

Shepherd remains the villain to the campus left, even after Laurier's investigation

The “woke” standpoint on free speech is shifting to the thoroughly discredited 1960s’ era proposition that free speech is just a feint deployed by the privileged to silence the powerless



TERRY GLAVIN

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“At the dances I was one of the most untiring and gayest,” the dangerously courageous and brilliant revolutionary anarchist Emma Goldman wrote in her early 1930s memoir, *Living My Life*, and it was because of her “reckless abandon” on the dance floor, among other things, that she was routinely belittled and upbraided by the more dreary and humourless among her comrades.

Despite the 1960s’ feminist slogans, Goldman never said, “If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be part of your revolution.” Still, that commonplace misquotation perfectly captures Goldman’s sentiments, as well as those of the brightest and best who carried on in her tradition.

“I was tired of having the cause constantly thrown into my face,” Goldman wrote. “I did not believe that a cause which stood for a beautiful ideal, for anarchism, for release and freedom from convention and prejudice, should demand the denial of life and joy. . . if it meant that, I did not want it. I want freedom, the right to self-expression, everybody’s right to beautiful, radiant things.”

Wilfrid Laurier University’s famously upbraided teaching assistant Lindsay Shepherd is no Emma Goldman, but she is a bright young pro-choice vegetarian recycling enthusiast and erstwhile Liberal Party supporter. And it wasn’t even for dancing that Shepherd was outrageously abused in the star-chamber disciplinary proceeding last month that catapulted the 23-year-old into the limelight. It was for nothing. Nothing at all.

On Monday, Laurier president Deborah MacLatchy announced that an external investigation had found that Shepherd — charged with violating the university’s Gendered and Sexual Violence policy by unlawfully creating a “toxic” environment that put transgendered students at risk of feeling “unsafe” — had done nothing of the kind after all. And there had never even been a complaint about her, formal or informal, either. The whole thing had been a big fat “institutional failure.”

The Laurier derangement kicked off after it came to the attention of Shepherd’s busybody supervisor, communications professor Nathan Rambukkana, that during a lesson on contentions surrounding the architecture of grammar, Shepherd had aired a brief clip of a debate broadcast on TV Ontario that centred on the controversies arising from gender-neutral pronouns in the English language.

On one side: the cantankerous University of Toronto psychology professor Jordan Peterson, notorious among campus social-justice activists for declaring

that he will defy the law if need be, rather than be compelled to use pronouns he says are ridiculous. On the other side: the similarly zealous, self-described “politically-conscious interdisciplinary historian” Nicholas Matte, curator of the Sexual Representation Collection at the U of T’s Mark S. Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies.

Accompanied at the meeting by associate professor Herbert Pimlott and Adria Joel, manager of the university’s Gendered Violence Prevention and Support office, Rambukkana proceeded to direct several false and absurd charges at Shepherd, not least that her showing the brief TVO clip was “like neutrally playing a speech by Hitler.” But Shepherd recorded the showdown, and after she turned the recording over to the Canadian Press, hey presto, another one of those zany campus free speech brouhahas was in full flower.

But the strangely-overlooked thing isn’t just that Shepherd’s free speech rights were only tenuously at stake to begin with (as a lowly non-union employee, she’s tasked with conducting tutorials more or less as directed). And it wasn’t just that the “progressive” or “social justice” contribution to the cacophony was in the right-wing tradition that had marshalled establishment power against the activists of Emma Goldman’s generation (women and men who went to jail in free speech fights over union organizing, reproductive rights and the right to convene street assemblies to assail the cruelties of capitalism).

It was this: Here were three manager-academics getting caught redhanded, on tape, as they badgered, bullied and browbeat a young worker, and the “left,” to the extent that it is anything of the kind, came down squarely on the side of the boss. Even now, after Laurier’s external investigation has shown that Shepherd had been subjected to a farrago of trumped-up transgressions, non-existent student complaints and outright lies — and even though the investigation totally

vindicated and exonerated her — Shepherd remains, to the campus “left,” the villain of the piece.

Fads do come and go, and one might reasonably hope that something useful and coherent may yet arise from the campus bedlam of speech policing rituals, trigger-warnings, micro-aggression panics, safe-space enclosures, implicit-bias patrols, structural racism probes and heteronormativity expungings that conservatives have lately had such a jolly time making jokes about. It’s also helpful to keep in mind that matters may not be nearly as frightfully dreary as the morbid public fascination with these uproars might suggest. University students should be expected to exhibit a bit of madcap stridency. Their professors should be encouraged to persevere in unbridled inquiry, too. It’s what professors are for. It’s what tenure is for.

But tenure was never intended to shield horrible-boss academics from public opprobrium. And it isn’t helping that the “woke” standpoint on free speech is shifting to the thoroughly discredited 1960s’ era proposition that free speech is just a feint deployed by the powerful and privileged to silence the powerless and keep the oppressed in their place.

As the American Civil Liberties Union has lately found itself forced to remind its multiplying detractors on the American campuses (a September ACLU seminar at the College of William and Mary in Virginia was shut down by noisemakers chanting “ACLU, you’d protect Hitler too!”), it’s the marginalized and minority-opinion voices that will be most likely to get silenced if free speech continues to decline as a broadly-accepted public good.

It’s not quite as clever as Lindsay Shepherd’s critics seem to think it is when they resort to the handy whataboutism available in the less-argued-about case of Dalhousie University student leader Masuma Khan, who got entangled in the

university's speech code brambles in October, following a row over the Student Union's decision to abstain from Canada 150 celebrations.

The point about Khan is supposed to run along the lines that the Dalhousie rumpus hasn't made the waves of Laurier's because Shepherd's "crying white girl" status supersedes the marginal position occupied by Khan, a Muslim woman of colour. See the white supremacy inherent in the system!

Paradoxically, unlike Shepherd's situation, Khan's case was a straightforward free speech debacle, but it also proved the ACLU's point and quite deftly illustrated the absurdity of obsessive speech policing as well. Unlike Shepherd's case, there was a formal complaint against Khan. A real live complainant took advantage of Dalhousie's code prohibitions on demeaning and intimidating behaviour to pursue disciplinary action against Khan over a Facebook post containing the by now familiar lingo about "white fragility" and "white tears" and so on.

Khan refused an informal mediation process, which left Dalhousie student affairs vice-provost Arig al Shaibah, herself a Muslim woman of colour, in the unenviable position of having to follow procedure and take formal disciplinary action against Khan in the senate discipline committee. This caused another uproar, which then forced Al Shaibah to withdraw the file.

Just how any of these rigmaroles advance the cause that genuine radicals once fought for — the cause of freedom, the right to self-expression and "everybody's right to "beautiful, radiant things" — is not immediately obvious. And neither is the spectacle of "progressives" applauding the abuse of a lied-about, traduced and undefended worker.