

The Rise of the College Crybullies

The status of victim has been weaponized at campuses across the nation, but there is at least one encouraging sign.



At the Odegaard Library of the University of Washington in Seattle on Nov. 12, a rally in support of black students at the University of Missouri.

WSJ By Roger Kimball, Nov. 13, 2015 6:50 p.m. ET

For more than a week now, the country has been mesmerized, and appalled, by the news emanating from academia. At Yale the insanity began over Halloween costumes. Erika Christakis, associate master of a residential college at Yale, courted outrage by announcing that “free speech and the ability to tolerate offense are the hallmarks of a free and open society” and it was not her business to police Halloween costumes.

To people unindoctrinated by the sensitivity training that is *de rigueur* on most campuses today, these sentiments might seem unobjectionable. But to the delicate creatures at Yale’s Silliman College they were an intolerable provocation. What if students dressed as American Indians or Mexican mariachi musicians? Angry, hysterical students confronted Nicholas Christakis, Erika’s husband and the master of Silliman, screaming obscenities and demanding that he step down because he had failed to create “a place of comfort, a home” for students. The episode was captured on video and went viral.

At the University of Missouri, Jonathan Butler, the son of a wealthy railroad executive (2014 compensation: \$8.4 million), went on a hunger strike to protest what he called “revolting” acts of racism at Mizzou. Details were scanty. Nevertheless, black members of the university football team threatened to strike for the rest of the season unless Tim Wolfe, Mizzou’s president, stepped down. A day or two later, he did.

Opinion Journal Video

Editorial Board Member Joe Rago on the student-revolts spreading across college campuses. Photo credit: Getty Images.

Emboldened, student and faculty protesters physically prevented reporters from photographing a tent village they had built on public space. In another shocking video, a student photographer is shown being forced back by an angry mob while Melissa Click, a feminist communications teacher at Mizzou, shouts for “muscle” to help her eject a reporter.

What is happening? Is it a reprise of the late 1960s and 1970s, when campuses across the country were sites of violent protests? In my book “Tenured Radicals: How Politics Have Corrupted Our Higher Education,” I showed how the radical ideology of the 1960s had been institutionalized, absorbed into the moral tissues of the American educational establishment.

As one left-wing professor wrote in the Chronicle of Higher Education, “After the Vietnam War, a lot of us didn’t just crawl back into our literary cubicles; we stepped into academic positions. With the war over, our visibility was lost, and it seemed for a while—to the unobservant—that we had disappeared. Now we have tenure, and the work of reshaping the universities has begun in earnest.”

“Tenured Radicals” provides an account of that reshaping, focusing especially on what it has meant for the substance of a college education. The book includes a section on “academia and infantilization.” But when I wrote in 2008, the rhetoric of “safe spaces,” “microaggressions” and “trigger warnings” had not yet colluded to bring forth that new academic phenomenon, at once tender and vicious, the crybully.

The crybully, who has weaponized his coveted status as a victim, was first sighted in the mid-2000s. He has two calling cards, race and gender. By coincidence [Lawrence Summers](#), then president of Harvard University, was involved in the evolution of both.

Race came first. In 2001 Mr. Summers made headlines when he suggested that Cornel West—then the Alphonse Fletcher, Jr., University Professor and eminence in the African and African American Studies Department at Harvard—buckle down to some serious scholarship. (Mr. West’s most recent production had been a rap CD called “Sketches of My Culture.”) Mr. Summers also suggested that the professor lead in fighting the scandal of grade inflation at Harvard, where one of every two grades was an A or A-.

A national scandal erupted. Black professors at Harvard threatened to leave—Mr. West soon decamped to Princeton—and the [New York Times NYT 1.06 %](#) published a hand-wringing editorial criticizing Mr. Summers, who quickly recanted, noting that the entire episode had been “a terrible misunderstanding.”

Then came gender. In 2005 Mr. Summers spoke at a conference on “Diversifying the Science & Engineering Workforce” at MIT. He speculated on why there aren’t more women scientists at elite universities. He touched on several possibilities: Maybe “patterns of discrimination” had something to do with it. Maybe most women preferred to put their families before their careers. And maybe, just possibly, it had something to do with “different availability of aptitude at the high end.”

What a storm that last comment sparked! “I felt I was going to be sick,” wailed Nancy Hopkins, a biology professor at MIT, who had walked out on Mr. Summers. “My heart was pounding and my breath was shallow, low,” Ms. Hopkins said. “I was extremely upset.”

Once again, Mr. Summers recanted. He published an open letter to the Harvard community. “I deeply regret the impact of my comments,” he wrote, “and apologize for not having weighed them more carefully.” It was too late. By May 2005 his faculty had returned a vote of no confidence 218 to 185, with 18 abstentions. By February 2006 he had been forced to announce his resignation.

