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# FIRST THINGS

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## TAKING POWER IN THE ACADEMY

by  
*Bruce Gilley*  
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In September 2017, I published a peer-reviewed paper titled “The Case for Colonialism” in *Third World Quarterly*. Eighteen thousand people signed petitions against the paper, six thousand of them academics. One month later, the paper was withdrawn with my consent, because the editor had been facing death threats.

Of course, I am not unique in having been persecuted for my academic work, nor is the experience of such persecution unique to academic conservatives. Right-wing activists have also been known to launch campaigns against left-wing academics. But there is a crucial difference: The right-wing activists are not part of university faculties or administrations and do not receive a sympathetic hearing within them. The left-wing activists tend to be supported by universities. The two petitions against me were launched by academics, Farhana Sultana of Syracuse University and Jenny Heijun Wills of the University of Winnipeg. When I was invited to Texas Tech to give a talk on the subject of my paper, the university’s president and provost issued a joint statement saying that I should not have been invited because my article had been “discredited,” because my talk was “objectionable and potentially harmful,” and because the president and provost had decided “emphatically” that “there is no case for colonialism.”

Journalists often highlight dramatic cases like mine when discussing the narrowness of the academy, but the problem goes deeper than scattered incidents of no-platforming. The overwhelmingly left-wing makeup of university faculties, combined with the rise of ideologically driven university bureaucracies, has destroyed the freedom necessary for the liberal arts and scientific inquiry.

Campus politics is spreading throughout our culture. Recent graduates bring its tenets into newsrooms, corporate offices, political parties, and governments. Google's decision to fire James Damore and the Conservative party's decision (later reversed) to remove Roger Scruton from an honorary body reflect the spread of a type of politics that formerly was confined to campus. The political environment of our universities is a matter of public import. It is therefore a matter of public concern.

Depending on the study, the ratio of progressives and leftists to conservatives and classical liberals is something like 10 to 1 in the academy as a whole, and 20 or 30 to 1 in the humanities and social sciences in the U.S. and U.K. A study of registered Democrats and Republicans at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill conducted by the *College Fix* in 2016 found an overall ratio of 12 to 1 out of 665 identifiable faculty. There were seventeen departments without a single Republican, including American Studies, History, and Public Policy. Initially, the newspaper reported one Republican in the English Department, alongside forty-three Democrats. A "curious" department member contacted the newspaper to find out who this rogue Republican was. On further investigation it turned out to be a clerical error. The *Fix* updated its results to show that there was in fact not a single Republican in the English Department. "We apologize for the error," the editors wrote.

Reliable studies have not been conducted in other major Western countries, but my experience in places like Germany and France suggests that the situation there is worse. Of course, the best solution would be for faculty and administrators at universities to accept voluntarily the need to serve the public good, given their publicly subsidized status. Organizations like the New York-based Heterodox Academy have tried to encourage this sort of shift by exposing faculty hiring, program development, reading lists, campus events, and all other intellectual endeavors to the social need for viewpoint diversity. University presidents have affirmed principles of free speech with high-sounding resolutions and stirring speeches to alumni, whose donations are on the line.

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Unfortunately, I see no evidence that this strategy is succeeding. Admirable as many of its members are, the Heterodox Academy is little more than self-therapy for liberals. It may provide a sense of solidarity, but it cannot change the university. At a conference I recently attended, a dissenting academic insisted that policy change should be a backstop, and that what we really need in order to reform the university is a culture of tolerance for heterodoxy. This is exactly backward. A healthier university can be built only by means of actual policy changes. Promoting a culture of tolerance for diverse viewpoints is at best a rearguard action.

When Allan Bloom criticized the leftward drift of academia in 1987, many believed deliberation and persuasion would set the world of higher education back on track. That didn't happen. Ask academics to increase viewpoint diversity on campus, and most will respond that they see a lot of viewpoint diversity already: feminists, environmentalists, Marxists, post-modernists, Nietzscheans, post-colonialists, social democrats, Emersonians, Afrocentrists, whiteness and structural racism scholars, LGBT scholars, anti-ableist scholars, intersectionalists, and people like the French scholar who identifies as a hippopotamus. Whaddya mean no viewpoint diversity?

