

A SPECIAL MEETING

THE MONT PELERIN SOCIETY 1980 2020

JANUARY 15-17, 2020

FROM THE PAST TO THE FUTURE: IDEAS AND ACTIONS FOR A FREE SOCIETY

TURNING FREEDOM INTO ACTION: SOME REFLECTIONS ON REFORMING HIGHER EDUCATION AYAAN HIRSI ALI

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Turning Freedom into Action: some Reflections on Reforming Higher Education

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Turning freedom into action requires urgent reforms in higher education, both in the United States and elsewhere. Universities train future political leaders, captains of industry, as well as the next generation of teachers and university professors. If, as is increasingly the case, universities do not instill in students the fundamental principles of free inquiry, the future of freedom itself will be bleak. It is therefore imperative that universities be reformed so that meaningful critical thinking can once again flourish at these institutions.

In my view, reform should focus on four areas:

- The curriculum
- Distinguishing between "education" and "indoctrination"
- The professoriate: ensuring a healthy openness of discussion, free inquiry, and ideological diversity
- Boards of trustees: making sure they reclaim a measure of the power they have ceded, until now, to increasingly ideological administrators.

Background

In 2017, a representative survey in the UK found that 70 per cent of university students who were likely to vote were planning to vote for Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party.¹ Even then, Corbyn was a polarizing figure in British politics, with a track record of support for, and ideological associations with, extreme groups including Hamas.² By 2019, this previously strong Labour support among university students had fragmented. Of those students who indicated they were likely to vote in 2019:

- 38% stated they would vote for the Labour Party;
- 19% for the Liberal Democrats;
- 18% for the Green Party;
- 12% for the Conservatives³

From 2015 through 2019, Labour was the clear favorite among students likely to vote, despite the well reported problems in the Party associated with anti-Semitism and support for Islamism.⁴

 $[\]label{eq:labour-support-among-uk-students-nearly-halves-18-months} \\ \frac{1}{1000} \frac{1}{$

² Simcox, Robyn. "Jeremy Corbyn has a soft spot for extremists." Foreign Policy. <

https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/10/03/jeremy-corbyn-has-a-soft-spot-for-extremists-ira-hamas-hezbollah-britainlabour/>

³ <u>https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/labour-support-among-uk-students-nearly-halves-18-months</u>

⁴ <u>https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/labour-support-among-uk-students-nearly-halves-18-months</u> Ambrose, Jillian. 2019. "Corbyn nationalization plans for energy sector to collide with international treaties." *The Guardian*. < <u>https://www.theguardian.com/business/2019/nov/28/corbyn-nationalisation-plans-for-energy-sector-to-</u> collide-with-eu-law-labour>

The popularity of hard-left candidates such as Jeremy Corbyn among British university students over the years raises serious questions about the state of critical thinking and intellectual freedom, and intellectual diversity in Britain's universities. And the problem is not confined to the UK.

In the United States, college students overall appear to be less left-wing and more diverse in their stated political affiliation than their British counterparts.⁵ Yet freedom of expression on American college campuses is under growing threat, usually from those who favor a radical understanding of the term "social justice," one focused on the idea of "intersectionality" and the collective victimhood of certain social groups.

Although a majority of American college students—slightly less than 6 in 10—find that "hate speech," defined as "attacks [on] people based on their race, religion, gender identity or sexual orientation," ought to be protected by the First Amendment, 41 per cent *disagree*.⁶

More than two-thirds (68 percent) of American college students say their campus climate precludes students from expressing their true opinions because their classmates might find them offensive.⁷ Numerous incidents in recent years point to a climate of intolerance on many university campuses and not only towards conservatives.⁸

At the same time, young Americans overall (not just university students) have surprisingly positive views about socialism. In 2018, Americans aged 18 to 29 who were surveyed stated they were more positive about socialism (51%) than they were about capitalism (45%).⁹

What about other countries? Reliable, representative data is not universally available, but in Australia a 2019 survey of 500 students found that 41 per cent of students felt they were sometimes unable to express their opinion at university, while 31 per cent had been made to feel uncomfortable by a university teacher for expressing their opinion, and 59 per cent believed they were sometimes prevented by other students from voicing their opinions on controversial issues.¹⁰

