

Campus Bums . . . Again

by Robert Bruce (November 2017)



Total Confusion, by Tamra Pfeifle Davisson

The university exists only by a faith that human beings are worthy of special attention; that the development of the human intellect is an end in itself; that the exercise of memory and reason is not a perversion of the nervous system; and that the scholar is somehow superior to the fool—all of them propositions that admit of no scientific proof; propositions that must, in fact, be maintained despite clear and cogent evidence that

untroubled happiness is reserved for morons. –Willmore Kendall

If the best sinecure in America is a tenured full professorship, the worst fate may be that of a recent graduate in anthropology with a \$100,000 loan. That the two are co-dependent is a national scandal. – Victor Davis Hanson

What price freedom of speech? To judge by the speech made to the Times Higher Education conference by Louise Richardson, Oxford University's first female vice chancellor, about 350k a year with benefits and one is bound to say, if she did nothing else for the rest of the year than deliver these words, she will have more than earned it.

The offending words:

I've had many such conversations with students who come to me and say they don't feel comfortable because their professor has expressed views against homosexuality. They don't feel comfortable being in class with someone with those views. And I say, 'I'm sorry, but my job is not to make you feel comfortable. Education is not about being comfortable. In fact, I'm interested in making you uncomfortable. If you don't like his views, you challenge them, engage with them, and figure out how a smart person like that can have views like that.'

Personally, I rather doubt the existence of that Professor but, apocrypha aside, it's a well-made point even if one can't help thinking she squandered it on a hard case. It follows equally lucid comments on the American disease of safe spaces. Asked where she thought anxious students should flee to avoid difficult ideas the puzzled academic responded with a question

of her own "Isn't that what your private life is about, that you have your friends, that you create a social group around you of people with whom you feel comfortable? Why would that need to be an institutional space?" Why indeed. Heady stuff in the academy these days, and too much for a student union smarting from defeat over a still erect statue. Oxford is not yet Middleboro or even Yale and Americans will doubtless think a petition, and the offer of counselling for those who had been traumatised by the remarks, is a good problem to have. But all the same, this is still a bar too low for one of the most prestigious universities in the world and it is a testament to how far the prestige of free enquiry has sunk that we find Professor Richardson's comments so remarkable. That difficulty is the price of learning is not something the Enlightenment invented, it is a truth written into the myths of all advanced civilisations and, when we see this principle inverted, we should not pretend this is a small matter. What we are seeing in the 21st century is a reversion to mankind's self-imposed immaturity—particularly on American campuses where a marriage of mediocrity and tenure has driven learning to an abyss that not even Alan Bloom could have imagined.

In retrospect, deconstructionism was probably the key moment; when academics stampede to replace knowledge with 'method' there is probably no turning back and, when one looks at the characteristic obsessions of this ideological fad, it is easy to see how theory would appeal to mediocre minds. To an ardent deconstructionist, stuck in an English literature department and unable to write a coherent sentence let alone add to the canon of dead white European males, it must be a huge liberation to know you can read into Shakespeare what you like, and that no man is the author of his genius. This is old wine in new bottles. When Freud wrote his biography on Leonardo da Vinci, he made pains to point out he had no intention of dragging the sublime into the dust, but no one really explains genius with a reverent touch, and his true

feelings are better captured in an anecdote recorded by his friend, Hanns Sachs. Pointing to a bookshelf adorned with Goethe's literary treasures—the father of psychoanalysis grandly announced 'all this was used by him as a means of self-concealment.' The spirit of resentment driving all this is palpable and, after the sixties, when most of the faculty *lumpenintelligentsia* lowered their aim to fit their talents, it reaped a whole harvest of mediocrity. No further explanation is needed to show why American faculties have debased themselves so thoroughly and the most conspicuous casualty of this has been the idea of a liberal education.

Until recently, the ideals of the university were indistinguishable from the humanist ideals it upheld and, if its cash value was debatable, it gave students a priceless gift in exchange. Michael Oakeshott knew his undergraduates started with "nothing but a few books, a few half-baked ideas and a few tunes in their heads." The purpose of a liberal education was to give them "what in the end, on your distant death beds, you will recognize as one of the things most worth having: a mind and some thoughts of your own." The pursuit of "Relevance" killed all that off, universities henceforward would move from the Light into the cave, and having reduced, *a la* Foucault, knowledge to a set of arbitrarily defined epistemes and the philosophers task to the unmasking of ubiquitous structures of oppression, it is hardly a surprise campuses should be awash with competing victimhoods. Conrad noted political crusades were fired by personal injuries, it is the singular accomplishment of our postmodern culture to fan them out; and only the most naïve understanding of human nature would lead us to think the resulting disposition will be a sunny one. David Hume, a very shrewd judge of mankind and burdened at the time with a very difficult houseguest captured the problem early on with characteristic sensibility. Remarking on Jean Jacque Rousseau, he wrote,

He has read very little during his life, and has now totally renounced all reading: He has seen very little, and has no manner of curiosity to see or remark; He has reflected, properly speaking, and studied very little; and has not indeed much knowledge: he has only felt, during the whole course of his life; and in this respect, his sensibility rises to a pitch beyond what I have seen any example of: but it still gives him a more acute feeling of pain than of pleasure. He is like a man . . . stripped not only of his clothes, but of his skin.

