

FLASHBACK TO EDUCATION BY INDOCTRINATION

Christina Behme

Recently, university campuses in the US and Canada have seen violent protests to presentations by invited speakers (Milo Yiannopoulos, Charles Murray, and Jordan Peterson are examples). These actions in themselves are reason for concern. When, in the name of tolerance, students who want to learn about different points of view are prevented from doing so, and when speakers who attempt to express those points of view are not merely silenced but physically assaulted, talk of academic freedom rings hollow. The moment one group, any group, uses violence to oppress voices they disapprove of, everyone interested in a multifaceted, open-minded education loses.

Unsurprisingly, the events have been widely debated on campuses, social media, blogs, and in the print media. The opinions expressed are as diverse as the views of the speakers who have been silenced and their critics. In many cases, one can notice opinions different from one's own and learn from them or agree to disagree. However, some opinions can lead down a dangerous path because they call into question the ideal of freedom of expression for everyone. Regrettably, one of the most dangerous articles, titled "Free Speech Is Not an Academic Value", by Stanley Fish, has been published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

I do not believe in silencing dangerous views but think we need to critically engage with them. I explain below what the dangers of Fish's views are and how they can be addressed. While reading Fish's article I felt more than once as if I had travelled back in time into the East German indoctrination machine. Fish draws a distinction between 'the academic scene' and 'the extracurricular scene' and wants to limit free speech to the latter.

Fish claims "Freedom of speech is not an academic value. Accuracy of speech is an academic value; completeness of speech is an academic value; relevance of speech is an academic value. Each of these values is directly related to the goal of academic inquiry: getting a matter of fact right. The operative commonplace is 'following the evidence wherever it leads.' You can't do that if your sources are suspect or nonexistent; you can't do that if you only consider evidence favorable to your biases; you can't do that if your evidence is far afield and hasn't been persuasively connected to the instant matter of fact".

Superficially sounding reasonable, Fish's proposal actually is a subtle recipe for indoctrination. Usually it is defended by taking extreme examples (like flat-Earthism) and proclaiming: We do not want *this* to be included in curricular activity! But the extreme cases do not imply that academic inquiry has produced consensus in all (or even the majority of) cases. How then do we know what speech is relevant or when inquiry is complete? Ordinarily we consult experts. But experts are no infallible gods who have direct access to 'The Truth'. Like the rest of us they can be (and have been!) mistaken. Roughly 70 years ago wide scientific consensus suggested that homosexuality is a disease that needs to be cured. Defenders of that view certainly believed that their speech was 'accurate', 'complete', and 'relevant'. Evidence to the contrary would have been rejected as 'suspect'. Had all scientists obediently followed Fish's dictum, we still would expose people to electric shock aversion "therapy". Our view on homosexuality changed only

when views that challenged the perceived wisdom were no longer silenced, when free speech was permitted in the academic scene.

For many of the current debates, we do not have the benefit of hindsight and hence we do not know which speech is relevant and accurate. But individual academics surely believe that their theories are correct and supported by the available evidence (otherwise they would not hold those views). Ordinarily this shapes the topics they choose to investigate and teach, the works they consult and refer to, the readings they select for their students, and so on. This is of course unproblematic. But, according to Fish, these academics are *also* licensed or even obligated to silence opposing views as irrelevant or suspect. Genuine inquiry cannot flourish in such a climate of enforced conformity. Many of the widely accepted views of today arose from the controversial challenges to the ‘common knowledge’ of yesterday. Allowing freedom of expression in the classroom does not lead necessarily to intellectual anarchy or regress to flat-Earthism. Exploring (and in many cases eventually rejecting) views challenging the ‘established consensus’ fosters critical engagement with academic topics and encourages mutually respectful debates. Student minds are not vessels to be filled but fires to be kindled (as Plutarch put it).

Having shown that Fish’s thesis that academics ought to silence non-conforming views does not apply to the academic scene, I argue now that his proposal for the extracurricular realm is problematic as well. Here Fish wants to allow freedom of expression but insists that the university not only has the right but an obligation to police how conflict between mutually exclusive opinions is to be resolved. He bases this insistence on the premise that “[Middlebury students] are obnoxious, self-righteous, self-preening, shallow, short-sighted, intolerant, and generally impossible, which means that they are students, doing what students do”. It is quite astonishing that Fish would issue such a blanket condemnation of ‘students’ based on the actions of a small group of students at Middlebury who prevented Murray from speaking and attacked him and another professor after the event. Reprehensible as this behaviour might have been, it is hardly representative of how students in general act. While there have been several widely covered events of violent protests, the vast majority of campus debates are entirely peaceful. In fact, the violent attack on Murray attracted so much attention *because* it was so atypical. The media show little interest in peaceful debates that occur on campuses every day. Ironically, Fish’s condemnation of students as a group would apply exactly to the kind of person who would emerge from the academic scene he prescribes. This climate of indoctrination in which free speech has no room produces intolerant people who believe “we are in possession of the truth, and it is a waste of our time to listen to views we have already rejected and know to be worthless”. Fish calls this attitude “a nice brew of arrogance and ignorance”. Indeed—but the brew is ‘cooked’ according to his own recipe.

