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Introduction: free speech & the academy

by *Roger Kimball*

On the symposium hosted by The New Criterion and the Social Affairs Unit in London.

"Shut up," he explained.
—Ring Lardner

What socialism implies above all is keeping account of everything.
—V. I. Lenin

Appearances do not always deceive. We are once again laboring in those fecund if weed-strewn fields where language, law, politics, and dissimulation contend under the mournful gaze of exiled truth. Indeed, careful readers will note that at least since 2008, when we published a special pamphlet on "Free Speech in an Age of Jihad," assaults on free speech have occupied a prominent and regular place in our reflections.

As with the House of the Lord, however, the abridgement of free speech has many mansions. In January 2015, we considered a broad range of threats against free speech, prominently including the threat posed by the rise of Islamic ideology in Western societies. Since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, Western societies have—had?—sought to forestall the sanguinary hecatombs of religious wars by substituting state for religious sovereignty in the sublunary world of political affairs. How strange, then, to find ourselves in the opening decades of the twenty-first century once again conjuring with demands for the reimposition of laws against blasphemy.

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Some of these demands are frankly religious, or at least theocratic, in origin, as in the tireless campaigns undertaken to promulgate laws against blasphemy by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, representing fifty-six Muslim countries and the Palestinian Authority, in the United Nations and other organs of transnational progressivism.

Other interdictions against "blasphemy" are of a more secular, but no less dogmatic, character, as in the strictures against so-called "hate speech" on campus and anywhere else that political correctness triumphs. The United States must "get tough on hate speech through the law," wrote the feminist commentator Tanya Cohen in a much-cited essay a few years back. Note the phrase "through the law." Under the category of "hate speech," Cohen aggregated speech that "offends or insults in general, along with speech that voices approval of anti-democratic, anti-freedom, and/or totalitarian ideologies and propaganda for war." That's quite a list. How would "the law" handle such torts? Like this: as I write, the Dutch politician Geert Wilders has just been convicted of (as *The New York Times* reports it) "inciting discrimination and of insulting a group for saying that the Netherlands would be safer with fewer Moroccans." Think about that.

This year, conjuring with assaults against free speech in the academy, our focus is in some ways narrower. But since universities and their attendant institutions are defined by their commitment to the pursuit of truth, the assault on free speech in those precincts reveals with particular clarity what is at stake. By subordinating truth to the requirements of an ideological agenda (what lit-crit types call "discourse" or "narrative"), the assault on free speech in the academy is at the same time an assault on freedom of thought and, beyond that, an assault on political freedom tout court. Hence the vertiginous irony that behind leftist calls to "speak truth to power" is the corrosive assumption that truth is always and everywhere relative to power (except of course in the categorical assertion that "truth is relative to power"). It's nice work if you can get it.

In essentials, the subordination of truth to "narrative" rests upon a contradiction as old as Protagoras and Thrasymachus. Nor is it any more cogent for being updated in the forbidding argot of Foucault and his heirs. Taken together, the following essays offer a sort of fever chart or participant observer's report on this pathology of truth in contemporary intellectual life. Some of the essays, like Andrew C. McCarthy's reflection on the baneful influence of Edward Said, dilate on the central mendacity at the heart of political correctness: the demonization of reason itself as "a malevolent [i.e., non-progressive] force." Other essays delve into particular manifestations of the disease. Peter Wood, the President of the National Association of Scholars, provides a compendium of various ways in which free speech is curtailed on campus, while Peter Bonilla, from the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, shows how the integrity of faculty research has been inverted, turned upside down, by an increasing subservience to forces outside and alien to the canons of scholarly endeavor. Dominic Green anatomizes the "bds" (for "Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions") movement against the state of Israel, while Nigel Biggar rehearses the failed campaign to remove a statue of the great philanthropist Cecil Rhodes from an Oxford College that was a conspicuous beneficiary of his largesse.

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The pressure of academic political correctness against truth is not confined to the classroom or to campus life, as Anthony Daniels shows in his discussion of "medical correctness" in the pages of such premier medical journals as *The New England Journal of Medicine* and *The Lancet*. Daniels acknowledges that medicine might at first glance seem to be an unpromising discipline for subversion by political correctness. The visceral reality of illness is naturally resistant to ideological remediation. An aching stomach is not soothed by correct opinions about race, gender, or capitalist exploitation. Nevertheless, as Daniels shows, medicine, though initially recalcitrant, has turned out to be a field "ripe for political correctness." Medicine may have come late to the party, but it has made up for its tardiness by embracing political correctness "with the zeal of the late convert." Consider, to take just one example, an article published on Bastille Day of 2016 and entitled "Beyond Bathrooms—Meeting the Health Needs of Transgender People." The bits of this essay that Daniels quotes show beyond doubt that it is a masterpiece of minatory absurdity and virtue signaling.

