

# The Intellectual Arrogance of Suppressing Campus Speech

*'Don't tell me about facts. I don't need no facts.'*

by Richard L. Cravatts (November 2017)



*The Trial*, George Condo, 2017

Seeming to give credence to Bertrand Russell's observation that "The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, and wiser people so full of doubts," a student-written op-ed that ran in the September 25th issue of *The Daily Princetonian* argued that conservatives should not have the benefit of free speech, and do not even have the right to expect its protection because, given their ideological stance, "they are appealing to a right that does not exist" for them.

“In my belief,” student Ryan Born continued in this astounding piece of sophistry, “when conservative ideas are opposed, there is no right that is being infringed.” In fact, he seemed to be saying, the essential worthlessness of conservative ideology—as opposed to the virtue and fundamental truths embodied in progressive thought—means that instead of debating their ideological positions, conservatives should recognize the errors in their thinking and abandon their views. “Some ideas will already have been judged wanting,” Born wrote, and “Conservatives ought to question why some ideas are so stringently opposed and then adapt their arguments, instead of begging for ‘free speech.’”

And unlike progressives and leftists like himself, who Born apparently felt have the right to unbridled free expression without having to actually defend their ideas in the marketplace of ideas, conservative speech “is something much different,” he claimed, while exhibiting behavior that psychiatrists term projection, because “conservatives are interested in being able to propose their ideas without any political opposition to their right to speech.”

Where did the colossal intellectual arrogance of this op-ed come from which allows liberals to make the leap from purporting to endorse freedom of expression for all on their campuses to reserving that right, in actual practice, only for favored groups? For many on the Left who were students and young faculty members during the 1960s, it was the influence of Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse, who believed that the repressive force of the existing establishment could not be weakened unless its ability to control speech—and ideas—was diluted. That would only be accomplished, according to Marcuse, by favoring “partisan” speech to promote “progressive” or revolutionary change, and that speech would be, by necessity, “intolerant towards the protagonists of the

repressive status quo.”

For evidence that academia is currently awash in this type of execrable sentiment, one only has to look at the number of campuses which, just in the opening months of this semester, have experienced the actual shutting down or exclusion of conservative speech—purportedly with the intention of rejecting “hate speech,” right-wing thought, white supremacy, fascistic ideology, and a host of related extremist modes of thought the progressive left on campuses has conjured up as being an imminent threat to their emotional safety and well-being.

Now, any speech that the left wishes to suppress or avoid, it categorizes as being equivalent to violence; conservative ideology is thought of as being weaponized as “hate speech” and potentially harmful to listeners. Any speech that is labeled as “hate speech” condemns that expression to lacking the protection of free speech, and because it thereby falls outside the bounds of acceptable expression, it is undeserving of being heard and justified in being suppressed. Conservatives in general are accused of harboring racist, sexist, xenophobic, Islamophobic, and homophobic views, and they are deemed unworthy of expressing those views precisely because they are thought to represent unacceptable, hateful beliefs. Speakers who question prevailing liberal orthodoxy are said to be committing virtual “violence” against marginalized victim groups on campus who might be exposed to these extremist ideas and be injured by them in some way, and speakers are disinvited or obstructed proactively to ensure that victims are never threatened by ideas they do not wish to hear or tolerate.

Because campus progressives have shown themselves perfectly willing to shut down speech that they themselves have decided

is unworthy of even being heard, it is no surprise that, fortified with moral arrogance and boundless self-righteousness, liberal activists have repeatedly sought to, and have been successful at, silencing speakers with opposing views. This behavior is not surprising given a 2017 national survey of 1,500 current undergraduate students at four-year colleges and universities conducted by John Villasenor of Brookings Institute. When asked if it is acceptable for students to shout down and disrupt a speech by a “very controversial speaker . . . known for making offensive and hurtful statements,” 51 percent of those polled agreed that, yes, shutting down such speech with the “heckler’s veto” is justified. Even more troubling was the response to a follow-up question which asked respondents if they believed in using violence to interfere with and shut down the controversial speaker’s appearance; astonishingly, 19 percent of students answered affirmatively that a *violent response* to the controversial speaker’s ideas and words was appropriate and justified.

