

The New Criterion

Notes & Comments May 2016

Safe from “safe spaces”

On the rare good sense of a college administrator.

The Ohio state legislature ought to give the Ohio State University President Michael Drake some sort of medal or commendation.

We'll come back to the admirable President Drake below. First, the story thus far. For the last six months, since the disruptive and pitiable nonsense at the University of Missouri and Yale made headlines nationwide, university administrators have been in full-cringe mode. Students across the country, seeing what pushovers the administrators at Yale and Mizzou were, have tied themselves into squalid little knots of needy and petulant resentment. At Yale, a posse of students showed up at President Peter Salovey's house at midnight to present him with a list of demands, including the demand for “a University where we feel safe.” President Salovey, though acknowledging that the students had appeared “somewhat late” on his doorstep, professed himself “deeply disturbed” by the “distress” they felt and promised that he would “seriously” review their new demands.

He certainly did that. Among many other accommodations, he promised to distribute \$50 million to the congeries of ethnic, racial, and sexual pseudo-disciplines that provide holding pens for the exotic populations with which contemporary universities assuage their guilty consciences.

Two can play at that game. Peter Salovey coughed up \$50 million. Christina Paxson, the President of Brown, responded to student complaints “about how racism, sexism, and a whole host of other problems prevail [*sob*] . . . and prevent us from being safe [*sniffle*], from being at peace, from being whole [*poor baby*] and from being well [*there, there*],” by promising \$100 million to create “a just and inclusive campus.” Reaction by the Black Lives Matter protestors and their enablers? “The Diversity Action and Inclusion Plan” proposed by President Paxson “is illegitimate and insufficient.”

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And so it’s gone at campuses across the country. At Princeton, Harvard, Amherst, Oberlin, and many other institutions, students have disgorged ambitious lists of “non-negotiable” demands. The demands included the usual miscellany of left-wing pieties. Administrators were enjoined to divest from this, celebrate that, and subject the figures of miscellaneous personages, from John C. Calhoun and Jeffrey Amherst to Woodrow

Wilson, to a modern version of *damnatio memoriae*. They were also called upon to acknowledge the alleged horrors of white racism, patriarchy, environmental insensitivity, bathrooms labeled “men” or “women,” etc. But behind it all, as the above examples remind us, was a large if pathetic plea: that university administrators do whatever it takes to transform the institutions over which they preside into asylums of safety, oases of emotional and physical comfort in the midst of which no physical, psychological, or intellectual challenge is allowed to intrude.

We suspect that all the new rhetoric about “trigger warnings” and “micro-aggressions” may be motivated in large part by a grubby desire for power masquerading as a desire for justice (and sweetened, of course, by the gratifying limelight of notoriety). But the unifying trope has also relied heavily on that invocation of safety. Many readers, we’d wager, will remember that pathetic Yale female, who, in the midst of screaming obscenities at the Master of her college, demanded that he step down from his position because he had failed to create “a place of comfort, a home” for students. Never mind that every one of the campuses that has made headlines is, physically, among the safest and most pampered environments ever contrived by the ingenuity of mankind. That’s one of the things that \$65,000-plus per annum gets you: not only a large dollop of moral smugness but also a lavishly protected environment—Pampers, so to speak, for the spirit if not for the body.

It is worth acknowledging that the demand for “safe spaces” has a deep moral or intellectual component. What these battalions of crybullies want is to be protected not only from physical harm but also from anything that would challenge their settled ideas of virtue regarding race, sexuality, “the environment,” political responsibility, the Second Amendment (and, increasingly, the First), and so much more. It used to be that the very pattern of a liberal arts education was set by the figure of Socrates calling his interlocutors to debate about essential questions. What is the good life? What is virtue? Can it be taught? What is truth? How do we recognize it? How can one justify going to war? What is the best way to organize society?

Those were the sorts of questions that, once upon a time, those who were privileged enough to go to college paid good money to think about seriously. By acquainting one with the great debate conducted from the dawn of recorded history until the day before yesterday, a liberal education initiated one into a never-ending conversation. “Being educated” meant immersing oneself into the

stream, if not the scrum, of that debate and understanding that one's own position on the tiny lip of the present moment offered but a poor resource for understanding the important questions that confront us all as imperfect and mortal creatures.

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Today, by contrast, a college education, apart from whatever technical or administrative skills it may impart, seems geared to reinforcing a set of intellectual and moral clichés and protecting its charges from confronting any idea that has not received its Good Housekeeping Seal of political correctitude. Enforcing a regimen of intellectual timidity fired by ravenous moral resentment, today's colleges are in fact factories for the production of sclerotic, politically correct

conformity on any contentious moral or intellectual issue. The spectacle of college administrations first inculcating and abetting this timidity and then capitulating to the groundless anger that it feeds upon would be comical if it were not blighting the lives of those it pretends to help. "We are," as G. K. Chesterton observed in another context, "on the road to producing a race of men too mentally modest to believe in the multiplication table."

