

JORDAN PETERSON & THE VEXED QUESTION OF FREE SPEECH ON CAMPUS

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It seems scarcely a week goes by without news of a speaker—I believe without exception either on the political/religious right or a supporter of Israel—being shouted down or otherwise prevented from speaking on some North American campus. In Canada notorious examples are Benjamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak, both at Concordia University in 2002, Ann Coulter at the University of Ottawa in 2010. More recently, Hasbara Fellowships Canada, a pro-Israel advocacy group, was prevented from participating in a 2016 event at University of Ontario Institute of Technology.

On Friday 17 March of this year the tradition continued at McMaster University, where University of Toronto Psychology Professor Jordan Peterson, a critic of Bill C-16, which would add “gender identity” and “gender expression” to the list of discrimination categories in the Charter of Rights & Freedoms, was prevented from speaking by a group of 15-20 protestors. The next day, however, Peterson spoke to an estimated audience of 700 at Western University, receiving a standing ovation and praise even from some who had expected to disagree.

On 20 March Patrick Deane, McMaster President, sent out an “Open Letter to the McMaster Community”, in which he expressed unwillingness to “shut down events, exclude speakers, or prevent discussion of issues”, a welcome sentiment, but at the same time surely a minimal requirement of an administration that, in his inspirational closing words, wants McMaster “to be a place where respectful debate and discussion can flourish”.

The real problem faced by university administrators across North America, entirely unaddressed in President Deane’s open letter, is to *ensure* that “respectful debate” is *enforced* on campus, as it is by law in the wider society. Of course “respectful debate” is lovely, but if the university fails to take the security precautions required to prevent illegal violent disruption of expressions and explanations of unpopular opinion, then its pious desires amount to no more than the mumblings of a toothless gnome. (My apologies to toothless gnomes everywhere, whose humour I have always greatly appreciated.)

At McMaster there is an organization rather grandiosely titled the President’s Advisory Committee on Building an Inclusive Community (PACBIC), of which, mainly because I have always distrusted inappropriate uses of the word “community” (not to mention “inclusive”), I became a member. Thus I received a statement from PACBIC, dated 16 March, the day before Peterson’s visit, that came very close to denying his right to speak, and justifying suppression of it. Here are some quotes:

“freedom of speech doesn’t now, and hasn’t ever, meant that we can or should be able to say whatever we like in public spaces regardless of the impact of our speech on others”;

“little to be gained from debating Dr. Peterson because he presents no argument based on evidence”;

“speech or action that reduces the humanity of any group is not an exercise in freedom”;

“wherever free speech is valued, protest too must be valued”.

So PACBIC, the President’s Advisory Committee, takes the position that “respectful debate and discussion” with Peterson is useless and inappropriate: no mention of *his* “humanity”. This unfortunate document was supported by three groups associated with the McMaster Students Union.

On Tuesday 21 March, four days later, one day after President Deane’s open letter, I received another mailing from PACBIC. This time they complained of “messages that have singled out PACBIC members” as being involved in the protest that shut down Peterson’s event. After various disclaimers and evasions, it was finally admitted that “in consultation with the President and Provost, we have agreed to not put out any other public statement” that might “draw more hatred and bigotry or threats toward PACBIC”. In view of PACBIC’s hatred and bigotry and veiled threats, certainly a case of “live by the sword, die by the sword”. Still, a great relief to those of us who value “respectful debate and discussion”.

One concludes that President Deane advised his Advisory Committee to cool it. It remains unclear whether PACBIC’s original *cri de coeur* provided motivation for the disruptors of Peterson’s event. PACBIC of course denies this, but how would they know for sure? A McMaster “spokesperson” makes vague mention of the involvement of “someone who is not affiliated with the university”. The President in an interview excuses the McMaster security personnel, saying that it was difficult to “choreograph” an effective security response. He states the obvious when he agrees that it was “absolutely” a learning experience.

But what exactly has been learned? Amidst all the chatter emerging from this incident, there has been no mention of establishing procedures and regulations designed to *really* ensure freedom of speech on campus—freedom from bullying, illegal disruption of peaceful but unpopular events. Bad. But it is worse than that: it is not just at McMaster that nothing will happen—but nowhere in Canada, nowhere in North America. And it is not that hard.

Since the 1960s—1968, to be precise, when the Black Panthers took over San Francisco State University—university and college administrators have walked on eggshells, afraid to permit any challenge to the prevailing “politically correct” fad of the day. There is much talk of “diversity”, “inclusiveness”, “respectful debate”, as we have just heard from McMaster’s president, but when problems arise, as they inevitably do, no university seems to have policies or procedures or regulations in place to deal with them. It becomes a “learning experience”. To take one example, in 2011 a Canadian parliamentary committee proposed several steps that Canadian universities could take to deal with anti-Semitism on campus, including, for example, “working together to develop protocols and procedures”. The result? Zero—even though a group of us vigorously brought the report to the attention of both McMaster University and the Council of Ontario Universities.

McMaster is just a microcosm of an ailment that has afflicted our campuses for 50 years, a disease much more serious and deadly in its long-term consequences than any Black Death could ever be.

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