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A painful lesson

On the implications of the recent debacle at Middlebury College.

Last month, the commentariat was riveted by news from that expensive Vermont spa and indoctrination center, Middlebury College. On March 2, Charles Murray, one of America's most distinguished social scientists, was to talk about his recent book *Coming Apart*, which is about social, economic, and other divisions in white America. When he was introduced before an audience of some four hundred, a patter of boos and catcalls disrupted the introduction. When he rose to speak, most of the audience stood up en masse and turned their backs on him. For the next twenty minutes, as Murray stood calmly at the podium, the mob cycled through a sequence of obviously rehearsed chants.

Eventually, college officials, acknowledging the futility of attempting to continue with Murray's planned talk, announced that they would be moving the event to another location, from where the proceedings would be streamed back to the original hall. This announcement was met with loud boos, but Murray persevered, retreating to the other room for a conversation with Allison Stanger, a professor of politics at Middlebury. *The New York Times* summarized what happened next:

Once the interview began in the second room, protesters swarmed into the hallway, chanting and pulling fire alarms. Still, the interview was completed and officials, including Ms. Stanger, escorted Mr. Murray out the back of the building.

There, several masked protesters, who were believed to be outside agitators, began pushing and shoving Mr. Murray and Ms. Stanger, Mr. Burger [a spokesman for the college] said. "Someone grabbed Allison's hair and twisted her neck," he said.

After the two got into a car, Mr. Burger said, protesters pounded on it, rocked it back and forth, and jumped onto the hood. Ms. Stanger later went to a hospital, where she was put in a neck brace.

Writing about the event a few days later, Murray noted that many of his attackers "looked like they had come straight out of casting for a film of brownshirt rallies." "Much of the meaning of the Middlebury affair," Murray observed mildly, "depends on what Middlebury does next. . . . Absent an adequate disciplinary response, I fear that the Middlebury episode could become an inflection

point.”

An atmosphere of virulent, smash-it-up hatred.

Indeed. And it is worth noting that, as of this writing, it appears that Middlebury, apart from publishing a handwringing tut-tut-tut by its president Laurie Patton, has done absolutely nothing to chastise the malefactors.

Many commentators have focused on the violence with which the event at Middlebury ended and which sent Allison Stanger to the hospital. Did that mark the “inflection point” of which Murray spoke? Or was the Rubicon already crossed earlier when the privileged students at an elite liberal-arts college utterly betrayed the purpose of their education by succumbing to the mindless groupthink of the mob? An amateur video of the first part of the evening has gone viral. It vividly dramatizes the atmosphere of virulent, smash-it-up hatred epitomized by those brownshirts Charles Murray mentioned.

The video also captures the smug aroma of self-righteous virtue-signaling that emanated from President Patton and Allison Stanger, both of whom made introductory remarks before Murray’s aborted talk. President Patton, after congratulating herself on her broadmindedness in attending an event featuring Charles Murray, underscored Middlebury’s commitment to unlocking the “brilliance” of every delicate snowflake in her charge, “no matter their race, their class, their sexual orientation, their religious orientation, their disabled status, or any other demographic marker.” President Patton must have worked hard on that formulation, for she repeated it verbatim towards the end of her remarks.

First, though, she issued a disclaimer. “I would regret it terribly,” she said, if her presence in the hall were regarded as “an endorsement of Mr. Murray’s research.” Certainly not! In case there were any doubts, the President of Middlebury announced that she “profoundly disagrees with many of Mr. Murray’s views.” What views? No specifics were forthcoming, but the audience greeted that protestation with enthusiastic applause (though not as enthusiastic as the applause that greeted her announcement of another forthcoming speaker: Edward Snowden, who made his appearance a week later via Skype).

For her part, Professor Stanger was also careful to distance herself from the unspecified-but-clearly-beyond-the-pale views of Charles Murray while at the same time toadying up to the audience. She concluded with a yoga benediction: “Namaste.” Peter Wood, President of the National Association of Scholars, noted in an essay about the event for The Federalist weblog that the term literally means “I bow to you.” Professor Stanger didn’t stop bowing. As Mr. Wood observed in his review of her video performance,

At one point (29:08), Stanger is to be found grinning at the chant, “Hey hey, ho, ho, Charles Murray has got to go.” At another (30:05) Stanger is broadly smiling as the crowd chants, “Racist, sexist, anti-gay,

Charles Murray go away.” Still later, as the crowd chants, “Black Lives Matter,” Stanger raises her hands above her head (33:20) and claps along. Soon after, the camera pans across her again (33:34) and she is chanting the slogan as well as clapping.

In other words, Stanger was not just present at the protest, but participated in it.

