



In Search of More Generous Listening

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INTRODUCTION

In both the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US), recent academic years have been marred by cascades of scandals surrounding student behaviour that violate, or seem to violate, the principles of free speech that make Anglophone universities the best in the world. Incidents range from protests against speakers visiting campuses in order to present their ideas, the defunding of student newspapers expressing ideas deemed unsavoury, to large-scale organised policy that seeks to deny certain kinds of thought a place on the university stage.

Much discussed in both popular and academic media, the current wave of censorship for and by students has become a movement of many scales in many places; although one largely (but not wholly) led by liberal student activists. While it is tempting to push back at their perceived childishness, “othering” them as the activist language goes, these students see themselves as responding to severe gaps in dialogue which the ideas of groups historically left behind are shunted away from the main stage of academic discussion.

It goes without saying that free speech at universities in the UK and US must be preserved. However, beginning that process will require a conversation about how Anglophone universities got to this point to begin with. That conversation will be a frustrating one by necessity. Activists do not always hold their ideas through into the practice of protest, and bearers of the status quo are often more recalcitrant than reason dictates. A return to respectful discourse in the hope of resolving these issues will require us to commit to *detente*, to understanding, and to a clear assessment of the conditions of dialogue at our universities.

1) METHODS OF SPEECH REPRESSION

Generally speaking, free speech-threatening incidents can be broken down into a few categories. First and most pressing is what in the UK is called no-platforming and in the US, somewhat less elegantly, is referred to as “shutting down” speakers. Essentially, it is an organised and concerted effort to prevent a visiting speaker, who may be a political commentator, academic, or public figure, from taking the stage at a planned event. Typically this involves protest outside the venue with the goal of preventing the audience access to their seats, generating sufficient noise as to make a speech impossible, or, in rare cases, presenting a threat of violence to the speaker and their audience.

In the UK, these protests do certainly still persist; look no further than the anti-fascist protest at the Oxford Union that threw a talk with French Front National leader, Marine Le Pen, into jeopardy.¹ But a policy by the National Union of Students (NUS) that allows for the wholesale denial of speaking time, attendance, and publication to members of a set of 5 organizations deemed racist or fascist² presents a far more insidious case by categorically no-platforming organizations.

Censorship has also taken a more literal form in past years through the attempted defunding of student newspapers and banning of external publications. At Wesleyan University in Connecticut, an Op-Ed written by a student critical of violence by the Black Lives Matter movement prompted a petition which called for the denial of funding to the campus publication, pending reforms including mandatory “social justice/diversity training” and monthly reports on the diversity of its executive staff. Organizers also called for a grassroots movement to destroy as many copies of the newspaper as possible until conditions were met.³

In the UK, a watchdog project by Spiked Magazine found that at least 30 student unions were responsible for banning specific publications on campus. These bans have typically been made on the grounds of sexist, homophobic, or racist content and rhetoric and thereby presenting a threat to non-whites, women, and LGBT+ persons.

Finally, we look to the much-maligned “safe spaces” created by student activists where ideas are filtered by acceptability. These extend from on-campus refuges for LGBT+ students created generally by university administrators to provide support networks, to organizations like Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) which has transitioned from an advocacy group for Palestinian self-determination to one which has turned to violence in order to repress dissent. At an event for student organizations to open themselves up to new members in 2014 at Temple University, an SJP member punched a university employee after he approached their table with criticism about SJP support for Hamas, the Palestinian terrorist organization.⁴ While such violence is rare, it illustrates the seriousness with which activists defend their safe spaces. These are communities in which certain ideas and only certain ideas are given

¹ Henley, J. & Ullah, A. (2015): ‘Marine Le Pen’s Oxford university speech delayed by protesters’, *The Guardian*, 5th February 2015

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/05/marine-le-pen-front-national-oxford-union-university-speech-delayed-protesters>

² National Union of Students (2013): ‘Report - No Platform policy’, 4th November 2013

http://www.nus.org.uk/Documents/NEC_131120_No%20Platform%20policy.pdf

³ Kingkade, T. (2015): ‘Activists Want Wesleyan Newspaper To Lose Funding For Running Op-Ed Critiquing Black Lives Matter’, *The Huffington Post*, 23rd September 2015

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/wesleyan-newspaper-black-lives-matter_us_5602f1efe4b0fde8b0d0f40d

⁴ Horst, T. (2014): ‘Horst: Get the facts before condemning SJP’, *The Temple News*, 2nd September

2014 <http://temple-news.com/opinion/get-facts-condemning-sjp/>

room to speak. They serve as semi-formalised bubbles within universities where students who feel victimised by ideology can retreat into communities of like-minded people.

