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Campus hi(s/r)jinks

An update on the ongoing devolution of academic culture.

One of the great curiosities of this decadent age is the extent to which hallowed values and ambitions from the past have mutated into their opposites. As we've had occasion to observe in this space before, what started out as the free-speech movement at Berkeley in 1964 now appears as a politically correct demand for speech codes, safe spaces, trigger warnings, and constant vigilance against possible "micro-aggressions." Or think about race relations. In the early 1960s, the rallying cry was for racial integration. Today, at many campuses across the country, colleges are bowing to demands for segregated housing for black students only. (Memo to white students: this tactic will not work for you.) There is also a more general mutation, focused not on one issue but a general approach to life. In the Sixties, one saw a rebellion against the idea that colleges stood in loco parentis in matters of social and sexual behavior. Students wanted, or said they wanted, the freedom to do as they liked. Today, we see a strange, authoritarian return of the panoptic proctor who seeks simultaneously to impose a new, puritanical regime on campus while at the same time nurturing every certified mode of putatively victimized infatuation. Campuses are hothouses for the exfoliation of every lgbt+ extravaganza (that plus sign is a newish innovation meant to forestall laughter at the ever-expanding tail of letters) while at the same time threatening every traditional heterosexual encounter with the stigma of rape. It is an odd, yeasty, unstable environment.

Let us pause to note that we used the word "decadent" in our first sentence advisedly. A decadent society is not necessarily one that is libertine, although it may be that. It is essentially one in which inherited institutions and ideals have been hollowed out, ironized, inverted. Thucydides, in his description of the revolution in Corcyra in Book III of his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, describes how existential upheavals in society precipitate broader semantic and linguistic upheavals: "To fit in with the change of events, words too had to change their meanings." What used to be described as prudent circumspection was now dismissed as culpable naïveté. Conversely, sneaking dishonesty was now admired as brash cleverness. "As the result of these revolutions," he noted, "there was a general deterioration of character throughout the Greek world. The simple way of looking at things, which is so much the mark of a noble nature, was regarded as a ridiculous quality and soon ceased to exist."

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Thucydides' words resonate especially in troubled times, like our own, when fundamental values seem not only under attack but also internally sclerotic, uncertain, pusillanimous. In 1975, in another moment of societal upheaval, Yale University published the so-called

Woodward Report, named for the distinguished historian C. Vann Woodward, who chaired a committee to define the nature and appropriate limits of free speech on campus after students had angrily shut down or prevented the appearance of several controversial figures at Yale, including William Shockley, George Wallace, and General William Westmorland. The report is a rousing defense of free speech. An epigraph from Oliver Wendell Holmes indicates the tenor of its argument: "If there is any principle of the Constitution that more imperatively calls for attachment than any other it is the principle of free thought—not free thought for those who agree with us but freedom for the thought that we hate."

Yale has never explicitly disavowed the Woodward Report. Indeed, it periodically pays homage to it as a sort of sacred tablet. Nevertheless, there is some irony that a new, expanded edition of the report was published this summer under the title *Campus Speech in Crisis: What the Yale Experience Can Teach America*. The moving force behind the publication was not the university, but The William F. Buckley Jr. Program at Yale, an independent think tank whose mission is to promote the intellectual legacy of Buckley across the country. It is grimly apposite that a new edition of a report arguing that "the paramount obligation of the university is to protect [the] right to free expression" should appear at the very moment that Yale, like many academic institutions, was ostentatiously turning its back on that obligation.

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Yale made national headlines last November when a controversy over the policing of Halloween costumes (it does sound ridiculous, doesn't it?) escalated into a histrionic, obscenity-laced showdown between students (the source of the obscenities) and the Master of a residential college. The pathetic episode was captured on video and went viral. The Master and his wife

have since left their positions, the title "Master" has been retired, and Peter Salovey, the craven President of Yale, promised \$50 million to enhance "diversity" and soothe wounded racial sensitivities on campus through the creation of such initiatives as the Center for the Study of Race, Indigeneity, and Transnational Migration. It didn't end there. Even as copies of *Campus Speech in Crisis* were rolling off the press this summer, Salovey announced the creation of a Committee to Establish Principles on Renaming and a separate committee to scrutinize public art on campus. The former would render judgment on such monuments of offensiveness as Calhoun College, named for John C. Calhoun, the nineteenth-century Congressman, Senator, Secretary of War, and Vice

President. Calhoun was also a robust and articulate supporter of slavery, which makes the presence of buildings named in his honor offensive to some historically illiterate social justice warriors.

The second committee, on public art, was established after a janitor smashed a stained glass window depicting slaves. Its brief is to identify objects that might be deemed offensive and then have them removed and spirited away “for further study.”

