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Inebriates of virtue

On iconoclasm and the restriction of free speech.

W elcome back to The New Criterion. We hope that our readers enjoyed a pleasant and productive period of aestivation. It was not, we regret to report, a good summer for free speech and one of its key enablers, historical truthfulness.

Let us start with an apparently frivolous example. At Yale, where censorship never sleeps, the Committee of Public Safety—no, wait, that was Robespierre’s plaything. Yale’s new bureaucracy is called the “Committee on Art in Public Spaces.” Its charge? To police works of art on campus, to make sure that images offensive to favored populations are covered over or removed. At the residential college formerly known as Calhoun, for example, the Committee has removed stained glass windows depicting slaves and other historical scenes of Southern life. Statues and other representations of John C. Calhoun—a distinguished statesman but also an apologist for slavery—have likewise been slotted for the oubliette.

B ut impermissible attitudes and images are never in short supply once the itch to stamp out heresy gets going. Yesterday, it was Calhoun and representations of the Antebellum South. Today it is a carving at an entrance to Yale’s Sterling Memorial Library depicting an Indian and a Puritan. The Puritan, if you can believe it, was holding a musket—a gun! Quoth Susan Gibbons, one of Yale’s librarian-censors: its “presence at a major entrance to Sterling was not appropriate.” Why not? Never mind. Solution? Cover over the musket with a cowpat of stone. (But leave the Indian’s bow and arrow alone!)

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Actually, we just learned that the removable cowpat of stone was only a stopgap. The outcry against the decision struck a chord with Peter Salovey, Yale’s President. “Such

alteration,” he noted, “represents an erasure of history, which is entirely inappropriate at a university.” He’s right about that. But wait! Instead of merely altering the image, Salovey announced that Yale would go full Taliban, removing the offending stonework altogether. In the bad old days, librarians and college presidents were people who sought to protect the past, that vast storehouse of offensive attitudes and behavior. In these more enlightened times, they collude

in its effacement.

You might say, Who cares what violence a super-rich bastion of privilege and unaccountability like Yale perpetrates on its patrimony? Well, you should care. Institutions like Yale (and Harvard, Stanford, and the rest of the elite educational aeries) are the chief petri dishes for the “progressive” hostility to free expression and other politically correct attitudes that have insinuated themselves like a fever-causing virus into the bloodstream of public life.

This summer, Douglas Koziol, an anguished employee at an independent bookstore near Boston, took to the publishing website “The Millions” to exhibit the fine grain of his caring, sharing sensitivity by airing his “moral objection” to J. D. Vance’s bestseller *Hillbilly Elegy*. What is a right-thinking (i.e., left-leaning) bookseller to do when customers clamor for a book with the poisonous message that hard work and individual initiative are important factors in escaping poverty? The urge to hide the book is strong, strong. But Koziol decided he would merely badger (“start conversations” with) the unenlightened masses who ask for books like *Hillbilly Elegy* (to say nothing of those wanting Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged*, anything by William F. Buckley Jr., or the works of the “tech vampire” Peter Thiel; the house of left-wing disapproval is large, and contains many mansions).

Spiriting away stonework in the Ivy League, and the residue of the attitudes that stand behind such iconoclastic activities in the parlors of left-leaning bookshops, may seem mostly comical. (As, we suppose, was the case of poor Robert Lee, the Asian sports announcer who, a week after the deadly melee at Charlottesville, was removed from calling a University of Virginia football game because of “the coincidence” of his unfortunate name.)

But there is a straight line from those nuggets of morally-fired intolerance to other, decidedly less comical examples of puritanical censure. Consider the case of James Damore, the (former) Google engineer who wrote an internal memo outlining the company’s cult-like “echo chamber” of political correctness and ham-handed efforts to nurture “diversity” in hiring and promotion. When the memo was publicized, it first precipitated controversy and then provided Google ceo Sundar Pichai a high horse upon which to perch, declare that Damore’s memo was “offensive and not OK,” and then fire him. For expressing his opinion on a company discussion forum designed to encourage free expression (so long as it toes the politically correct line).

