

Defenders of forced gender-neutral pronouns illustrate Orwell's warnings about language

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Wilfrid Laurier University's David Haskell has emerged as the biggest campus defender of Lindsay Shepherd, the teaching assistant who controversially showed her undergraduate communications students a TV debate on gender-neutral pronouns.

The journalism professor **introduced her at a free speech rally** as the school launched an investigation of her, and now he takes a step back to analyze her critics' evolving arguments in light of George Orwell's essay "Politics and the English language." Haskell writes in a magazine-length *Quillette* essay that LGBTQ activists and WLU faculty are using the "appeal to safety" and "appeal to contextualization" to promote censorship of ideas they dislike – namely the refusal to use gender-neutral pronouns such as the singular "they" and the invented "ze" ("he" or "she").

Just as Orwell warned that power-hungry forces would use "meaningless words" to achieve their goals, campus activists have redefined "harm" as "taking offence and having one's feelings hurt" by both seeing the Jordan Peterson debate clip in Shepherd's class and *hearing about the airing* of the clip, according to Haskell.

They resorted to "pretentious diction" – the practice of giving "an air of scientific impartiality to biased judgments," per Orwell – to convince people that talking about the optionality of gender-neutral pronouns was dangerous ("epistemic violence").

But as Haskell writes, "clinical authority is not on their side":

Amongst clinical psychologists, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is currently considered the **gold standard treatment** for anxiety disorders, including PTSD. A

core component of CBT is exposing a person to their fears as well as reducing behaviors which encourage avoidance. The underlying logic of this technique is that avoidance increases mental fragility while exposure decreases it.

The activists' language is becoming increasingly unhinged, Haskell says: In the absence of any reports of harassment or threats to city or campus police since the Shepherd controversy, her critics seem less than genuine in their stated feelings of being "unsafe."

WLU faculty – her supervising professor in particular – have scolded the young TA for failing to put the Peterson debate clip in context, by which they mean framing it through the Marxist-derived "critical theory," Haskell writes:

It posits groups and ideas must be presented in terms of the oppressed and the oppressor with the position of the former being elevated and that of the latter being muted or silenced completely. ...

[Prof. Nathan] Rambukkana says that some ideas are not "up for debate" and that the proper way to approach certain views is to tell students, "this is a problematic idea that we might want to unpack." When pressed by Shepherd if this form of contextualization isn't tantamount to "taking sides", Rambukkana, unphased, responds, "Yes."

Haskell accuses Rambukkana (who did apologize to Shepherd) of "priming the candidate" by using his status as an authority figure over Shepherd "to motivate specific thoughts or responses" in her – namely that telling her students ("very young adults") what to believe is the academically correct thing to do.

When students ignore their professors' efforts to contextualize their lessons, "we know what happens," Haskell writes:

Students challenging concepts such as white privilege—regardless of their intent or the quantity or quality of their facts—are labeled racists, those debunking the gender

wage gap are labeled misogynists, and those giving equal time to an argument opposing compelled pronouns are labeled “transphobic.” ...

Next, after receiving their obligatory label, these non-conforming students will be accused of spreading hate speech. ... Then comes the final step in the process whereby those making the accusation of hate speech will say they now have the right to shut down their ideological opponents.

The journalism professor closes with his own “appeal to common sense,” asking his colleagues to consider how marginalized people have achieved their rights:

If you’re honest, you’ll admit that the single greatest factor in their collective advancement has been the ability to articulate their arguments freely.

Read the essay.

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