⁵ <u>https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/05/the-most-polarized-freshman-class-in-half-a-century/525135/</u>

https://www.heri.ucla.edu/monographs/TheAmericanFreshman2016.pdf

⁶ <u>https://kf-site-production.s3.amazonaws.com/media_elements/files/000/000/351/original/Knight-CP-Report-FINAL.pdf P. 10.</u>

⁷ <u>https://kf-site-production.s3.amazonaws.com/media_elements/files/000/000/351/original/Knight-CP-Report-FINAL.pdf</u> P. 12

⁸ Jaschik, Scott. 2018. "Evergreen calls off 'day of absence." *The Chronicle of Higher Education.* < <u>https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/02/22/evergreen-state-cancels-day-absence-set-series-protests-and-controversies></u>

Stanley-Becker, Isaac. 2015. *The Washington Post*. "Yale instructor at the center of racial protest to leave teaching role." < <u>https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2015/12/04/with-her-words-this-instructor-helped-set-off-protests-over-race-and-a-debate-over-free-speech-now-shes-leaving-yale/ ></u>

⁹ https://news.gallup.com/poll/240725/democrats-positive-socialism-capitalism.aspx

¹⁰ <u>https://ipa.org.au/publications-ipa/media-releases/free-speech-crisis-at-australias-universities-confirmed-by-new-research</u>

The irony of this is that universities are supposed to be—in theory—bastions of free inquiry and critical thinking. Although there appears to be a lot of criticism of Western civilization and the free enterprise system, there is little diversity of opinions or tolerance of different points of view, let alone critiques of non-Western civilizations.

To improve the current state of affairs, I highlight four areas of reform below.

1) Curriculum

For a student to be able to think critically, a student has to possess a basic knowledge as well as a basic understanding of Western history and Western civilization. Although critical thinking certainly includes critiquing Western civilization, a measure of realistic self-criticism should never descend into nihilism, for instance ignoring abuses of non-Western civilizations while emphasizing only the dark chapters of Western civilization.¹¹ Pascal Bruckner has called this tendency the "masochism of the West," and he has a point.¹² Here, an irony arises: today there is a great deal of criticism of Western civilization in American and British universities, while other subjects, such as the behavior of the Prophet Muhammad or the early phase of Islamic military conquests, are increasingly immune from criticism.¹³ In my view, it is not sensible to have civilizational criticism go only in one direction.

There is another irony. Even as criticism of "Western civilization" is on the rise, familiarity of students with the core texts of "Western civilization" appears to be in decline. Not that long ago, a basic understanding of Western civilization was assumed to belong in a standard university curriculum. By all means, Western Civilization courses in the past had their own agendas but rightly understood, a rigorous university curriculum should emphasize knowledge of the classics, the great literary products of Western civilization, as well the aesthetic beauty of Western art. Yet in recent decades, this common assumption has disintegrated at many American universities. An added problem is that the harshest critics of Western civilization do not present feasible alternatives to, say, the market economy and democracy, only criticism, which if taken to extremes can lead to a type of nihilism.¹⁴

Here at Stanford University, in January of 1987, as many as 500 students, along with the Reverend Jesse Jackson, marched down Palm Drive chanting, "Hey hey, ho ho, Western Civ has got to go," and demanding that Stanford's standard required course in Western civilization be fundamentally transformed. There have been similar protests at other universities throughout the years. In 1989 Stanford's traditional Western Culture program was formally replaced with the Cultures, Ideas, & Values (CIV) program that included what the university euphemistically called "more inclusive" works on race, class, and gender.¹⁵

¹¹ See for instance: Sandall, Roger. 2001. *The Culture Cult: Designer Tribalism and Other Essays*. New York: Routledge.

¹² Bruckner, Pascal. The Tyranny of Guilt: an Essay on Western Masochism.

¹³ See: Shoemaker, Stephen J. 2018. "Muhammad" in *The Routledge Handbook on Early Islam* ed. Herbert Berg. Routledge: New York. P. 49-64.

¹⁴ See: Scruton, Roger. 2017. Fools, Frauds and Firebrands: Thinkers of the New Left.

