

UNCOMMON NONSENSE ON CAMPUS

Jack Edwards

The exercise of free speech, within certain limits, is a cultural good, a concrete expression of a value that not only is worth defending but also provides support for a variety of other values, equally worthwhile, not the least of which is the long-term survival of a free culture.

Over the last two or three decades, considerable changes have taken place on college campuses that appear to threaten the value of free speech. What are those changes, why have they occurred and what is being done to challenge them in a way that conveys understanding, purpose and resolve?

There are many examples within the campus milieu that are cause for concern: student protests have resulted in disinvitations to speakers, last-minute cancellations, shout-downs after a speaker has taken to the stage and even violence. In those cases, the speaker has been silenced and those who came to hear have only heard the voices of protesters and, on occasion, found themselves in harm's way.

What values do protesters claim justify their actions, sometimes to the point of violence, in preventing others from speaking on campus? Will such values endure, flow into the mainstream to become part of the "cultural good" and will they contribute to the survival or decline of a free society? Actually, what has taken place in the larger culture has been flowing into the academy for some time and, in that crucible, has been transmuted into something that is of questionable value. How did this happen?

Minority rights and human rights were an emerging focus in the West even before WWII and the subsequent formation of the United Nations. The civil rights movement in the US in the 60s, along with the *Ethnic Heritage Studies Program Act of 1974*, the 1982 Canadian repatriation of the Constitution, incorporating the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the passage of the 1988 *Multiculturalism Act* more or less formalized group rights and multiculturalism in North America. Add to that the massive migration into Western Europe from the East and that of millions of Mexicans into the US that continue to change the West dramatically.

In 2000/2001, the UN produced a report that served as a warning that migration levels into the West would be such as to destabilize Western culture and values. The confluence of migration and the legal and policy changes, necessary to justify and support those migration levels and prevent major internal strife, has contributed to the forcing of new values into the culture of the West. Those values have been making their way into public schools and universities for more than a quarter of a century.

As the new values, reflected and emphasized in words like *diversity, tolerance, racism, compassion, equality, bigotry, misogyny, victimhood, prejudice* and the like entered the lower grades of the educational system, occupied by an increasing number of migrants, they served as a form of social control. As those children have come of age in their university years and in the context of growing independence, youthful rebellion and protest, a significant number now find

themselves supporting policies and behaving in ways that are overprotective of some and threatening to the free speech of others.

Those who support trigger warnings, safe spaces, sensitivity to micro-aggressions, and speech codes as part of university life insist that such things are necessary for “the good” of all. They claim students ask for trigger warnings and that safe spaces serve therapeutic purposes. Both are also claimed to protect victims of assault and violence and prevent *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)*. They are said to mitigate the experience of bullying, mental stress caused by overt and subtle racism and a devastating loss of self-esteem.

Adopting values consistent with this new reality of university life serves to justify protecting them by punishing those who threaten them, especially those from outside the university who are invited to speak. The forms of protection range from mild and respectful protest against an invited speaker to demands that others not be invited or be disinvited. Unable to prevent some speakers from arriving on campus, protection of those new values justify shouting speakers down when they try to speak; on occasion, the new values justify violence.

A recent example, which involved the more extreme forms of protest, was the reaction to an invitation to Milo Yiannopoulos to speak at Berkeley, the ostensible home of the *Free Speech Movement (FSM)* in the ‘60s. In response to a request from the Berkeley College Republicans (BCR), the controversial firebrand, a gay British journalist, was scheduled to speak at the UC Berkeley campus on Wednesday, February 1st, 2017.

Despite the controversy that had been swirling around Yiannopoulos, including previous cancellations of speaking engagements at NYU, the University of Miami, Florida State, UC Davis and others, Berkeley’s Chancellor Nicholas Dirks sent a letter to the campus community affirming Milo’s right to speak.

The administration’s support for free speech was laudable, and especially so, given an earlier letter sent to Dirks and signed by thirteen faculty members. Among other things, the letter referred to Yiannopoulos’ “noxious views,” which “pass from protected free speech to incitement, harassment and defamation once they publicly target individuals in his audience or on campus.” “Such actions,” they stated, “are protected neither by free speech nor by academic freedom.”

As with other speakers at other institutions, administrators at Berkeley insisted that BCR pay the cost of security, which was estimated at \$10,000. Although this was rescinded after the event was cancelled, such practices raise a serious question: Does such a cost indirectly prevent groups from bringing controversial speakers to campus? Celine Bookin, the head of communications for BCR, wondered whether such unreasonably high costs serve as “a backdoor attack on free speech.”

Shortly before Yiannopoulos’ scheduled speech, some 1,500 peaceful protesters were joined by as many as 150 armed individuals, clad in black, wearing masks and, reportedly, having come onto the University from outside. They threw rocks and professional-grade fireworks at buildings and at the police. They set fires, painted graffiti on walls, threw Molotov cocktails and smashed

the windows of the student union center where Yiannopoulos was to speak. The damage was estimated at \$100,000. A number of people were injured, one seen bleeding from his eye and another pepper-sprayed while being interviewed. As a consequence of the violence and destruction of property, Yiannopoulos was unable to speak and had to be escorted from the campus by security.

