

Chronicles

A MAGAZINE OF AMERICAN CULTURE

New College of Florida's Disastrous Stanley Fish Indulgence

By Bruce Gilley, March 2025



“Now I ask you: does this person look like someone who is undermining Western civilization?”

And with that friendly rhetorical question, the well-known humanities scholar Stanley Fish opened an hour-long [love-fest](#) for Berkeley’s notorious gender theorist Judith Butler at the New College of Florida on Feb. 18.

New College, remember, is that tiny institution in Sarasota that is taking a stand against the left’s coercive domination of higher education. I am spending the year here and attended the talk. While much at the college is positive, the Fish-Butler night of passion was a reminder that the greatest obstacle to reform of our social institutions is not the radicals, who are open and predictable in their assaults on a free society. It is the self-professed liberals who claim to be its defenders.

Butler has weighed in repeatedly from her cathedral seat in Berkeley to condemn the stubborn parish of New College for refusing the papal encyclicals of the academy. Her latest book, [Who’s Afraid of Gender?](#), directs significant fire at the college, which on her general theory has become a dupe of right-wing Catholics and Evangelical Christians.

She (“they”) accuses the college’s new trustees of creating a wave of “anti-gay harassment” on campus, without citing any examples.

As trustee Christopher Rufo has [noted](#) of this claim, the only serious incident of harassment attending the college’s reformation was when a militant “non-binary” student spat on Rufo after a college event. She (“ze”) was charged with battery. Rufo asked prosecutors to drop the case after she agreed to pursue her studies elsewhere. Butler later appeared in an online [forum](#) with the ex-student (and another “they” professor) to denounce what she called New College’s “censorship and persecution that are deeply anti-intellectual.”

At the Feb. 18 event, Butler delivered her well-known monologue on how gender is a fluid concept and biology has little relevance. Men who crushed women in sports probably had access to private coaches or good nutrition, she suggested with a straight face. The field of gender studies is “a model of open debate.” The sexual mutilation of children confused by gender ideology is “healthcare.” Opposition to the crude sexualization of grade school textbooks is “censorship.” Conservatives should lighten up about the impact of telling children they are caught in the wrong body and about sending them to drag shows, even though, as Alexander Riley [pointed out](#), “she has consistently argued throughout her career that ‘texts, speech, images, and performances’ *do indeed* have the power to change and perhaps even to create the world.”

Butler betrayed no recognition of how sharply mainstream opinion has shifted against her outlandish and contradictory claims, even in countries led by left-wing governments like [the UK](#). But her apparently onerous terms for appearing at New College, judging by the opening remarks of college president Richard Corcoran, may reflect a deepening of her famous aversion to debate. Her insistence on Stanley Fish as interlocutor ensured that.

After a distinguished career teaching Milton and other literature at prominent institutions, Fish came to New College as a “Presidential Scholar-in-Residence” (the same title I hold) in 2023, aged 85. He took [heat](#) from the academic left for the late-career shift, and defended it as consistent with his belief in academic freedom. But the criticism still seemed to sting. His mission at the college now seems to be to prove to the academic swamp that he is not a shill for the conservatives. His performance at this event was stellar in that regard.

After his flippant opening question, Fish criticized what he called “anti-gender polemics” and asked Butler: “How should we respond to that?” He then dismissed claims that Butler’s prose is “undecipherable,” apparently not having read works such as the article that won her top “honors” in the journal *Philosophy and Literature*’s 1998 Bad Writing Contest. That entry included a 94-word sentence of gibberish that ended with something about “contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power.”

Fish compared Butler to luminaries of the academic left like Noam Chomsky and Edward Said, an affinity that conservatives would probably endorse, only without the normative valence.

Butler’s well-known rhetorical strategy is to defend truth and reality when it suits her and to dismiss them as “articulations of power” when it does not. Gender was an articulation of power in her earlier work when she was courting feminists. Once she began courting the trans community she reclassified it as reality, apparently fearful of a backlash should she claim that men parading as women were not “really” women.

Butler showed no interest in truth or reality at New College, and Fish gave her rich quarter. After her speech, Fish superintended the audience session like a mother hen, clucking and spreading his wings to direct all questions to the fan group clustered near the front, mainly young women with purple hair, face masks, and tattered garb. “Who’s afraid of questions about gender?” might have been the title of the proceedings, I thought, as the audience microphone was taken away from me for the third time at Fish’s direction.

One of the students mournfully asked “Judith” for advice about the “precarity” of the job market for gender studies majors. When another mentioned New College’s closure of its gender studies department in 2023, I took the opportunity to voice loud applause. Fish looked up with death eyes and raised his hands for calm at this unseemly outburst. The henhouse that is the contemporary academy, even at New College, was being threatened by a fox with alternative ideas. And that was it. The “discussion” ended. The book signings began.

New College shuttered its “gender studies” department for a simple reason: it was not an academic department where a variety of viewpoints were possible but simply an ideological satrapy. Its chair was a scholar of French literature, not exactly the stuff of serious social science. To quote Fish: How should we respond to that? At the very least by discussing the reasons openly.

Grievance studies fields are not alone in being intellectually stagnant, of course. But in theory traditional disciplines are open to a diversity of ideas. Gender, for instance, should be housed in sociology, where its relevance to any topic can be questioned and hypotheses about, say, institutionalized misandry, can be asked. As a standalone field, however, its overshadowing ideological commitment renders it unserious. As New College trustee Mark Bauerlein wrote in a piece for *Chronicles* regarding the closing the unit: “Gender work belongs within zones of convention and tradition.”

