



Maturity, Immaturity, and Indoctrination at Sarah Lawrence College

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Published online: 8 February 2020

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On October 16, 2018, the *New York Times* published an op-ed by Professor Samuel J. Abrams of Sarah Lawrence College (SLC), in which Abrams criticized the college's Office of Student Affairs' proposal for a conference titled "Our Liberation Summit."¹ The conference proposal solicited ideas on "woke" topics such as Black Lives Matter and justice for transgender and queer people. In his op-ed Abrams, a professor of political science, maintained that the college's Office of Student Affairs was serving to shut down political debate rather than foster it. Abrams discussed a survey he conducted of a representative sample of 900 college administrators, which found that those with leftist political beliefs outnumbered those with rightist beliefs by a ratio of twelve to one. This, according to Abrams, made college administrators the most left-biased stakeholders on American campuses.

The following March a group of radical SLC students, calling themselves the Diaspora Coalition (DC), took control of the campus administrative building, Westlands, and demanded "justice." The DC students took particular aim at Professor Abrams, who, in criticizing the Office of Diversity and Campus Engagement, supposedly derided "Black Lives Matter, queer liberation, and women's rights movements," and demonstrated "outright hostility towards the essential efforts to dismantle white supremacy and other systems of oppression." Naturally, the group demanded "Abrams' [*sic*] position at the College be put up

¹Samuel J. Abrams, "Think Professors Are Liberal? Try School Administrators," *The New York Times*, Oct. 16, 2018; Robby Soave, "Activist Students Demand Sarah Lawrence College Punish a Conservative Professor for Expressing His Views," *Reason*, March 12, 2019.

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to tenure review to a panel of the Diaspora Coalition and at least three faculty members of color,” and that Abrams issue a public apology. Abrams, the DC students insisted, “threatens the safety and well-being of marginalized people within the Sarah Lawrence community by demonstrating that our lives and identities are viewed as ‘opinions’ that we can have a ‘difference in dialogue’ about, as if we haven’t been forced to debate our very existences for our entire lives.” The statement went on to call Professor Abrams “an anti-queer, misogynist, and racist who actively targets queer people.”²

In addition to the excoriation of Professor Abrams, DC demands included winter housing at no charge, free meals, book stipends, free health insurance, free tampons, free detergent, free storage space, and free tax advice. DC students demanded that the college send recruitment teams to “Latin America, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Central and Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands, and Africa” to recruit students and presumably to provide free or heavily subsidized tuition to them. They also demanded orientation sessions about intellectual elitism and classism.

The topic of elitism would seem appropriate for these students, since they attend a college that, according to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, is the most expensive in the country, with 2019 tuition and fees of \$55,900.³ Its small class sizes and its commitment to progressive education are one reason it is so expensive. A second reason is its pint-sized endowment, which according to the *Chronicle*, was only \$118 million in 2018. This is but a fragment of the endowments for similar colleges: Agnes Scott College, for example, has a \$229 million endowment in 2019, while Denison’s endowment is \$836 million, Vassar’s \$1.1 billion, and Williams’s \$2.8 billion.⁴

In their demands, the DC seemed to characterize all white professors as racist. They demanded that the college offer “courses taught about people of color by people of color.” They also demanded that the college provide a new scholarship program, segregated housing, cash stipends, day outings, financial subsidies, and funding for progressive student groups. Moreover, the group demanded that an “indigenous land acknowledgment” be given at all orientation and commencement ceremonies.

In justifying its calumnies against Professor Abrams, the DC students used this logic: the Institute of Humane Studies (IHS), with which Professor Abrams has been associated, was in turn associated with an organization called the League of the

²“Demands: the Westlands Sit-In,” *The Phoenix*, retrieved Nov. 7, 2019 from <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xNV0l1x3BXPzsVc15GQZNBx3VwQWE2rsOgJ2UKoXO8k/edit>

³“Top Ten Most Expensive Colleges in America,” CBS News, November 11, 2019.

⁴“Which Colleges Have the Largest Endowments,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 31, 2019.