While there is certainly nothing novel about a community of like-minded people, safe spaces are unique in that the assertion of a safe space can be used as a method of repressing debate. At Yale in 2015, students protested an email from Erika Christakis, a faculty member in the Early Childhood Education department and Associate Master of one of Yale's residential colleges, which called for levity in the treatment of culturally insensitive Halloween costumes by demanding her dismissal. As students put it, her email threatened their safety within their home, a safe space, in which they expected to be immune to a broader national conversation around the sanctity of cultural expression. Halloween costumes have caused controversy for years across the United States and particularly at universities including Penn,⁵ UChicago,⁶ and Dartmouth,⁷ so it is difficult to argue that the conversation was not topical. However, students felt that their residential college should not be the locus for such a conversation, being their home and therefore, by necessity, a safe space.

2) HOW LIBERAL STUDENT ACTIVISTS PUT IT ALL TOGETHER

Part of the issue in talking about no-platforming and censorship in a conservative context is the difficulty of establishing dialogue across with aisle with liberals and progressives. It is often difficult to parse which arguments brought by student activists are the flawed products of uninformed thinking and which are internally consistent rationales for action. Where addressing the former is likely a process best left to universities themselves, the latter are worth listening to, at the very least to practice the kind of free inquiry that appears to be under threat by them.

First and foremost among these arguments is that inquiry on universities, both in the USA and the UK, is not currently free. Where conservatives see liberal students repressing ideas: shutting down speaking events across the two countries, protesting the presence of statues as at Oxford or the names of university buildings as at Yale, liberal activists see themselves carving out space for ideas and people which for many, many years had no place at universities. And by their logic, carving out space sometimes means closing down the expression of ideas which they deem to be tied up in past

⁵ Shibley, R. (2006): 'FIRE, Carol Iannone, and the Amy Gutmann Halloween Costume Controversy', *FIRE*, 7th November 2006

<https://www.thefire.org/fire-carol-iannone-and-the-amy-gutmann-halloween-costume-controversy/>

⁶ Erbentraut, J. (2014): 'Students: University of Chicago's Racist Halloween Costume Controversy Is Part Of A Larger Problem', *The Huffington Post*, 24th November 2014

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/11/21/university-of-chicago-facebook-threat_n_6199892.html

⁷ Steele, K. 'Is cultural appropriation OK on Halloween?', *The Tab – Dartmouth (US)*, December 2015

<http://thetab.com/us/dartmouth/2015/10/29/cultural-appropriation-ok-halloween-540>

exclusions. A black South African law student demanding the removal of a statue of Cecil Rhodes at Oxford, for example, is a logical extension for activists of the uncontroversial policy of preventing fascists from speaking at universities. Where fascism denied millions a chance to partake in dialogue, notably Jewish academics in 20th century Germany, activists see figures like Rhodes and many, many others, as representing just that kind of repressive ideology. The ironic fact that Rhodes' philanthropy provided for those very students' presence at university is largely glossed over or addressed as a sort of reparation for colonial atrocities which neither calls for nor deserves any special consideration.

Furthermore, activists see the promotion of speakers that they associate with repression, as well as the defence of statues depicting slave owners or colonial magnates, as a not-so-subtle proscription of their ideas. Whenever a figure perceived as repressive is given time which might have been given to one perceived as progressive, activists read the administrators and faculty committees who make those decisions as passive promoters of the worst that they can stand for. The neutral observer, weighing potentially dangerous ideas by subjecting them to open discourse, is dead. This is because liberal activists largely believe that universities, from the composition of their faculty to the distribution of their annual speaking calendar, subtly affect the way that their constituent populations think. On one end, the physical environment in which ideas are presented with invited speakers addressing their audiences from pulpits or professors lecturing in the front of a hall, in the eyes of many of these protesters, gives what those speakers say a subtle air of proscription. Something like the position of a speaker on a stage, literally above her student listeners, gives that speaker an impression of greater legitimacy than those in the crowd.

Such a combined gap in perceived legitimacy has stakes for liberal student activists. For example, in March of 2015, the University of Chicago invited Zineb El Rhazoui, a Charlie Hebdo satirist, to give a lecture and Q&A which prompted one student to speak up violently in protest to her disparaging commentary on the double standards for women's rights introduced in order to preserve Islamic traditionalism.⁸ The event, which prompted discussion as to the conduct of the student who spoke out, highlights the frustration felt by students bearing poorly represented ideological backgrounds.

Some argue, drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, that when only a certain set of ideas are represented, the audience loses its ability to think outside of those ideas. Or even more insidiously, institutions of power i.e. universities or governments, present only a certain set of ideas in order to circumscribe the thought of their subjects. Certainly in the case of the satire of Islam, such a prospect

⁸ Zuckerman, E. & McInnis, A. (2015): 'Letter: French club says "Freedom of speech does not mean safety from debate" in response to criticisms of Zineb El Rhazoui discussion of free speech', *The Chicago Maroon*, 5th March 2015
<http://chicagomaroon.com/2015/03/05/letter-french-club-says-freedom-of-speech-does-not-mean-safety-from-debate-in-response-to-criticisms-of-zineb-el-rhazoui-discussion-of-free-speech/>

would be dangerous. This is all to say, the student activists who raise concerns about free speech are within their own rationale campaigning for a freer and broad and respectful exchange of ideas by resisting, sometimes violently, a perceived circumscription of thought.