¹⁵ <u>https://exhibits.stanford.edu/stanford-stories/feature/1980s</u>

Stanford's curriculum reform, which was also implemented at many other universities in various forms, helped to empower "critical" race theory, "critical" gender studies, and "critical" sexuality studies. Many of these "critical" disciplines teach a particular perspective on the part of opinionated and highly ideological instructors, from a viewpoint of moralistic superiority that brooks little dissent and, it must be said, even less critical thinking about the premises on which they are based.¹⁶

In that sense, the 1980s—although in many ways a conservative decade politically that culminated in the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the demise of East bloc Socialism—were also a time when many American universities reduced their commitment to traditional Western values.¹⁷

2) Distinguish between education and indoctrination

Those involved in higher education should move towards a better understanding of what it means to be college-educated. It has been said that education opens the mind, while indoctrination closes it. A good education permits one to think critically, and to consider multiple viewpoints. A good education ought not to result in nihilism, or total relativism, or the urge to "de-construct" all that is beautiful and sublime in Western (or any other) civilization.

At many American universities today, there is a growing focus on the pursuit of what is called "social justice" rather than the pursuit of objective truth, an appreciation of beauty, or an understanding of the classics. In many university departments, the notion of "objectivity" itself is under siege, as is dispassionate scholarship based on free inquiry. This issue was raised in 2016 by Jonathan Haidt, one of the founders of Heterodox Academy, who said universities would soon have to choose between pursuing either truth or social justice as a "telos."¹⁸

"Critical" race, gender, and sexuality studies focus on alleged collective victimization, grievances, and oppression. Scholars in these fields are less interested in individual agency than in the plight of marginalized groups. The very notion of scholarly objectivity itself is criticized for its tacit acceptance of historical oppression, and even for its use as a tool of oppression of marginalized groups in the guise of neutrality. In these fields, the market economy is usually described as an exploitative system that creates victims, rather than as a system that empowers individuals.¹⁹ Any pushback against these claims tends to be criticized as a lack of sensitivity to historically marginalized groups, if not an outright defense of "white supremacy" or "the patriarchy." We thus confront serious epistemological problems.

¹⁶ For a detailed analysis of the problems in women's studies, see: Patai, Daphne and Noretta Koertge. [1995]. *Professing Feminism: Cautionary Tales from Inside The Strange World Of Women's Studies.*

¹⁷ Rickets, Glenn, Peter Wood et al. 2011 *The Vanishing West: 1964-2010, the Disappearance of Western Civilization from the American Undergraduate Curriculum.* National Association of Scholars.

¹⁸ Miltimore, Jonathan. *Intellectual Takeout*. < <u>https://www.intellectualtakeout.org/article/social-justice-fake-scholarship-oxford-philosopher-says</u>>

¹⁹ Roger Scruton analyzes the views of several critics of the market economy in Scruton, Roger. 2017. *Fools, Frauds and Firebrands: Thinkers of the New Left.*

In 2019, a self-described liberal professor at Yale University, speaking on condition of anonymity, told the *Wall Street Journal* that "universities are moving away from the search for truth" in favor of a search for "social justice."²⁰ Certain colleagues "think people who agree with them are smarter than people who disagree with them." This brings me to the professors.

3) The professors

Because university communities generally tilt to the left, the ideas of professors are sometimes reflected in the ideas of students. It is difficult to distinguish between correlation and causation: do stridently ideological professors shape the thinking of their students, or do they reinforce the views of students who were already tending towards a particular ideology?

Even measuring professors' own political views, although more straightforward, is not entirely without complications. One can carry out representative surveys among academics, in the hope that the respondents will answer honestly; another way to gauge political views is to analyze the party affiliation of faculty members. Neither approach is perfect, but both shed some light on broad ideological orientations:

- In the U.S., at Tier-1 universities, if one excludes the two military colleges (West Point and Annapolis), there are 21.5 Democratic tenured faculty members for every Republican Faculty member.²¹ The imbalance is less severe, but still highly pronounced, at less selective schools. At Tier-2 colleges, for example, the ratio is 12.8 to 1.²²
- Research by Sam Abrams regarding general views of faculty members (rather than Party affiliation) indicates that "faculty members [at American universities] ... have a ratio of [liberal to conservative of] about six to one, with 13 per cent of our nation's professors identifying as conservative."²³

²⁰ <u>https://www.wsj.com/articles/yale-prof-estimates-faculty-political-diversity-at-0-11575926185</u>

²¹ Langbert, Mitchell. 2018. "Homogeneous: the political affiliations of elite liberal arts college faculty." *Academic Questions*. <u>https://www.nas.org/academic-</u>

<u>questions/31/2/homogenous_the_political_affiliations_of_elite_liberal_arts_college_faculty</u> [Reference to Mitchell Langbert, Brooklyn College,