These two incidents, partly because they involved such a high-profile institution, marked an important turning point. The pleasures of aggression were henceforth added to the comforts of feeling aggrieved.

The toxic fruits of this development are on view not only at Yale and Mizzou, but throughout the higher-educational establishment, where spurious charges of “systemic racism,” “a culture of rape” and sundry other imaginary torts compete for the budget of pity and special treatment.

Even as I write, Amherst College is exploding with nonnegotiable demands from a student group that the president apologize for (among others things) Amherst’s “institutional legacy of white supremacy, colonialism, anti-black racism, anti-Latinx racism, anti-Native American racism, anti-Native/ indigenous racism, anti-Asian racism, anti-Middle Eastern racism, heterosexism, cis-sexism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, ableism, mental health stigma, and classism.” Really, you can’t make it up.

The response of university administrations has not been encouraging. At Yale, cringing capitulation has been the order of the day. Last week Yale President Peter Salovey told a group of aggrieved students who complained that they did not feel “safe” at Yale that “we failed you.” At one of the several hours-long public meetings on campus, the Yale Daily News reported, Jonathan Holloway, dean of Yale College, found himself “surrounded by a sea of

upturned faces and fighting back tears” as he apologized for the administration’s silence on allegations of racial discrimination.

There are a lot of tears at Yale these days. When the conservative lawyer Amy Wax spoke at the Yale Political Union last week, a group of students stood up, turned their backs on her, and raised their fists in the air in protest. “Several students,” the Yale Daily News reported, “cried during her speech.”

A few days after enduring the hysterics of his students, Nicholas Christakis, accompanied by Dean Holloway and other university administrators, met with about 100 students at his home and abased himself. “I have disappointed you and I’m really sorry,” he said.

The confrontation “just broke my heart,” Mr. Christakis added. “I care so much about the same issues you care about. I’ve spent my life taking care of these issues of injustice, of poverty, of racism. I have the same beliefs that you do . . . I’m genuinely sorry, and to have disappointed you. I’ve disappointed myself.”

Perhaps he thinks such groveling will allow him to salvage his position. I wouldn’t count on it. At about midnight on Veterans Day, a group of students marched to Mr. Salovey’s house to complain about “institutional racism at Yale” and to present six demands, including “a University where we feel safe,” the renaming of Yale’s Calhoun College (John Calhoun supported slavery), the abolition of the title “Master,” and the erection of a monument acknowledging that Yale was built on land stolen from “indigenous peoples.” Oh, and they demanded that Nicholas and Erika Christakis be removed from their administrative positions.

For his part, Mr. Salovey noted mildly that the students had appeared at his house “at a somewhat late hour,” but that was just fine. He was “deeply disturbed” by the “distress” they felt and would “seriously” review their new demands.

The fatuousness of these episodes—many of which might have been plucked from the annals of Maoist public-shaming events—underscores the surreal quality of life at many American colleges these days. Peter Salovey came to his office a couple of years ago with a ringing defense of free speech. He has bravely endeavored to continue that support, but has also chained his carriage to a conflicting, indeed a contradictory, ethic: the mendacious gospel of political correctness, according to which reality must take second place to ideology. Mr. Salovey, like academic administrators around the country, hopes that he can safeguard free speech while also acceding to demands that the university be a “safe space” where no one’s feelings are hurt. It is an impossible project.

Academic administrators would be better advised to take a page from the robust philosophy of Teddy Roosevelt, leavened with a little clear-eyed truth-telling from Aristotle. In Roosevelt’s autobiography, TR cautioned that “The one absolutely certain way of bringing this nation to

ruin . . . would be to permit it to become a tangle of squabbling nationalities.” He warned against the destructive vogue for “hyphenated Americans.”

Back then, it was German-Americans, Irish-Americans, Italian-Americans. Today we speak of “Native-Americans,” “African-Americans,” and the like, and terms tend to be wielded in a way to claim both special protected status and unearned privilege. The result is a tangle of national squabbling that is like nothing Roosevelt could have imagined.

The truth is that American universities are among the safest and most coddled environments ever devised by man. The idea that one should attend college to be protected from ideas one might find controversial or offensive could only occur to someone who had jettisoned any hope of acquiring an education. Many commentators have been warning about a “higher education bubble.” They have focused mostly on the unsustainable costs of college, but the spectacle of timid moral self-indulgence also deserves a place on the bill of indictment.

There are some encouraging signs. When a dean at Claremont College resigned on Thursday after being accused of racism because of a carelessly worded email, some brave students at the Claremont Independent published a dissenting editorial in which they berated hypersensitive students for bringing spurious charges of racism and the dean and the president for cowardice in not standing up to the barrage.

“Lastly,” they wrote, “we are disappointed in students like ourselves, who were scared into silence. We are not racist for having different opinions. We are not immoral because we don’t buy the flawed rhetoric of a spiteful movement.” (A larger excerpt is nearby.)