

Dancing Bears in Academia

by Michael Curtis



Snowflakes keep falling on campus heads, nothing seems to fit. Snowflakes are light and blow with the wind, but they become potent if they form a blizzard. They already have produced a storm in U.S. and British universities where some members of the faculty, student body, and administration appear unable to tolerate expressions of policy, opinion, and speech, other than their own. At the same time these intolerant perpetrators of the tempest paradoxically often demand a “safe space” for themselves.

Snowflakes have also discerned and exploited weakness in those assumed to epitomize tolerant diversity of expression and exchange of ideas. Allan Bloom in his book, *Closing the American Mind*, 1987, arguing that moral relativism was a barrier to critical thinking, pointed out that a few students

discovered that the pompous teachers who enlightened them about academic freedom could “with a little shove,” be made into dancing bears.

The dancing bears in Britain and in the U.S. universities have been hesitant or unable to deal with snowflakes that have been pouring out on numerous occasions. They are cautious in response to public utterances that offend the sensitive students. A considerable number stand accused of that offence. In Britain the distinguished 76 year old Australian feminist writer Germaine Greer had difficulty speaking at Cardiff University in November 2015 because of her unpopular view on transgender women. A petition of 300 students had found her views “problematic” or “hateful.” In the U.S., well known conservative writers, Charles Murray in March 2017 at Middlebury College, and Heather MacDonald in April 2017 at Claremont McKenna, were not allowed to complete their speeches.

Attention is being paid to the sensitive, if also bullying, students. In Cambridge University, England, students in 2018 after a narrow vote 412-391, voted to opt out of a tradition of “class lists,” established in 1748. Those students can choose to opt out from having their names published publicly after examinations. If their names were made public they might, presumably because they did poorly, suffer distress and harm, and their mental health would be affected. In this, Cambridge is belatedly following Oxford University which was conscious of this psychological problem in 2009.

Yet some Oxford students in 2018 were still suffering distress. They were unhappy because of the portrait of Prime Minister Theresa May hanging on the wall of the women’s staircase in the Geography Hall. Her portrait was part of the celebration of women who studied in the Geography department, as May had done 1974-77, and later became prominent in their fields. The Oxford authorities first removed and then reinstated the portrait. They have yet to discover the extent

of the medical suffering of the offended students.

At Oxford, students are not alone in their propensity for suffering. The faculty in 1985, by a considerable majority, 738-319, prevented Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher from getting an honorary degree from the University. A petition of 5,000 students approved the faculty decision. Thatcher was thus the first Oxford educated prime minister to be denied the honor. Snowflakes had no objection to honors being given to those who had not offended them: Bill Clinton, a Rhodes scholar at Oxford but who left or was obliged to leave early, in 1994; Nelson Mandela in 1996; and Jimmy Carter in 2007.

Coincidentally, in the portrait on the wall next to that of May, is one more acceptable to the snowflakes, one of Doreen Massey, teacher at the Open University of "Marxist and feminist" geography, and cultural geography, a prolific writer of politically engaged Marxist influenced books. She is also a political activist who had spent time with Sandinistas in Nicaragua. and as adviser to Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. Not so coincidental is that Thatcher while prime minister had acted favorably towards the Open University by advising it to accept 18 year old students, not merely mature ones.

In universities in the U.S. the obsession with diversity, victimization, and identity politics has grown. Political correctness did not start but became notorious with the appearance in 1988 of Rev. Jesse Jackson, then a contender to be Democratic presidential nominee, at Stanford University where he joined the student body in shouting "Hey, hey, ho, ho, Western civ has got to go." The University immediately removed required courses in Western civilization. Attempts in April 2016 to restore those courses, and bring back Homer, Plato, Descartes, and Voltaire were decisively defeated by the student body.

Similar manifestations of this rejection of traditional culture have occurred all over the U.S. and accompanying

arguments over "diversity" and affirmative action remain acute. Some U.S. Supreme Court cases, Bakke 1978, Gutter v. Bollinger , 5-4, in 2003, Fisher v. University of Texas, 4-3, in 2016, have affirmed that race can be considered one of many factors considered for college admissions. Even more significant, the courts, though divided on the issue, have held that racial diversity is an essential part of the mission of higher education.

Diversity has now become central in academia. This was the issue in the chaotic situation at the Evergreen State College at Olympia, Washington. For some years the College has had a "Day of Absence." In 2017 a group of students called for all white people to stay off campus for the day. More than 200 students filled classrooms and the office of the College president. A biology professor, Bret Weinstein, a self-described progressive Democrat who voted for Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primary, and had been on the faculty for 15 years refused to leave the campus. As a consequence he was called a racist, an epithet always used to obtain what is wanted, and demands were made he resign, He and his wife also a biology professor, were forced to resign.

The intolerant mob, some carrying baseball bats and batons, but not text books, were carrying out identity politics and representation of victimhood culture with their need for "safe space" and their opposition to "white privilege."

Two issues are of particular concern. One is that the president of the college, George Bridges, ordered there be no police action to restrain the activists. The other is that 58 professors and 23 members of the staff of the College signed a "statement of solidarity" with the bigoted students. In essence, the president and the faculty had approved racial segregation. Only one member of the faculty wrote in support of Weinstein.

Justice may be imperfect but has not ended. Weinstein was

given a \$500,000 settlement by the College, but racism still continues there, as events in 2018 have been limited to "people of color." The College had to take precautions. It moved its commencement ceremony because of safety concerns. Even worse, the College is troubled as enrollment fell as news spread of the intolerance on display. As a result in 2018, 24 faculty and 19 members of the staff were terminated. Unfortunately, they have no "safe space." Snowflakes keep falling, but crying's not for the courageous like Weinstein.