Butler unintentionally affirmed the point at New College by saying that her field has a wide variety of viewpoints...on how to combat “masculine domination. Liberal complaints that New College should have hired critics of feminism and dissenters from the cant of “masculine domination” rather than closing its gender studies department ignore the problem itself. Scholars don’t make their careers by denying something. A gender studies class by such a scholar would last only long enough for him to pronounce: “This is not a claim that I take seriously.” Butler’s repeated argument at New College (and in her book) that “all top research universities have gender studies departments” was about as convincing as saying that “all top research universities have DEI departments, land acknowledgements, and black female presidents.”

Of all prominent scholars in the United States, Fish should have been the one to offer serious arguments about gender studies and gender ideology at the Sarasota event. His 2008 book, *Save the World on Your Own Time*, upbraided faculty radicals who view their jobs as the inculcation of morally correct views. “Analyzing ethical issues is one thing; deciding them is another, and only the first is an appropriate academic activity,” he wrote. Where was this self-styled *enfant terrible* of the American academy on that tropical evening? Gone fishin’, apparently, with more interest in small talk than in his once penetrating judgments.

Perhaps we overestimate the *terrible* of Stanley Fish. He was, after all, responsible for turning the Duke English department, while chair there in the 1980s, into the zaniest den of crackpots since the founding of the Bethlem Royal Hospital. Among the hires Fish made were Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Michael Moon, gender and gay studies activists who were responsible for the rise of “queer studies” that turned feminism into an all-out attack on women. Fish, in other words, may feel some proprietary defensiveness about attacks on gender studies. The field appears to be an exception to his reservation about activist scholars trying to save the world.

The Duke English department eventually collapsed into recriminations, but not before its flagship journal, *Social Text*, was famously hoaxed by Alan Sokal, a physicist, who

submitted an article in 1996 on the “hermeneutics of quantum gravity.” Fish, who served as a director of the journal’s press at the time, lashed out at Sokal in *The New York Times*, warning his unseemly exposure of academic chicanery would foster “a deep and corrosive attitude of suspicion” towards academic writing, as if that were not the point. Again, this may explain his tolerance for the sort of bad academic writing and intellectual antics for which Butler is famous.

For her part, and despite claiming that the two differ on many issues, Butler is well-known as a Fish fan. Her introduction to his essay entitled “There’s No Such Thing as Free Speech” in *The Stanley Fish Reader* of 1999 praised his demands for the censorship of “hate speech,” chastising him only for not being specific enough in “what belongs” to the realm of acceptable utterances. Butler, not surprisingly, believes that any speech she considers “fascism, racism, transphobia ... homophobia” should be banned. Thus Fish, with his theoretical essay, flirts with the radical left while allowing the likes of Butler to finish his sentences. She emerges as a crusader of radical social control, while he’s an amiable liberal enabler. Writ large, the Fish-Butler show has been going on for decades.

Butler was also the third scholar to give the Stanley Fish Lecture at the University of Illinois at Chicago in 2009. There she promoted her new book of activist opposition to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, suitably framed in academic gibberish (“If the visual field ratifies the target as a way to conceptualize precarious populations, can we read the frame as participating in the production of precarity?”) Butler declaimed in the lecture that her book was “not descriptive” but rather “critical and oppositional.” As Butler saved the world on academic time, the *enfant terrible* of academic activism had apparently gone fishin’. All this explains the dulcet tones of the “Pulled Punches & Judy” show in Sarasota.

It was not as if the conservatives at New College did not see it coming. But it was a reminder that when conservatives get involved in higher education reform, it is not enough to simply move around pieces while shuttering some rotten units. The leftist and liberal intellectuals have a way of regrouping and recapturing the institutions through a steady accretion of minor power plays. The moment the administrators are distracted, as at New College, by fundraising or dorm-building, the rot reappears. That the grandly named and generously funded “Socratic Stage” event at New College was turned into a festival of queer and gender studies promotion, without dissent, tells us only how little things have changed, even at a place where change is supposedly occurring.

Butler believes, as she told an audience in France last year, that “the new fascism works through basic structures of liberal democracy.” That’s why her conditions for appearing at New College were so strict. While in print she uses fear and shame to silence her critics, in person she simply hides from them. Why empower fascism? New College, desperate to be seen as open to multiple viewpoints after two years of steady assaults from the intolerant left, agreed to suspend the “basic structures of liberal democracy” that evening. Ironically, it did this by handing the proceedings to a great liberal democrat.

Stanley Fish is an American treasure. He is also a reminder of the problem we face in reforming the deep state that has captured our social institutions. Western civilization is not threatened by Judith Butler, whose ideas implode when exposed to open debate. It is, however, threatened by those well-meaning but muddled liberals who have decided to protect the captured institutions from democratic discourse and accountability, often in the name of “defending democracy.”

Others have written with far more eloquence about the responsibility of self-identified liberals and moderates for what has happened to our cultural institutions. I have seen the process play out so many times in my academic career that it makes me queasy to recount this development once again. Still, for Judith Butler to have appeared at New College uncontested must rank as a setback in the battle to restore higher education.