²² <u>https://www.nas.org/academic-</u>

<u>questions/31/2/homogenous_the_political_affiliations_of_elite_liberal_arts_college_faculty</u> [Reference to Mitchell Langbert, Brooklyn College,

²³ <u>https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2018/11/08/college-administrators-are-more-liberal-other-groups-including-faculty-members</u>

Abrams was denounced by progressive activists at Sarah Lawrence college, who called him "an anti-queer, misogynist, and racist who actively targets queer people, women, and people of color".²³ Abrams has stated he has received a significant number of private messages of support by academics who support his freedom of expression, but that these supporters are fearful of publicly supporting him. See: "Demands." The Diaspora Coalition at Sarah Lawrence College. 2019. <u>http://www.sarahlawrencephoenix.com/campus/2019/3/11/demands-westlands-sit-in-50-years-of-shame</u>

• Among college administrators, there is "a liberal-to-conservative ratio of 12 to one," far more imbalanced than Professors themselves.²⁴

As key decisions are increasingly made by an administrative class, and less by departments and faculty members, academic institutions tilt ever further to the left.

The growing risk of using "diversity statements" as political tests

The growing fashion for mandatory "diversity statements" at some universities, notably in the University of California system, merits special attention. Increasingly, individuals who apply for academic positions must score high marks on their diversity statements. The aim of such statements appears to be to foster more hiring of individuals who adhere to the ideology of social justice.

Here is one example. The University of California-Berkeley's scoring rubric warns that, if a candidate were to state in his diversity statement that "the field of History definitely needs more women"—which a layman might see as indicating a commitment to diversity—such a statement should *not* be scored favorably by the evaluator. The rubric considers such a statement to be an indication that the candidate is guilty of having "little demonstrated understanding of demographic data."

What is not wanted in these statements is a different view on, say, what constitutes "social justice," or a defense of pure meritocratic ability, or indeed, a value judgment that ranks individual ability above collective identity.²⁵

In addition to UC-Berkeley, Vassar, Vanderbilt, and the University of Pennsylvania also provide guidance on how to write such diversity statements. Peter Boghossian, a professor at Portland State University, said such universities are simply "looking for an ideological sieve to weed out people who don't comport with the reigning moral orthodoxy."²⁶ In December 2019, the acclaimed mathematician Abigail Thompson publicly raised concerns about the mandatory

Abrams, Samuel. 2018. "One of the most liberal groups in America." <

²⁴ "Indeed, through a new national survey of administrators in higher education that I conducted over the summer of 2018, which examined a nationally representative cross section of over 900 college administrators, I found that administrators are far more liberal than both the faculty members who teach our students in the classroom and the very students whom they indoctrinate. Two-thirds of administrators self-identify as liberal, with 40 percent of that liberal pool stating that they are far left. A quarter of them call themselves middle of the road, while only 5 percent say they are on the right. That makes for a liberal-to-conservative ratio of 12 to one.

Faculty members, in contrast, have a ratio of about six to one, with 13 percent of our nation's professors identifying as conservative."

https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2018/11/08/college-administrators-are-more-liberal-other-groups-including-faculty-members>

²⁵ "Rubric to assess candidate contributions to diversity, equity, and inclusion." University of California-Berkeley Office for Faculty Equity and Welfare. 2018.

https://ofew.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/rubric to assess candidate contributions to diversity equity and incl usion.pdf

²⁶ Diamond, Max. 2018. "Pledging Allegiance to Diversity, and to the Tenure for which it stands." <

https://www.realclearinvestigations.com/articles/2018/10/18/i pledge allegiance to diversity and to the tenure f or which it stands.html>

diversity statements at many University of California campuses being used as a *de facto* "political test." A professor at the University of California-Davis, Thompson wrote:

The diversity "score" is becoming central in the hiring process. Hiring committees are being urged to *start* the review process by using officially provided rubrics to score the required diversity statements and to eliminate applicants who don't achieve a scoring cut-off.

