

Progressive Politics in the Canadian University

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Concerns over attacks on academic freedom in North American universities are growing ever more serious. The academic and cultural boycott against Israel as reported by the National Association of Scholars as well as moves to “disinvite” speakers at universities under pressure from some students and faculty represent a trend toward mob rule and the ongoing promotion of partisan political agendas on campus.¹ *A Crisis of Competence: The Corrupting Effect of Political Activism in the University of California*, a 2012 landmark report by the California Association of Scholars, an NAS affiliate, struck at the heart of the problem.² The boycott and the disinvitations, as with other violations of the principles of academic freedom, were clearly politically motivated. Commenting on the Israeli boycott, NAS president and *Academic Questions* editor Peter Wood linked the issue to the politicization of academe, exhorting academics to stand “on the side that sticks up for the principle that higher education is above politics and that its preferred instruments are good argument,

¹Peter Wood, “NAS Opposes American Studies Association Boycott of Israel,” National Association of Scholars, December 11, 2013, http://www.nas.org/articles/nas_opposes_american_studies_association_boycott_of_israel; Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, “Executive Summary,” *Disinvitation Report 2014: A Disturbing 15-Year Trend*, May 28, 2014, <http://www.thefire.org/disinvitation-season-report-2014/>.

²California Association of Scholars and National Association of Scholars Center for the Study of the Curriculum, *A Crisis of Competence: The Corrupting Effect of Political Activism in the University of California* (Princeton, NJ: National Association of Scholars, 2012), http://www.nas.org/images/documents/A_Crisis_of_Competence.pdf. This report considers the moral objections to using education to advance political agendas and the deleterious effects of politicization on teaching and learning.

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sound evidence, eloquence in defense of basic principles, consistency, and integrity.”³

Reporting on these and similar cases is crucial to exposing the politicized stifling of academic freedom on campus. Also important, however, is how academic freedom can be compromised at the micro-level, where the students and professors affected do not make the news and get little organizational support. Consider the following testimony by a graduate student of social psychology:

I consider myself very middle-of-the-road politically: a social liberal but fiscal conservative. Nonetheless, I avoid the topic of politics around work.... Given what I've read of the literature, I am certain any research I conducted in political psychology would provide contrary findings and, therefore, go unpublished. Although I think I could make a substantial contribution to the knowledge base, and would be excited to do so, I will not.⁴

This and similar narratives—along with my own experience—motivated me to sketch a more detailed picture of how the academic freedom of some faculty and students is being stifled today.

A Vitriolic Reception

Let's begin with a personal example. I am a full-time doctoral student in education at the University of New Brunswick (UNB) in Canada. In July 2013 I gave a presentation, “Academic Freedom: Widening the Debate,” to an audience of UNB education faculty and students. This presentation was motivated by a concern I had throughout my time as a doctoral student. The seminar involving the cohort of UNB doctoral students was dominated by partisan political issues. I also noticed that the projects and studies of my fellow students were increasingly taking on a political character beyond the scope of the discipline we were meant to be studying. I decided to tackle the subject of politics in education in an attempt to discern a dividing line that educators must draw between necessary engagement with politics on the one hand and political activism on the other.

³Peter Wood, “ASA and the Politicization of Academe” *Minding the Campus*, December 19, 2013, http://www.mindingthecampus.com/2013/12/asa_and_the_politicization_of_/.

⁴John Tierney, “Social Scientist Sees Bias Within,” *New York Times*, February, 7, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/08/science/08tier.html?_r=0.

In my presentation I began by endorsing the work of my colleagues in combating the political and ideological influence of corporate interests and state policy on education. I proceeded to address the influence of progressive ideology, including identity politics, on the field of education. I gave clear instances of how identity politics impinges on genuine research and academic inquiry, thus violating the academic freedom of professors and students. Among my examples: the persecution of Lawrence Summers while president of Harvard⁵ and the hysterical reaction to the 1994 publication of *The Bell Curve*, by Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray.⁶ In these cases, the scholars were attacked not for their research method or analysis, but because their findings and conclusions did not confirm the ideologically held beliefs of certain identity groups.

For having identified these violations of academic freedom instigated by adherents of progressive political agendas, I was subjected to impudence and vitriol from the audience, including ad hominem attacks and the disruptive tactics typically used by radical and militant elements within academe. Lost on my antagonists was the double standard they were employing.

