

THE DEATH OF DEBATE IN ACADEMIA

Henry Srebrnik

There was a time when true contrarians and those who questioned ideological hegemony found a place in institutions of higher education. Not any more, it seems.

The examples are numerous and all around us. In March McGill University in Montreal, one of the most respected institutions in Canada, effectively forced out Andrew Potter, a professor who upset Quebec's political class because he wrote an opinion piece about the province that they didn't like.

Periodic eruptions of this sort are par for the course in this touchy province, and they happen every few years. The former *Globe and Mail* journalist Jan Wong and the late novelist Mordecai Richler both fell afoul of such hysteria, both of them accused of what today might be termed "Quebecophobia."

A friend and I suffered a similar fate after publishing an article on the Jewish community's fear of Québécois nationalism in the *Jerusalem Post* in 1982.

Potter, the director of McGill's Institute for the Study of Canada, penned an article, "How a Snowstorm Exposed Quebec's Real Problem: Social Malaise," in the March 20, 2017, issue of *Macleans* magazine, in which he criticized what he called Quebec's "political dysfunction" and argued the province was beset by "low trust and alienation."

The roof fell in on him. Premier Philippe Couillard denounced the piece, while the nationalist newspaper *Le Devoir* published a letter comparing the column to the type of hate speech that led to the Rwandan genocide.

Even though the poor man was forced to grovel by posting an apology on Facebook, it wasn't enough. It is not clear that he resigned of his own free will or under duress from McGill's administrators; either way, he resigned as director.

McGill University's principal, Suzanne Fortier, said in the statement that, while "academic freedom is a foundational principle" of the university, Potter had failed to uphold the institute's "mission," which is "partly to promote a better understanding of Canada and its heritage." George Orwell would have been proud of that remark.

She described concerns about political meddling in university matters as "unfounded rumours." We might remember something the 19th century German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck once said: "Nothing can be confirmed until it has been officially denied."

Andrew Coyne, in his March 24 *National Post* column, "This is Not How a Liberal Society Responds to Criticism," also weighed in on this shabby treatment. "It is simply incomprehensible in a modern democracy that anyone, let alone a distinguished scholar," could lose their job "over a piece of social criticism."

Why this vehemence, when francophone writers are often equally critical? As Don Macpherson of the Montreal *Gazette* explained in his March 23 column, “Andrew Potter and la famille québécoise,” Potter’s “real crime is not what he wrote; it’s who wrote it, the language in which he wrote it, and for whom he wrote it.

“That is, Potter is an anglophone, who wrote in English, for a publication from outside Quebec.” For nationalists, “to belong to the English-speaking community in Quebec is to be excluded, or to choose to exclude oneself, from the French-speaking one, the true Québécois nation.”

Coyne, too, thinks that “the heat in the response, the very language,” with its reference to “attacks” and comparisons to “racism,” is of a kind that one would expect in response, not to a good-faith critique of society, but an ethnic slur. In other words, Potter is being condemned for being an “outsider.”

As for McGill, Emmett Macfarlane, a political science professor at the University of Waterloo, asserted that it was simply not the place of McGill to issue a statement disavowing itself from Potter’s opinion.

After all, as Macfarlane wrote in “The Chilling Effect of a University Tweet on its Scholars,” in *Maclean’s* on March 22, “academic freedom is only meaningful if it protects ideas, arguments, or research that we don’t all agree with.”

Globe and Mail columnist Margaret Wentz summed it up very well in “Academic Freedom? McGill Caves in to Tribal Politics,” published March 24. “The message they have sent the researchers and professors and students could not be more clear. We didn’t stand up for him. So why should we stand up for you?”

I earned a BA and an MA from McGill many decades ago. Back then it was a place of intellectual ferment and critical thinking. Clearly that’s long behind us.

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