

REVIEW OF FRANK FUREDI, *WHAT'S HAPPENED TO THE UNIVERSITY?*

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Frank Furedi's new book, *What's Happened to the University?*, is primarily concerned with the infantilization of students, which he claims has contributed greatly to the spread of political correctness crusades across university campuses. One of the pernicious effects of these crusades involves the imposition of "safe space." The term once implied "a place of refuge for people confronted with racism, sexism or anti-gay hostility," but it has since changed to mean protection from "exposure to ideas that make one uncomfortable" (p. 81). The author suggests that the concept of safe space became problematic when it morphed from a pedagogic practice oriented towards helping minorities gain confidence and voice to a form of "quarantine against judgment and criticism" (p. 81).

The result has been the "deification of safety," which demands the policing of campus culture. For instance, in 2015, Yale University's committee on intercultural affairs took it upon itself to warn students of "insensitive" Halloween costumes. When two of Yale's professors, Erika Christakis and Nicholas Christakis, sent an e-mail asking whose business it was to tell students what costumes they should wear, a faction of students attempted to have the couple censured and ousted from their home on campus. Likewise, also in 2015, a weekly yoga class at the University of Ottawa was cancelled because it was considered a form of "cultural appropriation." Instructor Jennifer Scharf felt compelled to change the word "yoga" to "mindful stretching," largely to avoid the impression that the practice had become "westernized." In 2016, at Bowdoin College, in Maine, two members of the student government were threatened with impeachment proceedings for organizing a tequila-themed birthday party, where some of the guests wore sombreros. In all instances, transgressors were condemned outright for their lack of sensitivity towards "vulnerable" student groups.

Because of this "vulnerable" classification, university administrators have asked professors to provide "trigger warnings" before lectures that discuss sensitive social issues, such as rape, extreme violence, or racism. Moreover, professors are expected to "watch their words," and if they offend students, the latter are urged to report acts of "microaggression." This has even led to the creation of "Bias Response Teams" to handle such complaints. As Furedi acknowledges, "Encouraging members of an academic community to report on one another represents a new low in the bureaucratisation of campus life" (p. 114).

Furedi insists that it is precisely these kinds of paternalistic measures that prevent students from developing the coping skills necessary for the everyday world. After university, they will encounter differences of opinion that must be resolved via negotiation or critical thinking. Antics involving personal outrage, ultimatums, and the shouting down of colleagues will be viewed by others as a sign of permanent adolescence, not as a reaction to genuine injustice. In other words, hypersensitivity will seem disproportionate to reality.

Although much of the author's focus concerns left-wing causes—for example, those associated with radical feminists, LGBTQ activists, and the Black Lives Matter movement—Furedi's efforts should not be perceived as anti-left. He also critiques right-wing efforts at censorship,

namely, attempts to stifle criticism of Israeli foreign policy on university campuses. In the United States, Furedi notes how the Anti-Defamation League provides advice to Jewish high school pupils on how to construct “safe spaces” when they go to university. The goal is to “create a safe space and open up a conversation among students around issues of anti-Semitism and anti-Israeli bias” (p. 85). Furedi’s concerns are already well known among professors. Overt or consistent criticism of Israel is automatically labelled “anti-Semitic,” the kind of accusation that ended Professor Norman G. Finkelstein’s tenure bid at DePaul University, back in 2007. The result of this aversion to criticism is self-censorship by professors and students alike, what Furedi refers to as the imposition of “groupthink.”

Furedi contends, however, that all free speech on campus—even speech considered offensive—is important because “without the right to offend, academic freedom becomes emptied of its experimental and truth-seeking content” (p. 177). If truth claims lack merit, they will be exposed in dialogue with others. Without dialogue, the substance of any truth claim is left unchallenged. Hence, the danger Furedi warns against is Orwellian. “Orthodoxy is unconsciousness” is not just a fictional slogan; it becomes a reality for students who fail to question their own self-evident positions.

Furedi provides a remedy to the atmosphere of political correctness: a continued emphasis on judgment, especially of ideas. In his words: “Exposure to judgment challenges us—and yes, sometimes makes us very uncomfortable—but it also helps us to understand the strengths and weaknesses of our arguments and to learn from each other’s experiences” (p. 76). It is Furedi’s consistent focus on an open, adversarial review of truth claims—not people or their identities—that alone merits his book much praise.

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