One final point: Fish rejects the idea that free speech was attacked at Middlebury. He seems to base this rejection mostly on the fact that “no government or government agency prevented Murray from speaking”. Technically that is correct. But not even in totalitarian dictatorships (like East Germany) did governments send employees or agencies on university campuses to interfere with free speech. Instead, university teachers implemented the curriculum based on Marxist Science. That is, university teachers were enforcing the communist consensus view based on precisely the principles Fish advocates: they determined what speech was accurate, complete,

and relevant. It is of course not necessary that every such a system leads to indoctrination. But eliminating free speech from the academic scene is more than a first step in that direction.

Christina Behme earned her doctorate in philosophy from Dalhousie University in 2011. She works mainly in philosophy of language. Dr Behme is currently an assistant professor at Brandon University, in Manitoba.

References and selected news coverage:

Milo Yiannopoulos:

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38837142>

<http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/berkeley-riots-inside-the-campus-showdown-over-free-speech-w465151>

Charles Murray:

<http://www.realclearmarkets.com/articles/2017/03/14/>

[illiberal_arts_colleges_pay_more_get_less_free_speech_102586.html](http://www.realclearmarkets.com/articles/2017/03/14/illiberal_arts_colleges_pay_more_get_less_free_speech_102586.html)http://www.realclearmarkets.com/articles/2017/03/14/illiberal_arts_colleges_pay_more_get_less_free_speech_102586.html

http://www.realclearmarkets.com/articles/2017/03/14/illiberal_arts_colleges_pay_more_get_less_free_speech_102586.html

<https://www.thefire.org/in-anti-intellectual-email-wellesley-profs-call-engaging-with-controversial-arguments-an-imposition-on-students/>

https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/13/opinion/understanding-the-angry-mob-that-gave-me-a-concussion.html?mc=aud_dev&mcid=keywee&mccr=dommob&kwp_0=361481&_r=0

Jordan Petersen:

[https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/03/21/shouting-down-controversial-speaker-mcmaster-raises-new-concerns-about-academic?](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/03/21/shouting-down-controversial-speaker-mcmaster-raises-new-concerns-about-academic?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=b0b0559491-DNU20170321&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-b0b0559491-197532465&mc_cid=b0b0559491&mc_eid=d7f861a615)

[utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=b0b0559491-DNU20170321&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-b0b0559491-197532465&mc_cid=b0b0559491&mc_eid=d7f861a615](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/03/21/shouting-down-controversial-speaker-mcmaster-raises-new-concerns-about-academic?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=b0b0559491-DNU20170321&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-b0b0559491-197532465&mc_cid=b0b0559491&mc_eid=d7f861a615)

[DNU20170321&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-b0b0559491-197532465&mc_cid=b0b0559491&mc_eid=d7f861a615](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/03/21/shouting-down-controversial-speaker-mcmaster-raises-new-concerns-about-academic?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=b0b0559491-DNU20170321&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-b0b0559491-197532465&mc_cid=b0b0559491&mc_eid=d7f861a615)

[b0b0559491-197532465&mc_cid=b0b0559491&mc_eid=d7f861a615](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/03/21/shouting-down-controversial-speaker-mcmaster-raises-new-concerns-about-academic?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=b0b0559491-DNU20170321&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-b0b0559491-197532465&mc_cid=b0b0559491&mc_eid=d7f861a615)

<http://dailynews.mcmaster.ca/article/academic-freedom-and-the-role-of-the-academy-an-open-letter-to-the-mcmaster-community/>

Stanley Fish:

http://www.chronicle.com/article/Free-Speech-Is-Not-an-Academic/239536?key=-tzCsJT7grPRhQ3W3kE8Wtq05BbRDN0uGg_0bmbbB8W1jqIRtnmdR3xasOJ02R74X2JHU1laTEhHZUEyTzR2UXEtVmVCSWlaY0hEWkVyaGZfUHIWYkVfNTgyZw

[tzCsJT7grPRhQ3W3kE8Wtq05BbRDN0uGg_0bmbbB8W1jqIRtnmdR3xasOJ02R74X2JHU1laTEhHZUEyTzR2UXEtVmVCSWlaY0hEWkVyaGZfUHIWYkVfNTgyZw](http://www.chronicle.com/article/Free-Speech-Is-Not-an-Academic/239536?key=-tzCsJT7grPRhQ3W3kE8Wtq05BbRDN0uGg_0bmbbB8W1jqIRtnmdR3xasOJ02R74X2JHU1laTEhHZUEyTzR2UXEtVmVCSWlaY0hEWkVyaGZfUHIWYkVfNTgyZw)