

The Young Dictators



by Theodore Dalrymple

Complaints against the younger generation are as old as civilization itself, but that does not mean that they are always unjustified. And it seems to me that the younger generation of today is less attached to the notion of freedom of opinion than at any of recent times.

More than 18,000 people have signed a petition set up by a student at the University of Manchester in the UK calling for the dissolution of a student society called the “Manchester Pro-Life Society.” The number of signatories is likely to increase.

The “pro-life” society claims not to be exclusively fixated on the question of abortion, but of course it is this question that has inflamed passions. So far, the university’s students’

union, called upon by the petition to prohibit the society, has held firm: It says that the society has a legal right to exist and to promote its opinions. In fact, it has no legal powers to prohibit the society, but under pressure, it might find some sophistical jurisprudence to give it a pretext to do so (lawyers can be found to argue anything).

The arguments of the young prohibitionists are both revealing and depressing. The petitioners claim that the society "adds to an already prevalent stigma surrounding abortion, a legal right in our country. Women at our university should not have to feel additional pressure or judgement on such personal matters."

It was [stated by one student](#) that, if the union permitted the society to continue to exist, it was "enabling misogynistic hate speech." The student also claimed that "The Society has made me feel weak and inferior to my male counterparts" and that "I've had endless messages from girls who fear for their safety." A former student said of the Society having been founded by men (though it has women on its committee), "I don't see why men form anti-abortion groups when there are so many men's issues they could work on."

I am not going to argue the rights and wrongs of abortion itself: The question seems to me much more complex than that of a simple clash of inalienable rights, that of the conceptus to continued life on the one hand and that of the mother to do with her body what she likes on the other.

Rather, I will comment briefly on these supposed reasons for suppressing the Society.

In the first place, abortion is not a legal right in Britain; it is a legal right *under certain conditions*, which may or may not be fulfilled. These conditions are loose, it is true, and often it appears as if there is *de facto* abortion on demand, but still, there exist legal requirements. The law does *not*

say that abortion is a legal right unconditionally.

In the second place, it is not the function of the law to prevent anyone from feeling stigmatized, for this would be to prohibit a vast range of opinion and leave permissible speech at the mercy of all those sensitive souls who feel stigmatized by any criticism or opinion whatever. A society in which nothing and nobody were stigmatized would be unliveable, morally completely anarchic. Moreover, to say that abortion is wrong is not automatically to stigmatize those who have had one. In the third place, it is claimed that the existence of the Society makes women feel weak and afraid. This, if true, is a commentary on the extreme fragility and, indeed, poverty of their self-centered mental lives. But more importantly, they appear to believe that their feelings of weakness and fear, however unjustified by any real or objective danger, are relevant to the question of the Society's right to exist or freedom of opinion. In essence, they are claiming that whatever makes them feel weak or frightens them should be prohibited. This, of course, will increase their readiness to feel weak or frightened. In the fourth place, it is implied that men have no *locus standi* to comment on the question of abortion: But the question is obviously one for humanity as a whole, not one for half of it alone. Men and women often think differently, no doubt, but they are of the same species, live in the same society, and are necessarily deeply involved with one another. Stamp collectors may have nothing special to say about the rules of wrestling, but the relations between men and women are not quite as tenuous as those between philately and wrestling. If they were, there would be no question of abortions ever being necessary.

What is most alarming about the petition, apart from the very low intellectual level of the arguments in support of it, is the complete absence of any importance attached to the idea of freedom of opinion. Like all dictators, the 18,000 signatories believe that you can have any opinion you like so long as it

is theirs.

In other words, this is a generation with dictatorship in its soul. The members of this generation, or many of them, think it will be *their* dictatorship (incidentally, I do not know what percentage of the signatories were women), but of course, dictatorships do not long remain faithful to the opinions of what used to be called the masses. They soon become the dictatorships of a few, or even of only one. Those who censor others soon end up being censored.

It is not sufficient, however, to lament the state of the younger generation, tempting as it is to do so. History is a seamless robe, and the younger generation is, after all, largely the product of the older. Has the older generation, then, no responsibility for the situation? And if the older generation bears some responsibility, what about the yet older generation, that in turn formed it?

It would be fruitless to trace everything back to the Garden of Eden. What can be said, I think, is that we have failed to transmit the value of freedom of opinion to the young, perhaps because we have felt too secure ourselves in its exercise and have therefore come to take it for granted. But such freedom is not the natural condition of mankind; in fact, it is very rare. We are busily interring it.

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