To the public at large, the cavalcade of politically correct nonsense on college campuses seems preposterous but mostly silly. The recent influx of infantilization—the demand for "safe spaces" and "trigger warnings" against upsetting ideas, the warnings against "micro- aggressions" and other upsetting facts of life—add a surrealistic overlay to the grim comedy. But Daniel Johnson's look back at what happened to the German university in the 1930s shows that political correctness can be something much more serious. "The story of this self-immolation is salutary for us," Johnson writes,

> because, though we know how the story of the German university ended, we do not know how far the betrayal of science and the humanities with which we are now confronted almost daily in our own academic institutions may yet have to go. Perhaps only the prospect of the catastrophe that a century ago befell some of the world's greatest centers of learning—a catastrophe from which they have even now not fully recovered—will bring today's intelligentsia to its senses.

Perhaps. There are, here and there, some signs that the adamantine carapace of political correctness is cracking under the weight of its own absurdity. But I have been saying that at least since 1987 when Allan Bloom's book *The Closing of the American Mind* fired the first salvo against this phenomenon of mendacious self-indulgence. Hitherto, anyway, the "some signs" have signaled but local disturbances in the progress of the Leviathan of political correctness. For every salutary upsurge of sanity—for example, the University of Chicago's recent announcement that its campus was *not* a "safe space" or romper room for snowflakes more interested in savoring their own sense of virtue than learning about the world—there are a dozen Yales and Amhersts and Williams Colleges utterly beholden to the agenda of politically correct orthodoxy.

Still, reality itself is finally the great obstacle to the definitive triumph of political correctness. Which is why Andrew McCarthy was right to zero in on the extent to which the partisans of political correctness attack not just particular points of view but ultimately reason itself. Reason, whose procedures provide mankind with its primary key to the discernment of reality, is a suspect force. If the party line holds that two plus two equals five, but reason tells us that the correct answer is four, then it is reason which must yield. Hence it is, as McCarthy notes, that "The censors are not just destroying our universities. They are destroying what makes the West the West."

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As readers of *Nineteen Eighty-four* will recall, I take that arithmetical example from Orwell's great dystopian novel. "Freedom," the book's unhappy hero Winston writes early on in the novel, "is the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted all else follows." But it is exactly that freedom—the freedom of the independent operation of reason—that Big Brother interdicts. Like Lenin years earlier, Big Brother is everywhere. There is no detail of life too small to escape his scrutiny and control. All of one's behavior, even one's thoughts, belong to him. Thus it is that at the end of the novel, his spirit broken, Winston sits in a café tracing the equation "two plus two equals five."

The chief instrument for the enforcement of conformity—at the end of the day, it is even more potent than the constant threat of terror—is language, the perfection and dissemination of Newspeak, that insidious pseudo-language that aims to curtail rather than liberate thought and feeling. "The purpose of Newspeak," Orwell writes, "was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc [English Socialism, i.e., the existing regime], but to make all other modes of thought impossible."

> It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all . . . a heretical thought . . . should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words. . . .
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> This was done partly by the invention of new words, but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words and by stripping such words as remained of unorthodox meanings, and so far as possible of all secondary meanings whatever. . . . Newspeak was designed not to extend but to *diminish* the range of thought, and this purpose was indirectly assisted by cutting the choice of words down to a minimum. . . . [I]n Newspeak the expression of unorthodox opinions, above a very low level, was well-nigh impossible.

Orwell intended Nineteen Eighty-four as a warning, an admonition. Our academic social justice warriors, supposing they are even aware of Orwell's work, would seem to regard it as a plan of action. It was to shine some light into those tenebrous caverns of orthodoxy that we convened this symposium on free speech and the academy.

Notes

1 “Free Speech & the Academy: How Left-Wing Censorship Is Threatening to Destroy Our Universities,” a symposium organized jointly by *The New Criterion* and London’s Social Affairs Unit, took place on September 30, 2016 in Winchester, England. Participants were Michael Auslin, Nigel Biggar, Jeremy Black, Peter Bonilla, Anthony Daniels, Christie Davies, Dominic Green, Daniel Johnson, Roger Kimball, Noel Malcolm, Andrew C. McCarthy, Michael Mosbacher, Caroline Potter, Eric C. Simpson, Oliver Wiseman, and Peter W. Wood. Discussion revolved around earlier versions of the essays printed in this special section.

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