

Mao Maoing the Right-Deviationists in American Higher Education

Dr. Bruce Gilley, Chapter President, Oregon Association of Scholars, and Professor of Political Science, Portland State University

Presentation given at National Association of Scholars Conference “Disgrace: Shame, Punishment, and Redemption in American Higher Education”, Chapman University, January 11 and 12, 2019, Orange, California

1

“How does it feel to be so despised that applicants who have been associated with you need to make clarifying statements?”

That was the question posed to me in an intemperate email last year by a former masters student in political science whom I taught at Portland State University, writing to me from his doctoral program in geography at another university to declare his censure of my article “The Case for Colonialism” and to shame me with the revelation that in applying for tenure-track jobs in the United States, where he will be expected to become a steward of the institutions of a free society, he was taking special care to declare that my deviationist thinking – which he noted in his email had caused several of his students to “cry” in his office – was “utterly ignorant” – especially because it failed to take into account the views of “black Marxists” and “Third World feminists” -- and that he was declaring in those applications that he was “not in solidarity” with me, meaning, I suppose, that I stood outside the circle of what the communists used to call “the people” and that, as he wrote in a blog post about the “violence” of my intellectual viewpoints, my role should be to “sit down and shut up” and await the day of justice “when the leftists finally have some disciplinary power in political science to make it less disciplined” and, the big payoff, “to challenge the capitalist, imperial/colonial oppression of black and brown people”, which, as a black Nigerian female friend of mine who works in northern Nigeria on education and is an actually existing Third World female wrote in an essay is a position that is “bilious personification of anti-intellectualism” notwithstanding the pretensions of my very white, male, well-fed, and lifetime Westcoast USA resident correspondent, whom, I later learned, used to be a professional trombonist.

I have nothing against trombonists. Nor, for that matter, am I particularly exercised by strange people in the academy tilting at windmills. But I am concerned when this sort of

scolding language on questions of mainstream and common concern starts to show up in American society at large. It makes me wonder if politically correct shaming culture in American higher education has escaped from the asylum, so to speak, and become a sort of generally acceptable, or at least not unacceptable, way of dealing with pluralism.

Last September, the *New York Times* ran a lengthy essay by the virulently anti-Western Indian journalist Pankaj Mishra (who lives in London with his white wife) in which he declared that anyone who took a conservative view on issues like immigration, economic policy, or international security was part of a “white suicide cult” and that yours truly was a “busy recycler of Western supremacism” who had “promptly shot to martyrdom in the far-right constellation as a victim of politically correct criticism” after the withdrawal of my article. This is the *New York Times*, not *The Black Panther Daily*.

None of us, I suppose, is inherently interested when professors or graduate students trying to shame others to silence them. At the end of the day, campus life is a marginal part of American society, thank goodness. But we do have an interest in how our children and our professionals are being prepared for the world around them. I see the pitter-patter of assaults on freedom and vigorous debate in our institutions of higher education as reasonable thing to worry about and inquire into because of evidence that it is spreading to the mainstream.

Much of this inquiry has centered on more overtly coercive forms of assault – no-platforming, protests, structural censorship through faculty hiring and promotion, institutions of investigation and punishment such as diversity offices. And to be sure, in my case overt coercion was rampant, most notably I the credible death threats against the editors of the *Third World Quarterly* that led to the withdrawal of the article with my consent.

This conference’s focus on shaming, disgrace, and feelings of guilt is an underappreciated weapon in the armory of the assault on freedom and truth in higher education. Guilt, disgrace, and shame work through what social theorists call virtual social causation – they bring about effects simply through the expectation that they exist or will exist. The key is that they are invisible and thus far more lethal to a free society. Social media and the Internet have also vastly increased their power. The use of virtual causation – causing something to happen like self-censorship or denial of publishing or hiring and promotion without taking explicit action – is lethal because it denies would-be monitors a so-called “availability heuristic”, that is a sensory

experience of having seen, or heard, the actions of the censor and, lacking that sensory experience, denies them the motivation to do anything about it.