It is worth bearing that in mind as you absorb Professor Stanger’s exculpatory op-ed in *The New York Times* about the event in which she oscillates between professions of “understanding” for the “righteous anger” of those who shouted down Charles Murray and sent her to the hospital and unhappiness at their failure to “engage with one another as fellow human beings.” She “feared for her life” as the mob surrounded and harried them but focused much of her criticism on Donald Trump, who, she said, “seems bent on dismantling the separation of powers and 230 years of progress this country has made toward a more perfect union.”

A festival of mindless hatred on display at Middlebury.

As Professor Stanger notes in passing, Charles Murray himself is highly critical of Donald Trump, so the question is whether her remarks about the President are simply gratuitous, a sort of declaration of ideological allegiance—this was *The New York Times*, after all—or simply a non

sequitur. The Southern Poverty Law Center, an institution which occupies an infamous spot on the lunatic fringe of American life, has branded Charles Murray a “white nationalist.” Some of the Middlebury protestors cited that judgment as justification for their juvenile malevolence. To her credit, Professor Stanger dissented from that characterization. But it seems disingenuous for her to say that she was “genuinely surprised and troubled to learn that some of my faculty colleagues had rendered judgment on Dr. Murray’s work and character without ever having read anything he has written.” The festival of mindless hatred on display at Middlebury—a festival that Professor Stanger was only too happy to participate in before it skidded out of control—never had anything to do with reasoned criticism or dispassionate assessment.

John Stuart Mill once noted that if you know only your own side of an argument, you don’t even know that. It is only through the pressure of alternatives that we come to appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of our own position. That hoary liberal idea is obviously completely passé at elite institutions like Middlebury. Indeed, in the aftermath of Charles Murray’s appearance at Middlebury there have been a spate of articles calling the very idea of entertaining alternative points of view into question. Alan Levinovitz, an assistant professor at James Madison University, took to *Slate* to argue that what we need is not less but *more* intolerance of ideas we disagree with. “Intolerance,” he writes, “is often desirable.” In this space in January, we noted how Herbert Marcuse’s idea of “repressive tolerance” was making a comeback on college campuses. The Frankfurt School Marxist rejected “false,” “bad,” or “repressive tolerance,” extolling instead what he called “liberating tolerance.” What is liberating tolerance? Simple: “intolerance against

movement from the Right, and toleration of movements from the Left.”

That seems to be what Assistant Professor Levinovitz advocates. “If Charles Murray were to hand out copies of *The Bell Curve* in a supermarket,” he writes, “it would be entirely acceptable to shout at him.” Would it?

Charles Murray is the author of a dozen important books, but whenever Murray appears on a college campus he is the author of only one book: *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (1994), which Murray wrote with the Harvard Professor Richard Herrnstein. At the center of the book is the question to what extent IQ is heritable and to what extent it is a product of environmental factors. A key passage (page 311) notes that

If the reader is now convinced that either the genetic or environmental explanation has won out to the exclusion of the other, we have not done a sufficiently good job of presenting one side or the other. It seems highly likely to us that both genes and the environment have something to do with racial differences. What might the mix be? We are resolutely agnostic on that issue; as far as we can determine, the evidence does not yet justify an estimate.

As Murray notes, “That’s it—the sum total of every wild-eyed claim that *The Bell Curve* makes about genes and race. There’s nothing else.”

No one, we think, can watch that video of Murray’s ritual humiliation and believe that Middlebury College fosters an environment hospitable to open debate. On the contrary, despite President Patton’s protestations—but doubtless in part because of her policies—Middlebury—like so many other elite institutions these days—is a politically correct slum that, despite its affluence, works to instill a rancid intellectual and moral conformity in its charges.

That, in fact, seems to be the point. It is not surprising that other institutions have copied Middlebury by denying “controversial” speakers a platform to speak. Just a few weeks ago, for example, McMaster University shouted down Jordan Peterson, a professor of psychology, because he refuses to use fabricated pseudo-pronouns for “transgender” students.

One of the most disturbing things about this whole scenario is the way certain traditional liberal principles are twisted to further a decidedly illiberal agenda. Consider, to take one recent example, a statement from Wellesley College faculty about the appearance there of Laura Kipnis, another “controversial,” i.e., unacceptable, commentator. As usual, the statement begins with a formal nod to free speech: “We . . . defend free speech and believe it is essential to a liberal arts education” but then pivots to deny free speech to anyone who presents “controversial and objectionable beliefs.” Why? Because they “impose on the liberty of students, staff, and faculty at Wellesley,” especially the students who “feel the injury most acutely.”

John Stuart Mill said that the only justified reason to interfere with the freedom of another was if his behavior caused harm. Our new totalitarians have redefined “harm” to mean any opinion with which they disagree. Thus do the liberal arts perish on the pyre of their perversion. It costs

upwards of \$64,000 per annum to attend elite colleges like Middlebury and Wellesley. We suspect that many parents will conclude that is an awfully expensive way to besmirch freedom and intellectual integrity.

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