

Universities are progressing from parody to suppression

By Melanie Phillips, The Times, 5 April 2017

The universities have progressed from self-parody into suppression. A social sciences lecturer at Hull university has told students they will be marked down unless they use “gender-sensitive” language. The pronouns “he” or “she”, “his” or “hers” appear to have become prohibited speech.

Other universities have been steering students away from such gender-brutal words, including any constructed around the consecutive letters m, a and n. Last month, Cardiff Metropolitan University issued a checklist recommending students avoid words such as “layman” and “manpower”, and use “staff” or “operate” instead of phrases such as “man the pumps”.

This goes hand-in-hand with the development, on both British and American campuses, of “safe spaces” and “trigger warnings” to protect students from encountering opinions that might disturb their equilibrium.

After the BBC Woman’s Hour presenter Jenni Murray argued that men who claim to have changed sex should not call themselves women, Oxford students tried (and failed) to ban her from speaking last Sunday at the city’s literary festival. Spiked magazine has claimed that more than 60 per cent of British universities actively censored free speech last year.

Some may dismiss all this as due to the so-called snowflake generation, ludicrously quick to take offence and unable to face up to criticism of any kind. This greatly underestimates the gravity of what is happening.

In the Wall Street Journal, Jonathan Haidt, the psychologist and professor of ethical leadership at New York University, has said these are rituals being performed by “true believers who have reoriented their lives around the fight against evil”. They were transforming the campus into a kind of secular holy space, where white privilege had replaced original sin, victim groups were worshipped like gods and the sinned-against were propitiated with safe spaces and trigger warnings. These true believers were furthermore often granted the “heckler’s veto” by administrators who refused to stand up to them. Sometimes the heckling develops into something worse. Last month the social scientist Charles Murray, a conservative American scholar who has written controversially about genetics as well as society’s “underclass”, was subjected to attack after being termed a “white nationalist”. He was forced off the stage at Middlebury College in Vermont by violent protesters whose onslaught left one professor in a neck brace after she tried to shield Murray from the mob.

Worse still, according to Haidt, such students have redefined “violence” away from its association with physical harm. “As students are using the word today, ‘violence’ is words that have a negative effect on members of the sacred victim groups. And so even silence can be violence.” It follows, accordingly, that if either speech or silence are deemed to be an assault, actual violence is then seen as a form of self-defence against offence.

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Where did all this madness come from? Probably with the rise of identity politics back in the Eighties and Nineties. With Soviet communism deemed useless as the means of transforming western society, and with divisions between left and right rendered meaningless by the dominance of market economics, radicals turned to race and ethnicity, sexuality and gender as the new political battlegrounds.

Groups formed around such identities claimed victim status, giving themselves a free pass for their own behaviour while demonising all who stood against them. The outcome was what might be termed “coerced virtue”. Under this implacable dogma, people have to be made to behave in accordance with beliefs that brook no dissent because they are held to be synonymous with goodness itself. It’s a doctrine which goes back to the 18th-century thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his sinister but protean belief in “forcing people to be free”.

“Coerced virtue” lies at the heart of all contemporary ideologies: moral and cultural relativism, multiculturalism, environmentalism, anti-racism, feminism and others which now dominate and shape western culture. All ideologies, however, are inimical to reason. Rather than looking at evidence and arriving at a conclusion, an ideology starts with its governing idea and wrenches the evidence to fit. Its internal logic means that the truth and reality perceived by most people are to ideologues utterly unthinkable. Ideology is therefore inimical to reason itself, while demonising all who oppose it as the acme of evil.

At Sussex university, a recent poster advertised a discussion on “dealing with right-wing attitudes and politics in the classroom”. According to the university, this referred to “extreme attitudes” such as racism, sexism and homophobia. So “right wing” was equated with views considered beyond the pale.

Thus dissent is obliterated. On campus, a report by the Adam Smith Institute says, “left-liberals” outnumber conservatives by 75 per cent to 12 per cent. This is what Jonathan Haidt calls the “political purification of the universities”.

In his great essay *Politics and the English Language*, George Orwell observed that the debasement of politics and the corruption of language were intimately linked. “When the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer,” he wrote. “But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.”

In our time, both processes are feeding into each other. A university should be the crucible of ideas and the exercise of reason. It is instead turning into an instrument for the closing of the western mind.

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