queer visibility."

Meanwhile, in an open letter to the departing Pomona College President David Oxtoby, a group of black students from the Claremont Colleges attacked Oxtoby's recent reaffirmation of Pomona's commitment to free speech. "Free speech," they write, "has recently become a tool appropriated by hegemonic institutions" that "has given those who seek to perpetuate systems of domination a platform to project their bigotry." "Truth," they continue, is a "myth" propagated "to silence oppressed peoples." Referring to the recent outbreak of violent protests against the Manhattan Institute scholar Heather Mac Donald, the letter charges that Mac Donald is "a fascist, a white supremacist, a warhawk, a transphobe, a queerphobe, a classist, and ignorant of interlocking systems of domination that produce the lethal conditions under which oppressed peoples are forced to live." Gosh. In fact, Mac Donald is a painstaking and meticulous investigative journalist who has shown beyond cavil—but not beyond ideological whining—that the police are conspicuous friends of oppressed minorities.

What cannot go on forever, won't. These instances of existential academic failure, plucked at random from the vast cornucopia of absurdity that is university life today, betoken an enterprise at the end of its tether, a structure grievously imperiled by rot. Is it about to come tumbling down? Notices of the death of American academia have been many and hitherto premature. Sooner or later the reprieve will come to an end. Were we betting men, we would say it will be sooner. Good riddance.