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The way we live now

On rewriting history and romanticizing evil on college campuses.

Anti-Semitism is alive and well at echt-progressive Oberlin College. Back in 2016, William Jacobson reported at the Legal Insurrection website that hard-line anti-Israel groups at the tony college (total cost this year: \$71,439) endeavored to “co-opt the Black Lives Matter movement and other similar movements” into their pro-Palestine, anti-Israel activism. “The Jews” exploit blacks, you see, and also secretly run the world. Concerned alumni then began to document anti-Semitic incidents in a letter to the school. Jacobson detailed a number of alarming occurrences. One that caught our eye was the repeated dismissal of the Holocaust as an example of “white on white crime,” i.e., nothing really to worry about.

Commenting on that controversy at Oberlin, the columnist David Bernstein pointed out some of the larger implications. The link between virulent anti-Israel sentiment and anti-Semitic behavior, he noted, is not just “a troubling sign of emerging hostility to Jews and Jewish concerns among self-proclaimed social justice advocates on left-wing campuses, but [also] an equally troubling sign of the degradation of intellectual discourse at such campuses more generally, as reason, compassion and just plain old decent manners are replaced with shrill sloganeering based on which group can most successfully proclaim itself to be a victim.”

Since then, things have only gotten worse. Just this past spring, Oberlin alumni wrote another letter, noting that “there were eight times as many events portraying Israel negatively as there were portraying Israel positively” and that a “Jewish student who had an Israeli flag in her window had a rock thrown through her window.” Welcome to the way we live now.

Indeed, what Jacobson, Bernstein, and others have documented at Oberlin is a disease rampant on nearly all progressive campuses: the more “progressive,” the more intolerant they are and the more likely their animus will include a large measure of anti-Semitic bias.

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The dismissal of the Holocaust as “white on white crime” is of a piece with another revisionary gambit. Campaigners for transgender rights at Goldsmiths, University of London, recently suggested that their political opponents be sent to the gulag, explaining (when criticized for this robust expedient) that Soviet gulags were places of “educational” reform and “rehabilitation.” To wit, a group called the LGBTQ+ Society at Goldsmiths said, “sending a bigot to [a gulag] is actually a compassionate, non-violent course of action.” Why? Because, according to these sages, the Soviet “penal system was a rehabilitatory one and self-supporting, a far cry from the Western, capitalist notion of prison. [Well, they got that last point right.] The aim was to correct and change the ways of ‘criminals.’ ”

One might wonder about the scare quotes around the word “criminals.” Could it possibly denote an awareness of the fact that most of the people Stalin sent to the gulag were criminals only because he didn’t like them, these so-called “enemies of the people,” “counter-revolutionaries,” “Trotskyites,” etc.?

No such luck. As in “wider Soviet society,” the LGBTQ+ Society explained, “everyone who was ‘able’ to work did so at a wage proportionate to those who weren’t incarcerated and, as they gained skills, were able to move up the ranks and work under less supervision.”

Again, we might wonder about the significance of the quotation marks around “able.” On reflection, we wonder whether the writer(s) may just distribute the punctuation as an ornamental device intending to add emphasis to certain words and phrases. But who knows? In this semantically tenebrous world, quotation marks around “criminals” may be meant to suggest, à la Michel Foucault, that the whole idea of criminality is a bourgeois construct (unless of course you dare to disagree, in which case you are not just a “criminal,” but a criminal), while quotation marks around “able” may perhaps be meant to make a knowing nod to the sin of “ableism,” the discriminatory practice of noting the difference between physically competent people and those who are, for whatever reason, not. The jury is out on that.

The jury is not, however, out on the stupendous and willful historical ignorance of Goldsmiths’s LGBTQ+ Society. “Educational work,” they go on to explain, “was also a prominent feature of the Soviet penal system. There were regular classes, book clubs, newspaper editorial teams, sports, theatre and performance groups.” The mind reels. And so did the campus Students’ Union, which in due course suspended the group.

Since these writers are lucky enough to have escaped the “regular classes” offered at the local gulag, we suggest that they make up for that loss by acquiring a copy of Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago* and the multi-authored *Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*. The former is a firsthand account of the systematic dehumanization and casual cruelty and brutalization that were integral to the operations of the gulag. The only clubs mentioned are cudgels, and the only performances were beatings, torture, and executions. The latter book is a meticulously researched compendium of the millions upon millions of people murdered by Communist regimes in the twentieth century, prominently including in the Soviet gulag system.