We saw the latest example of this academic dynamic at work at Ohio State University last month. A group of students, marching under the rubric #Reclaimosu and representing a dozen campus organizations such as the Committee for Justice in Palestine, Still We Rise, osu Coalition for Black Lives, and (possibly for comic relief) "Real Food osu," occupied part of Bricker Hall, which houses part of the osu administration, including the president's office.

No self-respecting student protest can proceed without a manifesto and list of "non-negotiable" demands, and #Reclaimosu did not disappoint, even if some of the grievances—we're thinking of the demand for a "just, transparent and democratic food system"—seemed somewhat overbred. The meat and potatoes (if we may continue the food metaphor) were mostly off-the-rack items from the menu of contemporary left-wing causes. The Committee for Justice in Palestine, for example, wanted the university "to divest from companies that are complicit in Israeli apartheid," while osu Divest demanded that the university divest its holdings in Caterpillar, Hewlett-Packard, and G4S "due to their involvement in well-documented human rights abuses." United Students Against Sweatshops, meanwhile, wanted the university to halt its energy management plan, because it would "further privatize our university," derailing the great goal of "student led sustainability measures."

As manifestos go, it was pretty pathetic, but it was accompanied by the usual declaration of intransigence. "We will not leave this space," it insisted, "until both of the below demands are met."

This is where things got interesting, and President Michael Drake came into his own. He sent osu Senior Vice President Jay Kasey as his ambassador to the protestors. Speaking in calm, measured tones (the [video clip](#) is widely available on the internet), Kasey explained that he was not there to negotiate. “Dr. Drake will never receive a list of demands and he will not negotiate with you.” Er, what? Yes, they heard right. They were in violation of the Student Code of Conduct, Kasey informed them, and if they did not vacate the building by a certain time, police officers would be called to clear the room. The administration was pleased, he added, to “give you the opportunity to go to jail for your beliefs.”

This wasn’t part of the script the students had signed on for. “What do you mean by ‘clear the room?’ ” one student asked. “Our police officers will physically pick you up,” Kasey patiently explained, “and take you to a paddy wagon and take you to be arrested. You will be discharged from school also.” Hmm. What do you mean “discharged?” someone asked. Probably, Kasey clarified, you will be expelled.

Gratifying as that exhibition of vertebracular stiffness was, what was most instructive was the rationale Kasey enunciated for insisting on the students’ removal: they were violating a “safe space.” The people who worked in the building, he explained, felt intimidated by their presence. But how are we intimidating? whined one student, possibly one who had on another occasion claimed that reading *Huckleberry Finn* or dressing as an American Indian on Halloween constituted a micro-aggression that violated his safe space. It was a brilliant move and, judging from the response of the osu Police, was a coordinated effort. One Tweet from the university police advised the world that “Ohio State respects everyone’s 1st Amendment rights. @osupolice on hand to enhance safety and allow #Reclaimosu to voice peaceful concerns.” Who could be against “enhancing safety”?

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In a single stroke, the osu administration, led by Michael Drake, had turned the table on the college crybullies who have been weaponizing their resentment and putative status as victims to wallow in an infantilizing bath of moralizing intolerance. We commend osu not only for its bracing exhibition of principle but also for its canny strategic gambit: seizing on the students’ own rhetoric to justify its disciplinary action, the

university not only forestalled any effective response, it also . . . we were going to say, it also made the students look like fools, but no, the students accomplished that all on their own.

Coda: perhaps Michael Drake or Jay Kasey can be prevailed upon to go to the University of Washington, where, as a hilarious [internet video](#) prepared by the Family Policy Institute reveals, randomly interviewed students have been so thoroughly indoctrinated that when asked by an adult, Caucasian male of medium height whether he is Asian, or a woman, or six-foot-five, or a

suitable candidate for first grade they are unable to answer. "If I told you I was a woman, what would your response be?" "Good for you, yeah," responded one young woman (we use the term in its old-fashioned sense meaning "female.") We described this video as "hilarious," which it is. But it is also terrifying, for it reveals the extent to which the insanity of "identity politics" has corrupted judgment and language. The ambition behind this nonsense is magical: that by the proper incantatory spells, reality itself might be altered. Alas, reality has a way of intruding sharply into those verbal palaces. We may well be on the road to Chesterton's men who are "too mentally modest to believe in the multiplication table," but two times two still equals four, a man is a man, not a woman, and a short Caucasian is a short Caucasian, not a tall Asian. One didn't always have to go to college to learn these things. Perhaps the moral is, one still doesn't.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 34 Number 9 , on page 1

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