

## Academy suffers by rejecting reasoned debate

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By Noel Carl, 21 August 2019

*Editor's note: I'm ashamed of my old alma mater, Cambridge University, as they trash freedom of speech in favour of ideology and bullying.*

In a 1951 essay for The New York Times Magazine titled “The Best Answer to Fanaticism — Liberalism”, philosopher Bertrand Russell laid out 10 principles that he believed summed up the liberal outlook.

The fifth item on Russell’s list was: “Have no respect for the authority of others, for there are always contrary authorities to be found.”

This statement echoes the motto of Britain’s Royal Society (a learned society founded in 1660 for the promotion of scientific knowledge), which is *Nullius in verba*, meaning “Take nobody’s word for it”.

Both Russell’s statement and the Royal Society’s motto capture the idea that when we find ourselves in disagreement with someone, we expect that person to give reasons and to present evidence, rather than simply to declare his position as authoritative.

Resolving disagreements through reason-giving is important in every domain within society. But one domain where it should be considered especially important is the university. We - expect academics to engage with one another through careful, reasoned dialogue — whether in person, on the internet or through their published works.

However, in recent years many academics and academic institutions have been falling far short of this ideal.

A phenomenon has arisen — sometimes referred to as “academic mobbing” — in which a large number of scholars get together to ritually denounce one of their colleagues, usually by means of an open letter.

Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt drew attention to this phenomenon in their book *The Coddling of the American Mind* (Penguin, 2018). Examples of academics who have been “mobbed” in recent years include Jordan Peterson, Nigel Biggar, Rebecca Tuvel, Bruce Gilley, Rachel Fulton Brown, Alessandro Strumia, Amy Wax, Ricardo Duchesne and Peter Boghossian.

In December last year I had my own “mobbing” experience. Earlier that year I had been appointed to a research fellowship at St Edmund’s College in the University of Cambridge. However, just two months into the three-year fellowship, I found myself the subject of a censorious open letter (signed by more than 500 academics) that claimed my academic work was “racist pseudoscience”. The letter used moralistic language and provided no specific evidence for its assertions.

An independent inquiry rejected the complaints against my appointment. But a second investigation into my “activities and connections” concluded that my work was “problematic”. As a result, St Edmund’s College terminated my fellowship.

This is not the forum to adjudicate my scholarship. Nor is it the place for me to defend my “activities and connections”. Rather, what I wish to discuss is something far bigger: open inquiry and academic freedom.

Many of the censorious open letters that have been signed by academics in recent years share three important features. First, they affirm that the target’s scholarship lacks academic merit, typically with little or no supporting evidence. Second, they impugn the target’s character; for example, by claiming the target is a “racist” or “white supremacist”. And third, they proclaim that the target’s work constitutes a tangible threat to certain marginalised groups within society.

Of course, it takes only a single individual to refute a bad argument. There is no reason to gather tens or hundreds of signatories except for the purpose of achieving some collective goal, such as rallying support for a political cause (for example, opposition to colonialism), or pressuring an institution into action (for example, to have a particular individual fired).

Moreover, if the target’s arguments were as flawed as the signatories claim, they could simply be rebutted. There would be no need for personal attacks and appeals to emotion. Hence even a non-expert can reasonably conclude that signatories are probably motivated by political objections to the target’s work rather than substantive ones.

Notwithstanding the psychological costs incurred by the target, open letters signed by academics could be safely dismissed were it not for the fact the signatories often get exactly what they want. The target does get investigated or fired; their article does get retracted from an academic journal. Such capitulation by academic institutions is in clear violation of the principle with which I began this essay, namely that disagreements should be resolved through reason-giving rather than by appeals to authority. Hence it represents a serious threat to academic freedom.

Persecution of intellectual dissidents is not a new phenomenon. In 399BC, Socrates was tried and put to death based on the charge that “he busies himself studying things in the sky and below the earth”, which it was claimed would “corrupt the youth”. In 1633, Galileo was found “vehemently suspect of heresy” because he had claimed that the Earth revolved around the sun. Galileo subsequently was required to “abjure, curse and detest” his beliefs. And in 1859 Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*, which met with sustained opposition from the church. After reading the book, the Reverend Adam Sedgwick wrote Darwin a polite letter stating that he had found parts of the book “utterly false & grievously mischievous”.

Galileo’s theory of heliocentrism and Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection caused widespread offence at the time they were published because they conflicted with the sacred values of the church.

Note that sacred values can be distinguished from mere instrumental values in two ways: no amount of a sacred value can be traded off for any amount of an instrumental value; and proposals to accept such trade-offs engender moral outrage. Hence Galileo’s belief that the Earth revolved around the sun was not simply a tentative hypothesis with some preliminary supporting evidence. It was a direct affront to an entire moral system.

The sacred values of the church no longer predominate in institutions of higher learning (with the exception of a few religious colleges). Today there are different sacred values, ones that reflect an academy in which left-wing and progressive views are overwhelmingly dominant. (It should be noted that there are still attacks on academics from religious and conservative factions operating outside the academy.)

The sacred values of the progressive left do not constrain the study of celestial mechanics, or indeed most other branches of technical science. Rather, they curb discussion of topics in the sociopolitical realm, notably those for which it is possible to weave a compelling narrative of victim and oppressor: sex, race, transgender, colonialism, immigration.

But perhaps some ideas are just too dangerous or too offensive to be discussed openly. Why should we care about academic freedom at all?

The first reason is that people can be quite bad at objectively assessing risk. For example, we judge activities to be riskier if our mental images of those activities contain more negative emotional content. Hence we may not be very good at identifying which ideas really are dangerous.

The second reason is that suppressing bad ideas has a tendency to backfire. When a particular idea is declared taboo, it may end up becoming more influential rather than less, a phenomenon known as the Streisand effect.

The third reason is that academic freedom serves as an error-correction mechanism. It allows us to weed out the bad ideas and sharpen our arguments against the worst ones.

Of course, the ideological skew of the professoriate is not the only factor behind the rise of “mobbing” and the general reluctance of academics to speak frankly about certain topics. Another important factor is the increase in university tuition fees, which has transformed many students from dutiful scholars into entitled consumers.

It is not uncommon for one of today’s students to ask, on encountering an invidious idea, why on earth they should have to put up with it. And when dealing with complaints from students, university administrators (who are ever mindful of their bottom lines) often choose the path of least resistance, which means giving in to demands for censorship rather than standing up for academic freedom.

The university should be the one institution in society where any idea — however controversial — can be subjected to robust, open debate. However, it increasingly seems to be the institution where such debate is least possible. In a provocative lecture titled Two - Incompatible Sacred Values at American Universities, Haidt argues that universities face a choice. They can retain “truth” as their ultimate aim, thereby committing to uphold academic freedom and open inquiry, or they can adopt “social justice” in its place.

Some universities are already careening down the latter path. Let us hope that most of them opt for the former.

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College, Cambridge following a campaign by professors and students who objected to his research on intelligence and the ethics of studying group differences.