Is anyone or anything safe? Even as Yale embarks on its projects of politically correct sanitization, it is moving forward with “on-line anonymous reporting systems” to police alleged sexual misconduct. Note the word “anonymous.” Had an unhappy date? Anonymously report it to your local Title IX Commissar and the miscreant might well be expelled.

Of course such insanity is not confined to Yale. Indeed, it is pandemic. At Brown University, for example, a public debate over the term “rape culture” was thought to be so traumatizing that the university provided a “safe space” for upset students. “The room,” one account of the episode reports, “was equipped with cookies, coloring books, bubbles, Play-Doh, calming music, pillows, blankets and a video of frolicking puppies, as well as students and staff members trained to deal with trauma.” No wonder the total cost of attending Brown is \$68,106 per annum.

Meanwhile, at Vanderbilt University, a Faculty Senate Gender Inclusivity Task Force provides guidance on the troublesome topic of how to address people who are uncertain about which sex they are. “I’m Steve and I use he/him/his pronouns. What should I call you?” “My pronouns are they/them/theirs. May I ask yours?” Don’t be surprised if the creature you are addressing responds, “I use the Ze, Zir, Zirs pronouns.” Vanderbilt suggests that professors include this critical information on class forms, rosters, etc. Much confusion can be avoided by “substituting language such as *everybody*, *folks*, or *this person* for gender binary language: *ladies and gentlemen*, *boys and girls*, *he or she*.” Heaven forbid that anyone should speak of “ladies and gentlemen.” But what if you make a mistake? “Graciously accept correction. . . . ‘Thank you for reminding me. I apologize and will use the correct name and pronoun for you in the future.’ ” Vanderbilt is an absolute bargain at \$63,532.

The novelist Lionel Shriver put a lot of this nonsense in perspective in a recent speech she gave in Australia on the subject of “cultural appropriation.” She began by recalling a surreal episode at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, where students threw a tequila-themed birthday party for a friend. Horribile dictu, they distributed sombreros to their guests which the guests actually wore. Photos of the partygoers circulated on campus. College administrators, with Yale-like alacrity, threatened the “culprits” (Of what were they culpable? Wearing hats?) and opened an investigation into this “act of ethnic stereotyping.” The revelers were placed on “social probation,” the hosts were expelled from their dormitory and removed from their positions in the student government. This insanity can be yours for only \$61,650 per annum. (Actually, that’s per this annum: costs escalate every year.)

As Shriver notes, this impulse, which began in the hothouse of academia but has now spread to the culture at large, puts huge swathes of cultural expression out of bounds. In principle, nothing is safe from interdiction.

[A]ny tradition, any experience, any costume, any way of doing and saying things, that is associated with a minority or disadvantaged group is ring-fenced: look-but-don't-touch. Those who embrace a vast range of "identities" — ethnicities, nationalities, races, sexual and gender categories, classes of economic under-privilege and disability — are now encouraged to be possessive of their experience and to regard other peoples' attempts to participate in their lives and traditions, either actively or imaginatively, as a form of theft.

Rigorously pursued, the imperatives of identity politics render social life intolerable: "Seriously," Shriver notes with some bemusement, "we have people questioning whether it's *appropriate* for white people to eat pad thai." The enforcement of identity politics would also, she cautions, make the writing of fiction impossible. For what is fiction but an act of imagination, which is to say the projection of possibilities based upon the reformulation, the appropriation, of experiences we have not had but can imagine. Shakespeare was not a Danish prince or a Roman dictator or a young Italian girl in Verona. But he saw deeply into the mind of Hamlet, the ambition of Caesar, the heart of Juliet.

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Shriver's speech, which naturally called forth anguished cries of protest, is only one in an accelerating series of dissents against the inanity of political correctness, identity politics, and the circumscription of free speech. In fact, signs are accumulating that the whole enterprise of repression, having evolved from political protest

to infantile posturing, is approaching a Wizard-of-Oz denouement. As the economist Herb Stein observed in another context, what cannot go on forever, won't. The shrunken man huddling behind the curtain stands exposed to the condign ridicule of the public. There will be more Yales and Vanderbilts, Browns and Bowdoin. But there will also be more and more colleges following the lead of institutions like The University of Chicago, which recently stunned the PC establishment with a brief but pointed memo from John Ellison, the Dean of Students. Like many such communiqués, the memo affirmed a commitment to free expression. Every college does that. But then Dean Ellison tore back the curtain: "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."

It's too early to say for sure, but we suspect that the reign of political correctness may itself be on the brink of a correction. The unsustainable insanity that has coruscated through our culture shows signs of exhaustion as it descends into ever more preposterous demonstrations of skirling self-

parody. How silly it will all look when it is finally exposed, exactly like the little man who pretended to be “Oz the Great and Powerful.”

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