Such willful ignorance and “progressive” romanticization of evil (our scare quotes are deliberate) are a growing blight on our colleges and universities. Organized, endowed, and showered with prestige and societal perquisites in order to preserve and transmit the enabling values of our civilization, they have mutated instead into weapons wielded to undermine and destroy those values.

Meanwhile, Williams College continues to tackle the important issues. Last month, we brought readers up to date on some of the recent faculty appointments at the elite college (a steal compared to Oberlin at only \$69,960 per annum). Now we are pleased to report that Williams has joined the great Enlightened Pronoun Smorgasbord for Social Justice and Linguistic Anarchy. Like many “woke” institutions, Williams long ago abandoned the idea that humanity was divided into two, and only two, sexes. No, the motto of contemporary gender-bending social justice warriors is “the more the merrier.”

We’ve had occasion to comment on this insanity before with respect to the Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson, who was threatened with legal sanctions for objecting to a proposed law that would mandate addressing students by their made-up pronouns, but the fact that this practice is now becoming institutionalized at formerly serious places like Williams is a noteworthy sign of just how far the decay has spread. A recent memorandum from Denise K. Buell, the Dean of Faculty at Williams, tells the whole sorry tale. Explaining that “acknowledging gender diversity” and “respectfully addressing our students and peers” is part of “building a community where everyone is a full member,” Dean Buell urges (orders?) the Williams faculty to be “attentive to what pronouns we use” in order to “respect the multi-faceted identities of our community members.” She (May we presume that “she” is acceptable for Dean Buell?) then goes on to say, “Everyone has the right to be addressed as they *[sic]* should be, and we leave that to each individual to determine.”

Shakespeare’s Brabantio spoke of the “wealthy curled darlings of our nation.” Your institution has to be seriously wealthy to allow you to get away with grammar like that.

We can skip over the fact that “everyone” takes a singular pronoun—and, sadly, a singular masculine pronoun—by default. What do we make of the idea that everyone has the right (the *right*, mind you!) to be addressed *as he should be* and that designation is up to everyone to determine for himself?

We think it is ridiculous in general, and particularly pathetic when emanating from the august precincts of the dean’s office of a supposedly elite liberal arts institution. Dean Buell cheerfully informs her faculty that various college offices are working diligently “to facilitate appropriate pronoun identification for faculty, students and staff” and “to give students the option to submit their pronouns . . . to make [them] available to faculty on class rosters.”

The world is complicated when you look at it through the wrong end of the telescope. “When or if a student changes pronouns at any point during the term, . . . faculty instructors and academic

advisors will receive an email notification . . . indicating that one or more students submitted a pronoun update.”

In an addendum to her memorandum, Dean Buell included links to various advisories about pronoun usage and a list of “pronoun choices” (“the following list,” she cautioned, “is not exhaustive”). On the list are such old friends as “she/her/hers,” “he/him/his,” but also “ze/zir/zirs,” “zhe/zher/zhers,” “name/name/name (e.g. Kris would like Kris’ things for Kris),” and “other (fill in the blank with your pronoun choice).”

What can one say? One bemused member of the Williams community wrote the dean to ask if her (“zir”?) office sent around the communication. The answer was a curt affirmative.

We mentioned Jordan Peterson and his engagement with the pronoun warriors. It is not clear from Dean Buell’s communication to the Williams faculty what penalties, if any, will be imposed on those who choose to address students as “Mr.” and “Miss,” or to utter the dread phrase “Ladies and Gentlemen.” Professor Peterson, before he shot to fame with his book *12 Rules for Life*, was in jeopardy of losing his job and faced possible legal sanction for standing up to the virtocratic language police. He was publicly berated and, more to the point for the way we live now, he suddenly discovered that Google had shut down his YouTube account as well as his Gmail and calendar access.

Peterson’s is one of a growing number of horror stories about suddenly huge, powerful, and wholly unaccountable tech giants like Google, Facebook, and Twitter. The story of how these vast surveillance technologies have assumed such a powerful position in our lives is told in dramatic and sobering detail in *The Creepy Line*, a new documentary written by Peter Schweizer and directed by Matt Taylor. Jordan Peterson, along with the psychologist Robert Epstein, is a prominent spokesman in the film. These companies are so new, yet so powerful, that we as a society have yet to take their measure, assess the extent of their reach over our lives, or determine an effective response to their extraordinary intrusions into our privacy and our political processes. Eric Schmidt, the former ceo of Google, once said that Google went right up to the “creepy line” in its surveillance of its customers and deployment of personal information about them—right up to that line without crossing it. This searing documentary shows that Google, along with Facebook and other tech behemoths, crosses the line every day.

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