These intolerant liberals are not even interesting in engaging with their ideological opponents. At a Rutgers University panel discussion in October, “Identity politics: the new racialism on campus?,” sponsored by *Spike*, “a British anti-misanthropy current-affairs magazine,” audience members began interrupting the panelists with chants of “black lives matter!” When one of the panelists attempted to explain his position, a woman from the audience shouted out that she did not “need statistics,” further complaining that, at any rate, “the system” controls facts. “It’s the system. It’s the institution,” she raved. “Don’t tell me about facts,” she shouted, most revealingly. “I don’t need no facts.”

Since the presidential election last fall, a new trend has shown itself on campuses in progressive activism and the

assault on conservative speech. As part of the paroxysms of moral indignation liberals have shown in response to what they see as the ascension of white supremacy and alt-right extremism in the wake of President Trump's victory, any student groups to right of center are subject to being smeared as extremists, racists, and white supremacists, and their very presence on campus a threat to victim groups. At the University of California, Santa Cruz, for instance, a meeting of the school's College Republicans was disrupted after students responded to a Facebook post that urged protesters to come to the meeting and shut it down. "We need a movement of people on this campus that rejects the 'right of assembly,' or 'right of free speech' for white supremacists and fascists," the Facebook post read, and activists eventually did force open the door to the meeting space and screamed that the members were "fascists," "racists," and "white supremacists."

Also in October, a similar scene took place at Columbia University where activists mounted "an anti-fascist rally . . . where Tommy Robinson, founder of the far-right Islamophobic hate group English Defense League," was scheduled to speak. Protesters announced "that alt-right speakers like Tommy Robinson are NOT WELCOME on our campus," another common phrase used by activists that suggests that they believe they, and only they, are the moral conscience and voice of the entire university community, when that is clearly not the case. A video taken of the event shows protesters attempting to block entrances to the building, storming the area where the speech was to be held, shouting "black lives matter" and "white supremacy," banging the outer walls of the auditorium to drown out any speaking, and dominating the room with random screaming directed at audience members, and loud, repetitive chants of, "Whose campus? Our campus!"

At an October event at University of Michigan, in in yet

another example, Charles Murray, political scientist, libertarian, and author of the controversial 1994 book, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, was scheduled to speak but protestors screamed out continually for 40 minutes, "Charles Murray go away; sexist, racist, KKK! Charles Murray go away; sexist, racist KKK!," occupying the majority of the seats in the venue and ultimately preventing Murray from speaking at all. When an administrator asked the protestors to cease their heckling, they screamed back at him, "We've been silent too long!" and "stop silencing students of color!"

Administrators have been slow to respond to these outrageous outbursts and out of control protests by leftist students who have unilaterally decided that their ideology is the only acceptable one and that they have the moral right to suppress the speech of others whose views they marginalize, condemn, and abhor. But the frequency and intensity of these disruptions, and the virulence of the left's reaction to conservative speech, has finally pushed at least one institution to take a firm moral stand and address this serious problem head-on. The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin recently drafted a new policy, titled "Commitment to Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression," which will enact penalties for any individual who exercises the "hecklers veto," disrupts the speech of others, or otherwise prevents others from enjoying freedom of speech on campus.

Anticipating the mistaken belief that many students now have that certain speech—such as that speech referred to as "hate speech"—does not deserve protection, the policy asserts that "[I]t is not the proper role of the university to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they, or others, find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive."

Maintaining civility on a campus is, of course, a worthy goal, but it is a secondary, not primary, consideration. “Although the university greatly values civility,” the policy states, “concerns about civility and mutual respect can never be used as justification for closing off discussion of ideas, however offensive or disagreeable those ideas may be to some members within the university community.” For a second infraction, a student will be subject to a formal investigation and a disciplinary hearing, and multiple infractions will result in suspension and eventually expulsion.

Shutting down speech is not only unconstitutional, it violates one of the university’s primary values. When members of the academic community ignore those values and violate regulations, there have to be swift and significant consequences, and these sanctions must be publicized in advance of any event, as the Wisconsin policy will do. Students should not and cannot be allowed to take over a campus and hijack the robust exchange of ideas—even if they think they have the best intentions and are promoting a virtuous, progressive agenda.

“If there be time to expose through discussion the falsehood and fallacies, to avert the evil by the processes of education,” observed the champion of free speech, Justice Louis D. Brandeis, “the remedy to be applied is more speech, not enforced silence.”

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