South, although the DC provided no evidence of any connection between the two organizations other than that several professors at various times belonged to both groups. IHS indicates that nearly 6,000 scholars are associated with its network.⁵

The DC also claimed that the Charles G. Koch Foundation fights against free speech, but the source it provides for this claim, a website called “UnKoch My Campus,” gives no evidence of links between Professor Abrams and the League of the South, between IHS and the League of the South, or between the Charles G. Koch Foundation and opposition to freedom of speech.⁶

I emailed an inquiry to IHS, from whom I have in the past received funding to bring libertarian speakers to my classes at Brooklyn College,⁷ and I asked whether IHS is associated with the League of the South. Kurt Kehl, an IHS representative, wrote: “IHS has no affiliation with that organization. In fact, it [the League of the South] represents the polar opposite of our mission, vision, and values . . . Our belief in the inherent dignity of every person serves as a compass for all of our programs and partnerships.”

The DC claimed that accepting money from the Koch Foundation violates Sarah Lawrence’s “progressive” values. On this point the students seemed to conflate two meanings of *progressive*, which reflected a contradiction that begins in the writings of John Dewey and SLC’s most influential president, Harold Taylor: the term *progressive* can refer to education reforms associated with Dewey that reject rote learning in favor of interaction and experience. But *progressive* can also refer to rote recitation of a fashionable, left-wing political catechism. The melding of progressive education, which opposes authoritarianism and rote recitation, with fashionable left-wing progressivism, which is authoritarian and requires rote recitation, has done considerable damage to the former.

The DC exhibited the authoritarian form of progressivism by calling for a blacklist of people who have attended IHS events and objected to Professor Abrams’s questioning the one-sidedness and politicization of higher education. They characterized Abrams’s criticism as “ignorant” and expressive of “outright hostility towards the essential efforts to dismantle white supremacy and other systems of oppression.” The defamation of Professor Abrams continued in the DC’s claim that his *New York Times* article somehow threatened the safety and wellbeing of marginalized students, for he called the DC’s ideas *opinions*, with

⁵See Institute for Humane Studies website, <https://theihs.org/?s=statistics>. “IHS connects a network of nearly 6,000 classical liberal scholars.”

⁶“Academic White Supremacy,” UnKoch My Campus, retrieved on November 7, 2019 from <http://www.unkochmycampus.org/los-ch2-part-3-the-programs>

⁷I have also in the past received funding from the Charles G. Koch Foundation.

which someone can disagree. In the DC's view, no one should be permitted to disagree with their opinions, and reference to their opinions as *opinions* rather than fundamental revelation amounts to a threat to their safety.

Some may claim that such closed-mindedness and rigidity are the result of the students' immaturity rather than the institutional culture at SLC. Dewey, however, would have to disagree, for he characterizes immaturity as supple, open-minded, and inherently playful. That is part of the basis for his ideas on progressive education. If intolerance is a function of natural immaturity rather than of institutional indoctrination, then we need to question Dewey's progressive education method altogether. Hence, I attribute the DC students' authoritarianism to political indoctrination and bad education, rather than to just innocent immaturity. In fact, I would feel better about the protests if I thought that they reflected immaturity, for then the protests could be viewed as a fumbling experiment in self-expression. Students who are naturally intolerant and closed-minded, independent of institutional influences, cannot learn from experience.

There is evidence that the SLC faculty has been intolerant. In 2018 I conducted a study of the political affiliation of the leading liberal arts colleges.⁸ I found that the Democratic-to-Republican ratio among professors at SLC with Ph.D.s whom I was able to identify in the registration rolls was 54:1. In other words, the SLC faculty had already demonstrated a pattern of exclusion of Republicans, and now their students were attacking someone who, apparently, slipped through the cracks. To the extent that, as Dewey argues, the school creates a learning environment, the intolerance of the DC students cannot be viewed as independent of the institution's intolerance.

The DC went on to demand a tenure review committee for Professor Abrams and an anti-free-speech statement from the college condemning the egregious harm that Professor Abrams had caused by writing a *New York Times* op-ed. The DC students demanded that Professor Abrams be forced to write a public apology.