3) LINES OF RESPONSE

Faced with a clear call for action, opponents to activists who threaten free speech can draw upon an arsenal of arguments which have come to the fore in recent months. Perhaps the most readily deployed of these is the notion that these activists are children who have been “coddled”⁹ or are in need of thicker skin. While it is satisfying to dismiss activists as such, it does not seem to be a particularly effective strategy for combatting the kinds of behaviour that have so disrupted Anglophone university life for several reasons.

Most simply, young people generally don’t respond well to infantilisation. As individuals coming into society, forming organizations, and taking action together, these activists neither feel like children nor present a childish threat. Theirs is a very adult one in the damage it could do to academic discourse. And yet, it is worth recognizing that university students occupy a place in popular consciousness which is neither adult nor child. They can neither act with the political passivity of children while political candidates jockey for their support, nor be expected to behave with full adult autonomy while they live and study in highly cloistered university environments. At the core of activist thinking lies, to some extent, an identity crisis. A more open conversation about what place the student has in the world is certainly overdue, particularly as more and more young people enrol. As it stands, undergraduate enrolment is up more than 14% since 2000 in the UK¹⁰ and 30% in the USA.¹¹ This is to say, their numbers are only growing.

That is not a very satisfying response, though, because it presupposes that activist thinking is simply a product of childlike limitation of thought and experience. Perhaps the best possible response to a threat to open discourse is the deployment of just that very open discourse. As Kirsten Powers said in a debate of American university professors in the Atlantic, where activists are “They're learning that they have a right to protect themselves from speech. And it's up to professors to teach them that the way you

⁹ Lukianoff, G. & Haidt, J. (2015): ‘The Coddling of the American Mind’, *The Atlantic*, September 2015
<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/>

¹⁰ Higher Education Statistics Agency (2015): Online Statistics – Students & qualifiers
<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/stats>

¹¹ National Center for Education Statistics (2016): Undergraduate Enrollment
http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cha.asp

respond when offended is to argue and make your case”¹² While Powers places the onus for teaching that lesson with professors, it might be just as well done by activists opponents. Demonstrating the power of free inquiry, opponents to this brand of liberal activism might be best served listening generously to the ideas that activists present to find areas of compromise or points of value.

If we find merit in the conclusion that a single speaker addressing a massive audience does give an air of proscription, event organizers can push for more panel discussions which situate speakers’ ideas within the context of those of their colleagues. We could campaign for more active Q&A sessions in which speakers not only present their ideas but defend them. As to the statues that dot British and American campuses, there certainly could be novel ways of presenting controversial figures both in recognition of their contributions but also in awareness of their shortcomings especially when those shortcomings were severe. Policy solutions are hardly ready-made, and they shouldn’t be. Those that will be most effective in preserving a diversity of ideas while also respecting those that can and have been left behind historically will likely be those that are developed by speaking ideas openly and listening to ideas generously.

CONCLUSION

While there is no doubt that the threat that activists’ speech policing poses to academic freedom is severe, their movement is undoubtedly bound by principled rationale. It is one which presses administrators and professors to give greater attention to ideas and peoples who have not often benefitted from a full hearing within the academic world and to draw away from ideas which marginalize parts of the population. What they call for is free speech of a kind, but where it casts off the shackles of certain modes of repression, it fixes new burdens upon ideas which do still deserve attention. Foundationally, academic discourse is not a zero sum game.

Saying that isn’t enough, however. Careful conversation with these individuals will likely reveal that the freedom and breadth of university discourse requires careful custodianship. Just as American academics pushed for the freedom to debate the merits of communism alongside those of Western capitalist ideology during the repressive McCarthy era, it has fallen to our hands to push for a continued depth and breadth of academic inquiry. That will require thoughtful, respectful, generous engagement with oppositional forces which relies first and foremost on carefully constructed arguments and a reciprocal give and take. To break the oppositionality with which activists view their struggle, we would do well to take off the riot gear and join them in the crowd so that we can hear their points, find common ground,

¹² Friedersdorf, C. (2016): ‘Should Any Ideas Be ‘Off the Table’ in Campus Debates?’, *The Atlantic*, 30th June 2016 <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/06/should-any-ideas-be-off-the-table-in-campus-debates/489710/>

and generate solutions that help to preserve the environment that has allowed for free thought to flourish so well in our university.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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