I find this theme to be particularly resonant because of its close parallels to communist political campaigns, in particular those with which I am familiar in Mao's China. Contemporary intellectual shame and purge movements, like those in Mao's China, rely heavily on the idea of "ideological error" and a resultant label of "deviationist" thinking. This brings about the unfortunate separation of the error-prone individual from "the people" and, no longer being a person, their necessary liquidation.

I use the term "Maoist" advisedly because actually existing Maoism killed more people than any other political movement in world history. The modern shamers threaten only professional death. But their repertoire is most definitely a brass rubbing taken from the tomb of Maoism. People too often assume that violence in Russia and China was the main mode of revolutionary rule. But shaming was cheaper and more effective – why liquidate the enemies of the people when they could be shamed into leaping from the balcony?

The Cultural Revolution was a purification movement intended to crush political opponents through recourse to ideological struggle. The identification of right-deviationists would not only purge the Party of incorrect thinking but would also invigorate the ranks by providing ambitious cadres with a way to signal their virtue and loyalty to the cause. Not surprisingly, the most aggressive agents were the Red Guards, teenagers and university-aged youth for whom participation in the purges was both fun and a quick route to the top. They ran the "shaming festivals" where deviationists were shamed by having their hair cut, their heads bowed, and their thought crimes read aloud for all to hear. But the real agents of the Cultural Revolution were the higher ups in the party who, rather than standing up, sat silent or mouthed support.

The parallels between Maoist anti-deviationist movements and contemporary "social justice" movements in American higher education are striking. The repurposing of the party to pursue class struggle rather than govern effectively is found in the repurposing of the university to pursue social justice rather than truth. The sudden privileging of poor peasant associations, like the sudden privileging of campus identity (or affinity) groups over other student groups, is the mobilizing of the movement. Once peasant status – like contemporary "marginalized" identity -- becomes the currency of the realm, others must be shoehorned into those roles in order to play a part in the movement. Mao called soldiers "peasants in battle fatigue" while

progressive administrators, faculty, and students are invited to be “allies”, credentialing them for participation in shaming and censorship.

Mao guided the movements with “work teams” and “central leading groups” sent from the top, no different from the Diversity Office or Institutional Review Board investigations of today. The error-prone were invited to correct their ways through struggle sessions, self-criticism, hysterical declarations of loyalty to Mao, and rustication to learn from the peasants – parallels found in today’s remedial cultural competency training, “awareness of whiteness” seminars, mandatory diversity statements, and service-based learning.

Hyping the threat was central because this legitimated shaming. The party warned about “fascism” that needed to be nipped in the bud, thus any suggestion of moderation or centrism was appalling, part of the problem itself. Most of all was the focus on the unbearable suffering, interminable victimization, and ineluctable exclusion of the “people” – the carefully curated construction of party ideologues – paralleled in today’s bogus term “marginalized groups.”

In the case of the shaming campaign against me, it was important for critics to establish that I had acted unethically: Like terriers they dug into the positions the more they were revealed to be false. In particular, that: (1) my article had not passed peer review and somehow I had cajoled or bribed or inveigled my way into print; (2) my article was intended as click-bait to boost my citations count for professional gain or it was intended as a spectacle to draw attention to myself; or, best of all, (3) that the investigation into me launched by our university’s Diversity Office by loopy students who had first demanded the university punish me for the article showed -- on the theory of “where there’s smoke there’s fire” -- that I was indeed an odious human being and thus my article was, by association, an odious article.

Shaming culture relies heavily on a vulnerability to being shamed. My first response to the global mob against my article was of that sort. I apologized, told everyone I had asked the journal to retract it, and begged pardon. It took me a good few days to stand up again and declare that I was not ashamed and that the shame was on those who joined the Maoist mobbery. The shame was also on our newly-installed university president, who remained silent throughout despite having himself been saved from the mullahs of Iran by Jimmy Carter’s amnesty for Iranian students who were studying the U.S. at the time of the Iranian revolution.