A Personal Note

In 1973 I transferred to SLC from SUNY Binghamton, attending for two years until my graduation in 1975. While there, I extended my studies in philosophy and in the German language, which I had begun at SUNY Binghamton, and also took

⁸Mitchell Langbert, "Homogeneity: Political Affiliations of Elite Liberal Arts College Faculty," *Academic Questions* 31, no. 2 (Summer, 2018).

classical Greek. I enjoyed SLC because of the intense teacher-student interaction, the small classes, the limitation of the faculty course load to three courses per year (not per semester), and the emphasis on writing an in-depth paper through direct meetings with each professor at least every couple of weeks. I had the privilege of working on a translation of a few pages of Aristotle's *Politics* during my second year of Greek and, toward the end of my senior year, on translating a page of Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* as well as writing an in-depth paper on slavery. I also did a translation of Rilke's "Ninth Elegy."

The work I did at SLC was as challenging as my graduate work at UCLA and Columbia. But that was in 1975, and even then Elfie Stock Raymond, my philosophy professor, included Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* in our philosophy class. But she also included Heidegger's *Hegel's Concept of Experience* and Plato's *Theatetus*. Even in 1975 Professor Raymond told me that the trend was to include more socially conscious, activist-oriented reading in philosophy courses. Although there was an LGBTQ-friendly environment there in 1973, and Gerda Lerner had started the first master's degree in women's studies there, I don't recall any sort of political activism interfering with my education.

Is Woke Politics Immaturity?

As a student at SLC, I realized that the progressive education model in play there was designed to promote independence of thought and intellectual curiosity. I concluded that the college contributed to maturation in three ways: mind or intellect, manners and interpersonal skills, and morality. After graduation I worked in the corporate world for the International Nickel Company, which was then based in Manhattan, and I learned that the interpersonal dimension was one on which I needed to work. As I subsequently pursued additional education in the field of organizational theory and business, I came across the work of Chris Argyris and his book *Personality and Organization*. Argyris, who was influenced by Dewey, claims that modern organizations tend to stunt individual growth. Maturity, in his view, means developing from passivity to independent activity, from dependence to independence, from limited behaviors to diffuse behaviors, from doing things superficially to doing them for their own sake, from having a short time horizon to having a long time horizon, from being subordinate to being equal or superordinate, and from a lack of awareness to a sense of

integrity.⁹ Argyris's point is that jobs, especially as they were constituted in the 1950s, did not encourage personal growth; they instead encouraged infantilization. The same might be said of ethics: survival in complex organizations creates a tension between interpersonal skills and other-directedness on the one hand, versus morality and inner-directedness on the other.

In his book *The Functions of the Executive* New Jersey Telephone executive Chester I. Barnard writes of a zone of indifference within which employees can be motivated to conform to organizational demands.¹⁰ Employees whose education reduces the scope of the zone of indifference, i.e., who have developed moral fastidiousness are unlikely to be attractive to most employers. Hence, while encouragement of a willingness to question or attack institutions fits well with Argyris's and Dewey's conceptions of maturity, in other ways the current fixation on microaggressions conflicts with Dewey's interest in creating individuals who are capable of navigating society. One cannot change existing institutions unless one can function in them, understand them, and grasp their value systems.

In some ways the SLC protests reflected a striving for personal maturity of which Dewey and Sarah Lawrence's former president, Harold Taylor, might approve, for the students acted independently and attempted to assert themselves as equal or superordinate partners. At the same time, if education aims to facilitate further development and learning, the protests were counterproductive because the students' attitudes have rigidified in ways that make them difficult to employ or even to engage in conversation.

Dewey argues that immaturity means the possibility of growth, the ability to develop.¹¹ The rote, left-wing ideology that the DC recites precludes growth. The DC, instead of asserting independence, diffuse behaviors, and doing things for their own sake, asserts the need for enhanced dependence on the college for financial subsidy, the need for increased support for a narrowly defined, woke curriculum, and for an education—limited in scope and intolerant of dissent—that restricts rather than opens possibility. The Sarah Lawrence I knew advocated an individual student's setting his own curriculum. The woke DC students

⁹Chris Argyris, *Personality and Organization: The Conflict Between System and the Individual* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957).

¹⁰Chester I Barnard, *The Functions of the Executive* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1938).

¹¹John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (Digireads.com Publishing, 2019), 36.

require spoon feeding according to a pre-programmed, politically correct algorithm.

