

There's No Safe Space for Ideas on Campus 'Animal Farms'

Zealous student activists find ways to punish those who make them think uncomfortable thoughts.

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Anti-Trump demonstrators in Los Angeles, Nov. 10. PHOTO: ETIENNE LAURENT/SHUTTERSTOCK



Most Americans know that higher education has for several decades been in the grip of a deeply intolerant, fanatical and uncompromising strain of progressive activism. Students and sometimes even faculty members regularly chase heterodox speakers off campus, demand complete fealty from terrified campus bureaucracies, and denounce and destroy each

other over the slightest and most inconsequential ideological deviations. The environment isn't unlike George Orwell's "Animal Farm," a place where "no one dared speak his mind, when fierce, growling dogs roamed everywhere, and when you had to watch your comrades torn to pieces after confessing to shocking crimes."

Yet an even more intolerant brand of campus activism is taking shape. This rising political philosophy isn't merely allergic to dissenting ideas but is opposed even to ideas about dissenting ideas. It's a bit like the concept of metacognition in reverse: These activists, gripped by zealotry and inflexible dogmatism, are taking pains to avoid even thinking about thoughts with which they disagree.

Consider a recent controversy at Washington College in Maryland. Students there successfully lobbied to shut down a campus production of a play just one day before it was set to open.

The aggrieved students were upset that the play, Larry Shue's "The Foreigner," depicts the evil antics of the Ku Klux Klan. But the play doesn't show Klan members in a sympathetic light—on the contrary, they're the villains of the piece, and they get their comeuppance in the end. Yet students were deeply upset by the Klan costumes the actors would wear, so the play had to go. (The theater department was "unable to find a satisfactory compromise" with the student activists, a campus official dryly noted.)

Several professors have also landed in hot water recently simply for speaking an offensive word while students were around. At Emory University, law professor Paul Zwier is facing major sanctions from his school because, in a few instances, he said the N-word. Mr. Zwier didn't direct the word at anyone or anything; he merely mentioned it, first as part of a discussion of case law and then to illustrate a larger point during a private conversation. Students claimed Mr. Zwier threatened their "safety and emotional well-being." Another student who heard Mr. Zwier use the word was reportedly "visibly shaken" after the experience, as if he had suffered a near-death experience. Faculty wanted Mr. Zwier barred from school events, lest they be forced to sit near him and risk their own reputations.

An employee at the University of North Texas lost her job after referring to the N-word as an example of constitutionally protected speech. Students demanded her firing, claiming that her use of the word proved she *was* racist. At Augsburg University in Minneapolis, a professor uttered the word while discussing a James Baldwin text that itself used the word. That professor was suspended after a student outcry. A professor at the University of Kansas got booted off the tenure track after referring to the word during a class session.

More evidence of ideological intransigence can be found in the "bias response teams" that are now regular features at many universities. One Michigan State student had a bias report filed against him for watching a Ben Shapiro video in a dorm. A faculty member at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln was reported for having a Trump sticker in his office window. Another professor was hit with a bias report after discussing the infamous Janet Jackson "nipplegate" controversy. The offended student said the professor had not couched the discussion with enough moral qualifiers.

These incidents don't represent the normal campus hysterics to which we've become accustomed. A growing and strident sect of campus activism is coming to oppose not merely differing opinions but even *talking* about differing opinions. This is a new and far more uncompromising brand of progressive politics, where even an unsympathetic and progressive depiction of the Ku Klux Klan is too much to handle.

Administrators are partly to blame. University leaders have been far too quick in recent years to yield ground to political zealots, with the result that zealots feel that they more or less run the show on campus. They aren't wrong.

But the real responsibility for this mess belongs to the student activists. Nobody forced them to become hyperpartisan fanatics; they did that on their own, and they now find themselves enmeshed in a silly, thought-free ideology, the consequences of which will surely come crashing down one day soon.

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