**A**s a political scientist, I take power seriously: I believe that change comes about through its use. Liberal commitments should not blind us to this blunt reality. Of course, as a good conservative, I am skeptical of improving projects. We should not exaggerate the harms of the dark age of higher education. But I think the balance of risks has changed. We are at a point where, even for a conservative who worries about unintended consequences, who is humble regarding his ignorance of how systems operate, who dislikes top-down planning, and who prefers gradualism and the status quo, it is worth experimenting cautiously with correctives to what I call a "market failure" in higher education. Academia has been hijacked by political interests, and it can be returned to health only through the exercise of political power.

First, existing laws that protect free speech, academic freedom, and due process rights must be enforced. A university that allows students or other groups to prevent speakers from coming to campus, whether through force or through administrative tricks, should be denied government benefits. So, too, with efforts to regulate speech on campus or to deny recognition to student groups outside the dominant ideologies. Regulation of speech includes speech codes, such as those that compel people to use gender pronouns not consistent with a person's gender at birth or to use euphemisms like "undocumented migrant" instead of "illegal immigrant." Of course, religious universities that place certain values above free speech have every right to conduct their affairs according to their religious convictions, especially if they forgo government funds. The same would, in theory, apply to a university founded on the principle of, say, atheism or climate-change activism. But other universities should be compelled to be truly liberal.

President Trump's executive order of March 2019 is a step in the right direction, because it affirms that universities must comply with the law on free speech. Any university that includes an anti-Israel "boycott, divestment, and sanction" provision in its endowment investment policies or other campus policies should be ineligible for federal research grants and federal student loans.

But the use of power to protect *against* violations of free speech does not really touch the problem, which is how to encourage a capacity on campus *for* true liberality. A university may allow a pro-life speaker to appear on campus while at the same time enforcing pro-abortion ideologies through cultural competence training, civic engagement requirements, trauma-informed sexual assault guidelines, and much else.

A key reform would be to abolish university offices of "diversity, equity, and inclusion," which have grown like great blobs from a narrow legal mandate into ideological shock units, tuition-funded activist agencies that push all sorts of left-wing agendas. By radically reducing the size of these bureaucracies, we can rein in both administrative bloat and the administrative imposition of left-wing viewpoints on the student body. Diversity offices have become not only legislative actors (making new rules to guide campus behavior) but also executive actors (promoting and implementing those rules) and judicial ones (setting up mechanisms that allow students to trigger Star Chamber-like inquiries and impose punishments). These offices should be abolished. Universities that preserve them should be excluded from federal student loan programs.

The simple enforcement of existing employment law would constitute progress. It is illegal in most countries to hire on the basis of gender, race, or religion, among other categories. Yet we know it happens

all the time. The solution may be for hiring and promotion to cease to be the exclusive prerogative of the faculty: Alumni, boards of trustees, community partners, and grant agencies could have a role as well. In religious universities that have succumbed to political correctness, clerical control should be reasserted. Hiring and promotion committees should be forbidden to ask applicants about their commitments to diversity, social justice, sustainability, equality and inclusion, or other political or ideological issues. An employment ombudsman might guard against what is, in effect, the political blackballing of candidates.

The abolition of departments with an explicit left-wing agenda would be another useful step. All of the grievance studies departments and programs should be ended and their fields of inquiry returned to the relevant disciplines. If you want to study black literature, it should be in a department of language and literature or English; if you want to study Native American history, it should be in a department of history; if you want to study women and politics, it should be in a department of political science. This reform would be a double winner, since we know from earnings data that grievance studies graduates are the lowest-earning of all those with university degrees.

**F**inally, conservative and classical liberal faculty need to organize. Groups like the National Association of Scholars do not only provide defense to scholars under fire for violating left-wing orthodoxy; they also draw together research and advocacy resources in order to lobby for legislative and legal changes.

In 1907, Harvard president Charles Eliot wrote, “This multitudinous tyrannical opinion is even more formidable to one who offends it than the despotic will of a single tyrant or small group of tyrants. It affects the imagination more, because it seems omnipresent, merciless, and irresponsible; and therefore resistance to it requires a rare kind of moral courage.” That kind of moral courage is what we need today if we are to release the academy from the death grip of the left and make it useful to society again. The corruption of the universities has come about through the use of political power, above all in university hiring committees and diversity offices. The deliverance of the universities will be achieved in the same way. Far from constituting a violation of academic freedom, the use of power is the only way to restore the conditions under which academic freedom is possible.

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