Progressive Ideology and Progressive EducationDewey emphasized that reflective thinking needs to be an educational aim.¹²

He writes that,

the desire to be in harmony with others is a desirable trait. But it may lead a person too readily to fall in with the prejudices of others and may weaken his independence of judgment. It even leads to an extreme partisanship that regards it as disloyal to question the beliefs of a group to which one belongs.

Dewey goes on to point out that to educate students toward independent thinking there must be both knowledge of the methods of inquiry and the development of the will to employ the methods. He recommends encouragement of open-mindedness, of the whole-hearted interest in a subject, and development of intellectual responsibility. He points out that it is common for people to advocate specific beliefs but to disavow their consequences, i.e., to lack responsibility.

The DC students took little interest in responsibly developing evidence for their claims about Professor Abrams. Nevertheless, and despite his protestations, the responsibility for their closed-mindedness originates with Dewey, who contradicts his advocacy of experiential learning elsewhere, advocating faith in the orthodoxy of organized social planning, in the belief—empirically unjustified, historically falsified, and irresponsibly held—in “the use of freed intelligence as the method of directing change,” i.e., in state-activist liberalism.¹³ Dewey claims that such planning is consistent with freedom of thought, but Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek provide counter arguments at the macro level, and the history of the last century shows that central planning is incompatible with civil liberties and intellectual freedom. We now see in the history of the past three decades that Dewey’s descendants in academia, the advocates of political correctness, woke politics, and microaggression, are, like the communists of Dewey’s day—whom Dewey opposed—authoritarians who are intolerant of dissent.¹⁴

¹²John Dewey, “Why Reflective Thinking Must Be an Educational Aim,” in Reginald D. Archambault, ed., *John Dewey on Education* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1964).

¹³John Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991).

¹⁴Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Friedrich A. Hayek, “The Use of Knowledge in Society” *American Economic Review* 35, no. 5 (September, 1945): 519-530.

My claim is that the DC's intolerance is evidence that political progressivism leads directly to authoritarianism on an educational level. Hence, SLC, an institution whose history is steeped in progressive education and the ideas of Dewey, has produced intellectually irresponsible, closed-minded students who defame a professor, defame conservative funding sources, and attack academic freedom.

A Brief History of the College

Sarah Lawrence College was founded as a two-year college, and from its beginning was committed to integrating John Dewey's ideas on progressive education into its curriculum. In the college's *First Year* catalog, Dr. Henry Noble McCracken states that the purpose was to create a two-year college whose aim was not vocational and whose method would focus on training rather than research.¹⁵ The curriculum was to be focused on individual needs and was to make use of the proximity to New York City for instruction in the fine arts. Its curriculum was to be organized along the lines of progressive education, with "[c]are put on the process of learning rather than upon the transmission of knowledge." The bulk of course work was to be done "by each student independently and in conference with the faculty," and instruction was to be coupled with individualized vocational counseling and with a faculty fellow, with whom the student was to confer each week. General reports and a pass-fail system were to replace traditional grades. There was to be emphasis on extra-curricular group work and experiential work involving community government, religious organization, orchestra, or college publications.

The college soon became a four-year school, and in 1945 it appointed Harold Taylor, then thirty-one years old, as president. Among other things, Taylor worked with Eleanor Roosevelt in developing the college and introduced the first male students, who were admitted as part of the GI Bill.¹⁶

In 1951 *The American Legion Magazine* included Sarah Lawrence in a list of colleges that employed communist professors. In response, Taylor became an active proponent of academic freedom, and on February 21, 1953 the college held the Intercollegiate Student Conference of Democracy and Communism in the Modern World, which was attended by students from at least forty-two

¹⁵Sarah Lawrence College, *First Year, 1927-1928* (Bronxville, New York).

¹⁶April Green, "Wisdom for the Ages," *Sarah Lawrence Magazine*, 2015. <https://www.sarahlawrence.edu/magazine/then-now/features/wisdom-for-ages.html>

colleges. It held a second, related conference in 1954. Taylor spent much of his time on academic freedom issues and in senate hearings.