Why is it a political test? Politics are a reflection of how you believe society should be organized. Classical liberals aspire to treat every person as a unique individual, not as a representative of their gender or their ethnic group. The sample rubric dictates that in order to get a high diversity score, a candidate must have actively engaged in promoting different identity groups as part of their professional life. The candidate should demonstrate "clear knowledge of, experience with, and interest in dimensions of diversity that result from different identities" and describe "multiple activities in depth." *Requiring candidates to believe that people should be treated differently according to their identity is indeed a political test* … Mathematics must be open and welcoming to everyone, to those who have traditionally been excluded, and to those holding unpopular viewpoints. Imposing a political litmus test is not the way to achieve excellence in mathematics or in the university. Not in 1950, and not today. [emphases added]²⁷

Thompson's defense of classical liberal principles and individualism resulted in a storm of criticism from social justice advocates (including professors), which in turn resulted in a public letter defending her freedom of expression signed by others.²⁸ Earlier, in 2014, Professor Thompson had asked one of the most controversial questions in today's academy: Does diversity trump ability?²⁹ Even in a field as meritocratic as mathematics—open to all, based on symbols accessible to all those possessing some aptitude, with verifiable proofs—a radical understanding of social justice will increasingly clash with classical liberal principles and will require a vigorous counter-response.

Overall, then, the trends in American higher education are concerning. The places that ought to be the freest in our society are becoming some of the least open when it comes to discussing controversial topics.³⁰ Increasingly, even those liberal professors who pride themselves on being open-minded are coming under pressure from radical social justice activists.³¹

 ²⁷ Thompson, Abigail. 2019. "A word from..." <u>https://www.ams.org/journals/notices/201911/rnoti-p1778.pdf</u>
²⁸ "Responses to 'A word from...Abigail Thompson."" *Notices of the American Mathematical Society.* < https://www.ams.org/journals/notices/201911/rnoti-p1778.pdf

²⁹ Thompson, Abigail. 2014. "Does diversity trump ability? An example of the misuse of mathematics in the social sciences." Volume 61, Number 9. P. 1024- 1030.

³⁰ Lukianoff, Greg and Jonathan Haidt. *The Coddling of the American mind: how good intentions and bad ideas are setting up a generation for failure.*

Campbell, Bradley and Jason Manning. The rise of victimhood culture: Microaggressions, safe spaces, and the new culture wars.

³¹ Stanley-Becker, Isaac. 2015. *The Washington Post*. "Yale instructor at the center of racial protest to leave teaching role." < <u>https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2015/12/04/with-her-words-this-instructor-helped-set-off-protests-over-race-and-a-debate-over-free-speech-now-shes-leaving-yale/ ></u>

In the UK, there are fewer surveys of faculty views, but the available evidence indicates a similar tilt to the left among higher education staff.³²

4) The boards of trustees

In practice, universities are increasingly governed by administrators who share even more "progressive" political views than the professors who do the teaching.³³ Even so, boards of trustees, not administrators, wield ultimate authority, and these boards should reclaim some of the power they have ceded to administrators in order to implement necessary reforms. To the extent there are serious problems, boards of trustees are ultimately responsible for them.

For instance, boards of trustees themselves should strive to ensure that a variety of perspectives are represented in classroom, extending real support for different political views, to enforce genuine education instead of indoctrination.

Conclusion

What concerns me the most about trends on university campuses is not the prevalence of left-ofcenter views on campuses per se. Rather, I am concerned about the increasing control of "social justice" advocates over large sections of the mainstream left, as well as the increasing rigidity of some advocates of social justice with regard to salient political topics such as Israel, Islam, and clerical rule in Iran, among other issues.

If one tries to have an earnest debate on such issues, this can be difficult: disagreement can be rejected as immorality. There has been a marked decline in the willingness of some individuals on the left to view their political opponents on the right as moral agents with whom they have policy disagreements, as opposed to immoral persons who do not deserve to be heard, much less debated.

Serious problems arise when, in the institutions of education, instructors seek to impose certain preconceived ideas, instead of teaching students to think through concepts and approach them critically, including the positions favored by the instructors themselves. Real critical thought requires a willingness to re-examine one's fundamental assumptions. In order to teach students this fundamental lesson, genuine diversity—viewpoint diversity—is indispensable on university campuses. This lesson was learned the hard way on both sides of the Atlantic in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when it tended to be religious dogma that stood in the way of free inquiry. It will be ironic if, by allowing the secular doctrine of social justice to become the new and inflexible orthodoxy of our time, we have to relearn that same lesson.

³² https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/almost-half-of-sector-to-back-labour-the-election-pollsuggests/2019944.article [Caveat is that this survey was self-selecting]

³³ <u>https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2018/11/08/college-administrators-are-more-liberal-other-groups-including-faculty-members</u>



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