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The Closing of the Collegiate Mind

Opponents of free speech have chalked up many campus victories lately as ideological conformity marches on.

By Ruth R. Wisse

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There was a time when people looking for intellectual debate turned away from politics to the university. Political backrooms bred slogans and bagmen; universities fostered educated discussion. But when students in the 1960s began occupying university property like the thugs of regimes America was fighting abroad, the venues gradually reversed. Open debate is now protected only in the polity: In universities, muggers prevail.

Assaults on intellectual and political freedom have been making headlines. Pressure from faculty egged on by Muslim groups induced Brandeis University last month not to grant Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the proponent of women's rights under Islam, an intended honorary degree at its convocation. This was a replay of 1994, when Brandeis faculty demanded that trustees rescind their decision to award an honorary degree to Jeane Kirkpatrick, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. In each case, a faculty cabal joined by (let us charitably say) ignorant students promoted the value of repression over the values of America's liberal democracy.

Opponents of free speech have lately chalked up many such victories: New York City Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly prevented from speaking at Brown University in November; a lecture by Charles Murray canceled by Azusa Pacific University in April; [Condoleezza Rice](#), former secretary of state and national-security adviser under the [George W. Bush](#) administration, harassed earlier this month into declining the invitation by Rutgers University to address this year's convocation.

Most painful to me was the Harvard scene several years ago when the Committee on Degrees in Social Studies, celebrating its 50th anniversary, accepted a donation in honor of its former head tutor Martin Peretz, whose contributions to the university include the chair in Yiddish I have been privileged to hold. His enemies on campus generated a "party against Marty" that forced him to walk a gauntlet of jeering students for having allegedly offended Islam, while putting others on notice that they had best not be perceived guilty of association with him.

Universities have not only failed to stand up to those who limit debate, they have played a part in encouraging them. The modish commitment to so-called diversity replaces the ideal of guaranteed equal treatment of individuals with guaranteed group preferences in hiring and curricular offerings.

Females and members of visible minorities are given handicaps (as in golf). Courses are devised to inculcate in students the core lesson that (in the words of one recent graduate, writing online at the Huffington Post) "harmful structural inequalities persist on the basis of class, race, sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity in the U.S." On too many campuses, as in a funhouse mirror, ideological commitment to diversity has brought about its opposite: ideological hegemony, which is much more harmful to the life of the mind than the alleged structural inequalities that social engineering set out to correct.

In 1995 I participated in a campus debate on affirmative action that drew so much student interest it had to be rerouted to Harvard's largest auditorium. This year I was asked by a student group to participate in a debate on modern feminism. Though I am not hotly engaged in the subject, I agreed and waited for confirmation, thinking it might be fun to consider a women's movement that has never graduated from sisterhood to motherhood. There followed several emails apologizing for the delay and finally a message acknowledging that no one could be found to take the pro-feminist side. Evidently, one of those asked had responded: "What is there to debate?" No wonder those who admit no legitimate opposition to their ideas feel duty-bound to shut down unwelcome speakers.

Because conservative students do not take over buildings or drown others out with their shouting, instructors feel free to mock conservatives in the classroom, and administrators pay scant attention when their posters are torn down or their sensibilities offended. As a tenured professor who does not decline the label "conservative," I benefit from this imbalance by getting to know some of the feistiest students on campus.

But these students need and deserve every encouragement from outside their closed and claustrophobic environs. As one of them put it to me, "There's more faculty interest in climate control than in the Western canon." Multiculturalism guarantees that courses on Islam highlight all the good that can be said of Muhammad and the Quran, but there is no comparable academic commitment to reinvigorating the foundational teachings of American liberal democracy or to strengthening the legacy bequeathed to us by "dead white males."

So far the university culture has not been able to destroy the two-party system, but its influence on the current administration in Washington gives some sense of what may lie ahead unless small "d" democrats—which these days means mostly conservatives—begin to take back the campus. Through patient but persistent means, they ought to help students introduce speakers, debates, demands for courses and all the intellectual firepower they can muster in favor of American exceptionalism, the moral advantages of a free economy and the need to protect democracy from enemies we are not afraid to name.

In short, let the university become as contentious as Congress. In Nigeria, Islamists think nothing of seizing hundreds of schoolgirls for the crime of aspiring to an education. Here in the United States, the educated class thinks nothing of denying an honorary degree to a fearless Muslim woman who at peril of her life, and in the name of liberal democracy, has insisted on exposing such outrages to the light. The struggle for freedom is universal; would that our universities were on its side.

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