Afterward, a faculty member expressed incredulity that my doctoral supervisor allowed me to make such a presentation. Mindful that my subject fell well within the limits of academic inquiry, I could only assume that my supervisor was being criticized for not getting me to toe the approved political line. Other reactions to my presentation included admonishments and jeremiads about the consequences of criticizing special-interest advocates.

Most evident was the fear and panic my temperate, balanced presentation generated. I clearly touched a nerve. This incident and its aftermath demonstrated the heavy investment faculty and students have in progressive ideological politics. Most disappointing was my colleagues' reluctance to condemn the disruption of my presentation and to support my right to express a view on education. Politics trumped scholarly inquiry and academic freedom.

⁵At a closed seminar, Summers mentioned research showing that the lack of parity for women in the sciences when compared to men may be due to lesser aptitude rather than socialization and discrimination. Summers was subsequently subjected to the most hostile criticism, mainly from feminist quarters, and was compelled to make repeated apologies. The incident was a contributing factor in his eventual resignation as Harvard's president.

⁶*The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (Free Press), which involved, inter alia, research on racial differences in intelligence, generated a furor that led the Board of Scientific Affairs of the American Psychological Association to conclude, in defense of Murray and Herrnstein, that "research findings were often assessed not so much on their merits or their scientific standing as on their supposed political implications." Ulrich Niesser et al., *Intelligence: Knowns and Unknowns*, "Report of a Task Force established by the Board of Scientific Affairs of the American Psychological Association" (August 7, 1995), reprinted in *American Psychologist* 51, no. 2 (February 1996): 77, available at <http://www.gifted.uconn.edu/siegle/research/correlation/intelligence.pdf>.

The Politics of Education Faculties

As a graduate student in education for the past three years, I've noticed that trends among the faculty and within the teachers colleges serve as a barometer of trends in higher education overall. This is reflected in the work of authors and scholars who exert the most influence in education circles. Progressives such as Paulo Freire and Michel Foucault offer foundational inspiration, while radical authors such as Henry Giroux, Joe Kincheloe, and bell hooks frame the principles around the political causes embraced—feminism, diversity, gay rights—and the condemnation of free market economics.

Of special importance today is the promotion of “social justice” as a goal of education. In *Unlearning Liberty: Campus Censorship and the End of American Debate*, Greg Lukianoff, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), cites the “conceptual framework” of Columbia University’s Teachers College: Students “are expected to recognize that social inequalities are often produced or perpetuated through systematic discrimination and justified by societal ideology of merit, social mobility, and individual responsibility.”⁷ In criticizing education programs that evaluate candidates for their commitment to social justice, Lukianoff states: “I challenge you to think of how you could evaluate someone’s commitment to social justice without reference to your own opinions about their politics.”⁸

Of course, one of the duties of all educators is to consider the context in which they exercise their responsibilities. Too often, conditions exist where students are denied access to a proper education. Some are barred entry and others are discriminated against at their place of learning. Advocating for such students is not only appropriate, but a teacher’s duty. Educators should be active in removing the obstacles that prevent any student from getting a sound education. But to become involved in issues that are *outside* education lies *outside* the educator’s scope. When advocating for the right to an education becomes partisan support for a particular group or ideology, an educator risks becoming politically involved—politicized—rather than engaged in pursuing education equality.

⁷Greg Lukianoff, *Unlearning Liberty: Campus Censorship and the End of American Debate* (New York: Encounter, 2014), 196.

⁸Ibid., 195.

Politics inside Academe

There are a number of well-documented instances where university-sponsored campus events have been disrupted by student protestors. In such cases, the stifling of academic freedom is rarely the result of intellectual disagreement. Most incidents are clearly motivated by politics. For example, in March 2013 Stephen Woodworth, a Canadian MP who famously put forward a motion in parliament for a debate on the rights of the unborn, was prevented from speaking at the University of Waterloo (UW) in Ontario. Students opposed to Mr. Woodworth's views stormed the podium part way through the event and occupied the speaker's space, resulting in the cancellation of the talk. A prominent member of the protest—an art student from a nearby university who was dressed as a giant vagina—claimed that the students were “using satire instead of intimidation.”⁹ Yet anyone who was present or viewed the clash on the widely circulated online video could sense the atmosphere of intimidation. What is most worrying is the protestor's implication that this sort of behaviour constitutes legitimate opposition in such a setting:

“That kind of speech, that kind of facts [*sic*], are not acceptable,” he said....“We decided to make Stephen Woodworth feel as uncomfortable as he makes us feel.”¹⁰

In *Exiled*, editor Mary Grabar compiles lesser known *Stories from Conservative and Moderate Professors Who Have Been Ridiculed, Ostracized, Marginalized, Demonized, and Frozen Out* because they expressed views that ran counter to the radical agenda rife within academe today.¹¹ FIRE and its equivalent in Canada, the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (SAFS), have their hands full compiling details on the depressingly recurring examples of professors and students being censored on political grounds.¹² SAFS was instrumental in bringing the aforementioned Woodworth incident to the attention of UW leadership. This resulted in a personal apology from UW president and vice-chancellor Feridun

⁹Ethan Jackson, cited in Joseph Brean, “The Moment Anti-Abortion MP Gets Shouted Down by Protesters at University of Waterloo,” *National Post* (Toronto), March 14, 2013, <http://news.nationalpost.com/2013/03/14/anti-abortion-conservative-mp-shouted-down-by-protesters-at-university-of-waterloo/>.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Mary Grabar, ed., *Exiled: Stories from Conservative and Moderate Professors Who Have Been Ridiculed, Ostracized, Marginalized, Demonized, and Frozen Out* (Scottsdale, GA: Dissident Prof Press, 2013).

¹²Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship, <http://www.safs.ca/>, monitors the attitude toward freedom in teaching, research, and scholarship and the treatment of faculty and students by Canada's colleges and universities.

Hamdullahpur to Mr. Woodworth and the commencement of an inquiry into what took place.

A quasi-official line on certain sensitive social issues has become routine in education departments. Often that line must be followed under pain of professional and social ostracism. Some educators suppress the right of others to express opinions on such issues as gay rights and affirmative action, but claim to have the last word—oftentimes the only word—on such topics as Christianity and patriarchy. Yet this seemingly hypocritical stance can be explained by the fact that their opposition is based on politics, not academic inquiry. In politics, one defends one's position to the hilt, looking to gain advantage over opponents through fair means or foul. This is not the way of education.

Alberta columnist for the *National Post* and contributing editor and columnist for *Financial Post Business*, Kevin Libin writes about the chilling effect that this toxic atmosphere is having on academe.¹³ He mentions egregious cases of violation of academic freedom, the most famous of which was a kind of Canadian version of the *Bell Curve* incident. Psychology professor J. Phillippe Rushton of the University of Western Ontario conducted a statistical analysis of IQ differences among blacks, whites, and Asians. For having conducted this research, Rushton was attacked by none other than the premier of Ontario, who called for his dismissal. Rushton's faculty colleagues made similar moves for his removal and students actually hired a lawyer to prosecute him under human rights legislation. Rushton was eventually able to continue his research—after spending thousands of dollars over five years trying to restore his career. Libin goes on to quote Peter Suedfeld, a psychology professor at the University of British Columbia: “There's a kind of atmosphere that there are some things you shouldn't say, there are certain things your research shouldn't show and certain topics you shouldn't be doing research on anyway.”¹⁴ As a result, fewer and fewer scholars are prepared to engage in research disapproved of by the ivory tower orthodoxy.

Conclusion

As I leave the education faculty to move on to the next stage of my studies, my advice to students entering the discipline is to be keenly aware of the political

¹³Kevin Libin, “Whither the Campus Radical?” *National Post*, September 27, 2007, <http://www.tobaccoharmreduction.org/pol/libin.pdf>.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 2–3.

imperative to be accepted into the fold. If you are in the field to participate in the free exchange of ideas and dissemination of knowledge, you will be disappointed. If you choose education to engage in social commitment or, even better, political advocacy and activism, you'll feel right at home. And whatever you do, don't challenge the political orthodoxy: you won't make any friends and it might slow progress through your studies. It's best to keep clear of the politics, if you can—but do not claim that you are not political. In the Looking Glass world of twenty-first century academe, to say that you are apolitical is considered an admission that you *are* political.