The significance of microaggressions in all this should be obvious. As any hack psychologist will tell you, “trauma” is heavily conditioned by the worldview you bring to bear on it and, if you doubted it for a minute, ask yourself why coal miners are less anxious than Yale students. The answer is simple—miners take it as read that ungendered pronouns are not worth losing sleep over. It takes a lot of learning to convince yourself otherwise and when you undergo all the infantilising rigours of a college education, traumas stalk you at every turn. Until recently, liberals could draw a pretty clear line between an idea and an assault, the rule of thumb being set by John Stuart Mill’s harm principle, famously laid out in the opening chapter of [article in the Atlantic](#) offering the most insightful critique of our rampaging therapy culture to date even if they do labour a very simple point. To precis; humans are not just not fragile—they are to use Nicholas Talebi’s term antifragile and emerge strengthened from stressful experiences. This has long been a staple of folk wisdom and now that whole weight of evolutionary psychology and neuroscience informs it, it may well sway the debate on campus. Still, is this really all there is to be said? In these disenchanting times, we feel squeamish about anything as fanatical as a moral judgement unless it is

disguised as a scientific formula, and it is hardly a wonder Bentham's felicific calculus has been resuscitated to take the strain, especially when modern brain imaging techniques are making it a practical proposition. We can compute felicity; all the banalities of nudge politics and wellbeing are a footnote to this breakthrough, but what it cannot do is tell us which pains and pleasures are worthwhile or whether it is better to be a Socrates dissatisfied or a pig satisfied.

Mill grew up without a faith, but as with so many Victorians, he remained a "tense bow"—his restless pursuit of truth and the highest perfection of the mind, a tribute to the residual power of religious sentiments and their ability to bend men to their better selves. Without it, there would have been no compelling reason not to trade in his Humboldtian ideal for all the drug-addled sensations and the vapid spirituality of Zen Buddhism which caught fire in the sixties. This all probably looked very fresh to the baby boomers but only a cursory historical glance at Weimar Germany, Imperial Rome and the late Hellenistic era is needed to see the classic signs of Toynbee's schism in the soul. Civilizations in their twilight always seek sanctuary in nature and feeling, and if Lukianoff and Haidt, with talents to squander, have used up their best arguments challenging the settings of the pleasure machine, they have largely ignored the main issue.

Listening to the responses from concerned students to Melissa Click's [The Time Machine](#), the hero is transported to a future where grotesque Morlocks labour sullenly beneath the earth's surface to produce the luxuries necessary to support the Elois—a fragrant and anaemic race whose lives are consumed by the leisured pursuit of fleeting sensations. Wells' mother was a live-in servant and he spent his early childhood sequestered in the lower depths of the house and, when the London

Underground started pushing the proletariat deeper into the bowels of the earth, the fixation with an upstairs-downstairs class system could only grow. Like most of the nonconformist liberal remnant drifting into the virtues of the Plan, Wells had a hatred of idleness, particularly in the gaudy, decadent colours of the rentier, and in the Edwardian era he would have seen many up close and personal not least amongst them the wealthier socialists who put their ancestors' capital to work plotting the abolition of capitalism. Is socialism nothing but the false consciousness of idle privilege? Looking at Berkeley and San Francisco it's difficult to avoid that conclusion, and nothing symbolises the barren achievements of the New left more succinctly than the ring of urban squalor surrounding these hippy cantons. Amongst the bobos, politics is intensely personal and conveniently global, but all the plastic straw banning and transgender pronouncing have made little impact on the lives of people cleaning up their trash. Moreover, for a city which prided itself on being the scourge of corporate power it is odd that its most visceral hatreds should be marshalled against the American working class.

None of this is new. Looking at the Battle for Berkeley unfold I couldn't help thinking of the hard hat riots I'd read about, and though I am too young to have seen the first round I more than made up for it in the sequel. Grazing for internet sensations I stumbled on the phenomenon of Based Stickman, and must have watched his exploits a hundred times—each new remix and voiceover drawing me in to vicarious combat with asexual and malnourished anarchists. Not a high brow pursuit I'll concede, but given the endless diet of sharks and Nazis on cable there are worse atrocities to inflict on the mind. Besides, stickman is wholesome from what I've seen. In the UK, when men draped in the Union Jack get a microphone stuck in front of them, you can guarantee a reek of stale alcohol and some pretty inarticulate racism; when Kyle Chapman was asked to outline his political demands, he came up with nothing more

sinister than a renegotiation of NAFTA, and the abolition of the central reserve ("it's neither federal, nor a reserve." Cute). That's a good anti-climax to have in troubled times. He has a past I understand, but then again criminals are the products of social failures and if the Left hold fast to their principles and avoid the rush to judgement so will I.

I don't know what Chapman did before he became a full-time meme but with FedEx man I think I could probably guess, and if watching stickman break his stick made me laugh, the sight of Mark Uhrin wrestling the embers of his flag from that moronic hair-dyed crowd made a more solemn and humbling impression. Uhrin in his understated interview said he simply did what he thought was right, an elemental reflex to be sure but one that can get leached out of you by too much study. There was no signalling here just virtue. Difficult not to be in awe of it, and ponder the relative social utility of places like Greensboro and Missou besides someone like him. Going on the projections of Gates, and other dismal prophets of the AI revolution his job will probably be gone soon, but with a bit of luck Click's will go first, and a country that can produce such a lofty soul as Uhrin will hopefully find him new glories. All hail the working-class hero.



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