In keeping with this tradition, president Cristle Collins Judd responded to the DC's demands in an email, which I received on April 4, 2019. Though the email was generally supportive of the demonstrators, President Collins wrote:

I want to affirm an immutable principle related to speech, freedom of inquiry, and having a voice at Sarah Lawrence. Strong differences of opinion and belief do not grant license to any individual or any group on campus to engage in the public silencing of individuals—be they faculty, staff, visiting guests, or other students. Freedom of inquiry and expression, grappling with disagreement, doubt, and varied perspectives, is messy, contentious, and hard work, but an essential ingredient to the creation of equitable and inclusive communities. The academic enterprise is undermined by demands and actions that seek to silence members who present considered arguments on the basis that they might be not only intellectually disagreeable, but profoundly offensive. Without such protections, debate would be stifled and along with it the processes of reasoning and creativity that underpin the process of knowledge formation and learning.

That said, the students at Sarah Lawrence were not unique in attacking academic freedom and freedom of speech. As colleges have increasingly been dominated by ideologies derived from Deweyan progressivism, they have become increasingly intolerant of academic freedom even though Dewey and his associates were the inventors of the modern concept of academic freedom.¹⁷

The Cultural Contradictions of Harold Taylor

Harold Taylor was a prolific author, and these tendencies can be seen in a number of his works, but I focus on *Students without Teachers: The Crisis in the University*, which was published in 1969 at the height of the 1960s student demonstrations.¹⁸ On the one hand, Taylor emphasized

¹⁷John Dewey, "Introduction," in John Dewey and Horace M. Kallen, eds., *The Bertrand Russell Case* (New York: N.Y.: The Viking Press, 1941).

¹⁸Harold Taylor, *Students without Teachers: The Crisis in the University* (New York, N.Y.: McGraw Hill, 1969).

the importance of academic freedom: “Freedom to think, to speak, to act, to learn, to invest oneself in a new kind of life which opens up the future is the right of youth and the eternal value which must animate social and political change.” In the same book he criticized universities for lack of imagination and relevance, i.e., that they are not sufficiently progressive in the political sense. He criticized the 1960s radicals as “difficult to educate because they are intolerant of any view contrary to their own and of democratic processes,” but the radicals should be supported because education should be student centered:

It is therefore the obligation of the educators to find the ways in which the students, the militants, and the general public can learn to understand that the university must, by reason of its fundamental mission to mankind, take a constructive part in the solution of social and political questions. That means giving to students the responsibility for direct confrontation and experience with the issues now tearing the country apart, educating them to understand the issues, and to work at their resolution.

In Taylor’s view it was the reactionary policies of state governments, which opposed the student radicals and resisted federal authority, that impeded the struggle to achieve a democratic educational system. The universities have failed because “[t]hey have too few facilities for dealing with the commitments of those with radical views and the actions of the students who hold them.” In Taylor’s view progressive social democracy provided an alternative to Marxist violence, so progressivism can achieve the ends of Marxism without violence. In fact, he saw the role of the university as encouraging change:

The greatest of all humane learning is the kind which comes about when the tension between minds is heightened, not by the hostility of opposite purposes, but by a mutual concern for finding answers to urgent and honest questions. The radical student movement needs confrontation at that level if it is to contribute what it has to offer to the improvement of society.

So much for classical Greek and German Idealism. The progress in America from 1830 to 1970, which generated the great wave of innovation and economic advancement is to be replaced by student activism.

Conclusion

President Judd and SLC acted consistently with the college's traditional support for academic freedom. The intensity of the DC students' protests against academic freedom parallels the intensity of similar protests against the First Amendment and against academic freedom around the country. My claim is that Dewey's educational philosophy, which emphasizes freedom, and learning by doing, contradicts the practical results of his political philosophy, which sees state action as a function of an optimizing intelligence. The latter has generated the escalation in intolerance, the claim that an optimal intelligence should make final decisions for all results in the deprivation of the freedom of those who disagree. History contradicts the claim that such an optimal intelligence is anything but chimerical. Hence, the traditions of Sarah Lawrence, which are to both engage in progressive education and in Deweyan social progressivism are self-contradictory. They have resulted in an intolerant, left-only college environment that sends signals to students that suppression of alternative views is appropriate. Thus, while Sarah Lawrence did the right thing with respect to the protest, the protest is a product of the college's educational negligence.