

THE IRONY OF—AND THE NEED FOR—THE HETERODOX ACADEMY

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I remember the excitement, more than thirty years ago, when I shifted to a life in the Academy following a ten-year career in law enforcement. I was entering, or so I thought, a world that welcomed debate and where contentious issues would be addressed with strong argument and evidence. I also relished the notion that I was entering the domain of the rebel where the unjust status quo could be challenged in a milieu that valued viewpoint diversity. I didn't believe this simply because my undergrad professors proselytized about it; I had, after all, lived through the civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam war protests, and entered adolescence during The Summer of Love. Whatever one might say about the ultimate naivety of that generation of (mostly privileged) students, they were all about freedom of expression and challenging orthodoxy.

I wasn't long in grad school before I realised that I had been had. Rather than challenging orthodoxies, it became apparent that to be a good scholar, indeed a decent human being, one needed to undergo a process of homogenization. The lights came on completely by the time I took up my current position, 26 years ago, just as the forces of political correctness hit universities. It became obvious that there was an inverse relationship between the degree to which my colleagues clamoured to have their departure from orthodoxy protected, accompanied by cries for academic freedom, and the degree to which they worked to suppress those very same aspirations from those failing to embrace their ever-narrowing ideological platform. These so-called rebels, who supposedly represented all that is good in the university, turned out to actually be defenders of the orthodoxy! It struck me as ironic that university professors as a group were much less tolerant of dissent than were my former police colleagues.

During that initial wave of PC, I mostly kept my head down in the pursuit of tenure and that first promotion, justifying my cowardice by rationalising that the intolerance was at least directed towards making the world a more just place (which, in retrospect, is no justification at all, even were the dubious premise true). As we re-entered a relatively tolerant, if still ideologically unbalanced, period at the beginning of the new millennium, my growing displeasure with the phoney rebels cost me relationships and annoyed administrators, but never, at least in my mind, really threatened my employment status.

Today, and beginning perhaps 5-7 years ago, intolerance has returned at levels much higher than could have been anticipated during the 1990s phenomenon. The university take-over by postmodernist thought and intersectional identity politics, all nested within a Marxist foundation, has already wreaked havoc in the humanities and social sciences and has moved on to attack the natural sciences. Not simply satisfied to have altered the *Zeitgeist* of the Academy, the authoritarians now seek to silence by vilification and name calling those rare voices who resist the betrayal of the university. When even these strategies fail to silence all, techniques like “no platforming,” the “Heckler's Veto,” and efforts to have iconoclasts fired are invoked.

It is hardly surprising that undergraduates fall into line with their authoritarian professors. Like students from the 60s, they find the call to revolution seductive: without an appreciation for the

sweep of history, and in the absence of competing perspectives, they fail to realise that they are conforming to the orthodoxy. Where they differ from their 1960s counterparts is that in increasing proportions, today's students are content to eschew the value of freedom if freedom conflicts with the pursuit of social justice as narrowly defined and ideologically imposed on them. Despite the good efforts of organizations like the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) in the US, and SAFS here in Canada, it's not at all clear that this illiberal train will be turned around this time.

A recent development mitigating my pessimism is the 2015 emergence of the Heterodox Academy, formed by a group of leftist, centrist, conservative, and classically liberal scholars whose sole creed is

I believe that university life requires that people with diverse viewpoints and perspectives encounter each other in an environment where they feel free to speak up and challenge each other. I am concerned that many academic fields and universities currently lack sufficient viewpoint diversity—particularly political diversity. I will support viewpoint diversity in my academic field, my university, my department, and my classroom. (www.heterodoxacademy.org)

As argued on their website, “Promoters of orthodoxies often create an environment of intolerance for diversity of ideas and dissent in the very institution in which free exchange of ideas is its *raison d’etre*.”

Although refreshing to see those of all political stripes come together in this venture—protecting the university should not be a left versus right thing—it is those who rebel from the supposed ingroup who are likely to have the greatest influence in challenging orthodoxy and dogma. In the case of the Heterodox Academy, that person is social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, whose roots are on the left of the political spectrum. Haidt is a world-class scholar, a persuasive speaker, and is blessed, unlike this writer, with an unshakeable reservoir of “calm” in his countenance. He appears to be immune to provocation.

The Heterodox Academy launched at about the same time that Jose Duarte, Lee Jussim, Haidt, and others published, in *Behavioral and Brain Science*, their already seminal article, “Political diversity will improve social psychological science.” Here, they make a compelling argument for the social good of viewpoint diversity, illustrating how it is the one type of diversity not valued in today's university. I found the article to be such a breath of fresh air that I shared it with a non-academic (but intellectually minded) friend.

His response? He didn't find it to be profound at all, but rather simply “common sense” and reflective of the mission of the university. This became a “from the mouths of babes” moment for me. My initial response to the paper as a revolutionary piece of work, when it rather simply supports the goals of the university, goes to show how far we have moved from our mission.

It is correct to be concerned about the post-fact world in which we live, so readily seen in the Donald Trump phenomenon. I fully support my academic colleagues who decry the lies and distortions coming out of today's White House but I am incredibly frustrated that they are unwilling to acknowledge a similar phenomenon in our own house. We live in scary, polarized

times in which young people are increasingly likely to perceive that they must either cast their lot with the Alt-Right or the Regressive Left. Let us hope the work of the Heterodox Academy will aid in demonstrating this to be a false dichotomy and will otherwise help steer the university back to its primary mission.

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