In a way, there was nothing new about Google’s actions. Large companies have always been bastions of conformity. Decades ago, everyone at ibm had to wear a white shirt and was strongly encouraged to espouse conservative social values. Today, everyone in Silicon Valley has to subscribe to the ninety-five theses of the social justice warrior’s creed, beginning with certain dogmas about race, sexuality, and the essential lovableness

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of jihadist Muslims. If you are at Google and dissent from this orthodoxy, you will soon find yourself not at Google. If you are a not-for-profit advocacy group like the Family Research Council (a traditionalist Christian enterprise) or “Jihad Watch,” you are likely to find yourself on the long, long list of “active hate groups” compiled by the Southern Poverty Law Center (among other honorees: American College of Pediatricians, American Family Association, and many traditional Christian organizations). Then you may find yourself receiving an email from ProPublica, a George Soros-funded left-wing activist group working hand-in-glove with the splc, asking you:

- 1) Do you disagree with the designation of your website as hate or extremist? Why?
- 2) We identified several tech companies on your website: PayPal, Amazon, Newsmax, and Revcontent. Can you confirm that you receive funds from your relationship with those tech companies? How would the loss of those funds affect your operations, and how would you be able to replace them?
- 3) Have you been shut down by other tech companies for being an alleged hate or extremist web site? Which companies?
- 4) Many people opposed to sites like yours are currently pressuring tech companies to cease their relationships with them—what is your view of this campaign? Why?

In our view, the appropriate response to such a missive is something unprintable. But ponder question number two, which mentions PayPal, Amazon, etc. What has begun to happen is that extremist left-wing enterprises like the splc have arrogated to themselves the authority to determine who and what is “hateful” and then conspire with like-minded initiatives like the online activist publication ProPublica to “out” such groups and bring pressure upon companies like PayPal, Facebook, Twitter, Google (which is working with ProPublica on a “documenting hate news index”), Amazon, and even internet service providers and domain registrars to deny service to groups that do not pass the social justice warrior’s standard of purity.

On the list of “hate groups” disseminated by the splc are plenty of unpalatable groups like the Ku Klux Klan and various far-right bijoux (what we are supposed to call “alt-right” now because it sounds scarier) like the neo-Nazi, white supremacist “Daily Stormer.” The “Daily Stormer” is a vile anti-Semitic site. Do you think that it ought to be denied internet access? We certainly wouldn’t miss it, but the issue is who will be next. As Jeremy Carl reported at National Review, Mathew Prince, the ceo of the internet infrastructure company Cloudflare, wrote that he made “an arbitrary decision”: “I woke up in a bad mood and decided to kick [the “Daily Stormer”] off the Internet. . . . It was a decision I could make because I’m the ceo of a major Internet infrastructure company. No one,” he added ruefully, “should have that power.”

You undoubtedly dislike what the “Daily Stormer” says as much as we do. Does that mean that they should not be able to express their opinions? Charlottesville was a godsend to the self-appointed hate police. In its immediate aftermath, companies around the country took pains to

declare their rejection of “hate,” and ProPublica, the splc, and other leftish thugs expanded their witch hunts. After Charlottesville, for example, “Jihad Watch,” a site critical of Islamic extremism, was briefly dropped by PayPal in response to the initiatives of ProPublica and the splc. Only a public outcry induced PayPal to drop its interdiction. Doubtless there will be many other casualties. Writing at the website “Legal Insurrection,” the law professor William Jacobson sounded a cautionary note: “Being cut off from domain registrars and other aspects of the internet backbone is something we expect from totalitarian governments. Now that power is in the control of almost-uniformly left-wing corporate managers.”

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Back in 1965, the Frankfurt School Marxist Herbert Marcuse wrote “Repressive Tolerance,” a totalitarian classic. Marcuse distinguished between “bad” or “false” tolerance—the sort of tolerance that most of us would call “true” tolerance, that

undergirds liberal democracy—and “liberating tolerance,” which he defined as “intolerance against movement from the Right, and toleration of movements from the Left.”

So here we are. The old idea of tolerance was summed up in such chestnuts as “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.” The new dispensation is: “I disapprove of what you say, therefore you may not say it.” We think that a group-authored column at the Electronic Frontier Foundation got it exactly right: “Protecting free speech is not something we do because we agree with all of the speech that gets protected. We do it because we believe that no one—not the government and not private commercial enterprises—should decide who gets to speak and who doesn’t.” Now that the Marxist-tinged ideology of the 1960s has had a few decades to marinate the beneficiaries of our free-market society, steeping them in the toxic, liberationist nostrums that masquerade as moral imperatives in our colleges and universities, we find the graduates manipulating the fundamental levers of political and corporate power. The possibilities for abuse are nearly endless, which is one reason that proposals to regulate internet registrars and enterprises like Google and PayPal as public utilities are worth considering. Totalitarian societies deprive people and groups they dislike of basic resources. Liberal republics always repudiated such tactics as inimical to freedom. But it turns out that in the great battle between the partisans of freedom and the inebriates of virtue, freedom is ultimately negotiable—until it rouses itself to fight back.

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