In the aftermath, Chancellor Dirks released a second statement condemning the violence, describing the preparations they had made to secure the event and reaffirming Berkeley's commitment to free speech. Vice Chancellor Dan Mogulof, commenting on the violent protesters, stated: "We've taken note of the tactics, weapons, discipline, organization and training. We will not be caught unprepared for them again." Milo was clear: "The days you could silence conservative and libertarian voices on campus and still expect to collect their tax money are coming to an end." He vowed to return to Berkeley in the next few months.

Cancellation of Milo's event at Berkeley has not been the only venue where disruptions have spotlighted speech on college campuses and many of the recent high profile disruptions have occurred during Yiannopoulos' tour. The events at Berkeley are particularly significant because of the contrast they bring to the history and reputation of free speech on that campus.

One measure of how restricted free speech has become is illustrated in that letter from the thirteen faculty members. They attempt to justify silencing Yiannopoulos by using pejoratives to describe *his* speech: "*harassment, slander, defamation, and hate speech.*" It is one thing to characterize Milo's speech with their words, as opinion, but ironic as a justification to prevent him from speaking.

Since those terms have legal foundations and criminal and civil lawsuits can be launched based on any of them, an obvious question is whether Yiannopoulos has been sued by anyone on any of those grounds. That does not appear to be the case and, in fact, the lawsuits that have been filed, or are being considered, are against institutions like Berkeley for failing to protect people from physical harm.

Terms like those of the Berkeley faculty have become part of campus life and, by metaphorical extension, have helped create a climate in which any slight, any hint of criticism of almost anyone, can become a cause for high dudgeon, demand for apology, shaming, censorship and expulsion.

Political correctness is a phrase used to push back on the uncommon nonsense of those imaginary threats and on a *language of overprotection* used as political intimidation to guard everyone against criticisms perceived to hurt their feelings. If anyone has shoved their fist into the face of political correctness it has been Milo Yiannopoulos. His "Dangerous Faggot Tour" has done its part to burst that protective bubble and open up discussions on freedom and censorship amid his outrageous and entertaining speech. Although many students were offended, many others found themselves agreeing with points he was making and, in that spirit of youthful rebellion, offering them a chance *to stick it to the establishment*. Similar to Donald Trump, Milo is an in-your-face challenge to the status quo of campus censorship. Consequently, many feel a need to silence him.

Regardless of whether Milo returns to Berkeley, another firebrand is set to speak there in April. Ann Coulter is scheduled to give a talk on immigration with a Q&A to follow. That event should reveal the extent to which the university has made progress in protecting free speech and creating conditions conducive to controversial speakers being heard.

Although censorship and suppression of free speech continue on many campuses, and laws, such as the recent *Bill C-16* in Canada, make individuals, and the academic institutions that provide a venue for their speech, culpable for “discrimination” based on “gender expression,” there are organizations and groups within the culture that are working to provide some measure of *counter-control*, on and off campus. To mention just a few:

1. In the US, the *University of Chicago* sent a letter last August to welcome students of the 2020 graduating class. In a sign of the University’s commitment to free speech, the letter read, in part:

You will find that we expect members of our community to be engaged in rigorous debate, discussion, and even disagreement. At times this may challenge you and even cause discomfort.

Our commitment to academic freedom means that we do not support so-called “trigger warnings,” we do not cancel invited speakers because their topics might prove controversial, and we do not condone the creation of intellectual “safe spaces” where individuals can retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own.

Fostering the free exchange of ideas reinforces a related University priority—building a campus that welcomes people of all backgrounds.

2. The *Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE)* has, as part of its mission, to “defend and sustain” freedom of speech as “a fundamental American freedom and human right,” pointing out that “there’s no place that this right should be more valued and protected than America’s colleges and universities.” *FIRE* brings attention to infringements of free speech, in the case of Berkeley condemning “the violence and attempts to silence protected expression.” In addition to the more than 400 cases in which it has been involved, *FIRE* maintains a *Disinvitation Database*, giving particulars of incidents beginning as early as 2000. In an encouraging sign, *FIRE* reported “an unprecedented decline in the percentage of universities maintaining written policies that severely restrict students’ free speech rights” for 2016. A summary of that report appears in the January 2017 issue of the *SAFS Newsletter*.

3. As a consequence of the incidents at Berkeley, President Trump tweeted, “If U.C. Berkeley does not allow free speech and practices violence on innocent people with a different point of view – NO FEDERAL FUNDS?”

4. Peter Wood, writing for *The Federalist*, points to his initiative of seeking endorsements from college presidents for a *College and University Presidents’ Intellectual Freedom Commitment*. He also mentions other efforts such as that of members of the *Goldwater Institute*, who are providing *model legislation* that could be adapted by States to help protect campus free speech.

These examples are encouraging because they are practical expressions of a resolve to defend the people's right to speak and be heard without fear of censorship or (violent) reprisal. Free speech is a cultural value that is part of the democratic ideal of the West. These and numerous other examples demonstrate the practice and support free speech continues to enjoy in the culture and points to people and groups working to ensure its survival. In contrast, practices such as trigger warnings, safe spaces, policing micro-aggressions, speech codes, disinvitations, the shouting down of speakers and violence in the service of censorship are maladaptive and sclerotic to the flow of free speech and action. If those and other practices like them persist, they will lead to cultural decline and the loss of many values that have made Western culture such a success. Acting to ensure free speech will prevent much of the current uncommon nonsense on campus from emerging into the broader culture as a new and dubious form of "common sense."

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