Do we worry too much about where this is heading? A litmus test for me came in November when I gave a talk entitled “The Case for Colonialism” at Texas Tech University at the invitation of NAS founder Dr. Stephen Balch. The talk was kept low profile until the

weekend before when it was announced on the university events site. A mob of 23 faculty members signed a letter to the President protesting the talk and demanding it be cancelled and, rather eccentrically, demanding that the President state categorically that “there is no case for colonialism.” My talk, the faculty letter wrote, “sends a clear message that the university does not value decolonial and postcolonial perspectives”, rather like saying that a talk on monetarism shows the university does not value Keynesianism. Having alternative ideas debated on campus was dangerous, according to the faculty letter, because “we don't need our students thinking ideas advocating colonialism are valid.”

Now one might say that 23 out of 1,563 full-time faculty – 17 of whom are in the English Department – does not constitute a mob, much less represent the views of faculty. But it is often the vocal minorities, not the silent majority, that carries the day. This is what happened in my case. The craven joint reply of the university President and Provost was bizarre and disheartening: I should not have been invited, they wrote, because my article had been “discredited”, because my talk was “objectionable and potentially harmful”, and..wait for it... because the Offices of the President and Provost of a major public university had decided “emphatically” that “there is no case for colonialism.” I supposed that the following weeks would bring forth a geyser of presidential decrees on controversial academic questions –no case that Ming dynasty seafarer Cheng He had reached Africa, no case for mind-body separation, no case for multiple-authorship approaches to Shakespeare, no case for the low nitrogen hypothesis of the sun's chemical composition. Dear me, the Office of the President in Lubbock could certainly set the world to right.

Actually, we turned the tables on the mob by inviting one of the faculty signatories – a historian – to join me on stage, refute my talk with his best arguments, and then engage in a civilized debate. You can watch it on YouTube. It was wonderful. Everyone was pleased, except for the University Provost who rather sheepishly sat at the back and then slunk out of the room without introducing himself, perhaps feeling rather foolish about his capitulation to crackpots in the English department. Shame on the University President and Provost of Texas Tech and shame on the silent faculty who did not stand up to the 23 thugs of the letter.

So if that was a litmus test, the news is not good and we are correct to be worried. I have often thought about the 2015 bestselling novel *Soumission* (Submission) by the French writer Michel Houellebecq which tells the story of a French professor who, bored with the comforts of

Western society, submits to the blandishments of Islamic fundamentalists who have come to power in a coalition government and ends up debasing his university. It is notable that the faculty protest mob at Texas Tech was led by English professor Kanika Batra, a self-described postcolonial queer activist from Delhi. What, you might ask, is a major American public university thinking when it submits to the blandishments of radicals completely unrooted in the Western liberal tradition and whose life work is to tear down that tradition? And what, you might ask, is the next generation of leaders in this country being taught in terms of how to engage with different viewpoints and to steward the institutions of a free society?

How can this be stopped? In the case of the Cultural Revolution, the underlying pressures for a change came from the silent majority, through widespread popular disgust, increasing rejection, and even threats of rebellion against the radicals who had seized the commanding heights. Secondly, the initiative was taken by those in authority who were *outside* of the morass. Third, the reform movement was done without any score-settling or transitional justice. The new leaders simply said they were taking the country in a new direction.

So for us, change must begin with the everyday public – the parents, the alumni, the taxpayers, and the employers – who are fed up with the mis-education of our youth. Secondly, we cannot expect university leaders or faculty to be the agents of change because they are part of the problem. Change needs to be initiated by Boards of Trustees, state legislators, state education commissions, alumni associations, broad and strategic coordination of like-minded organizations like the NAS, and, yes, courts. Finally, the process needs to be guided by an overwhelming toleration and liberalism – the purpose is not to shame or purge but to reinvigorate pluralism and the search for truth by putting the zealots back in their places.

ENDS