

THE MEDICALISATION OF THE UNIVERSITY

The university risks becoming a de facto clinic where students are the patients, argues **Frank Furedi**

In the early 2000s the Dean of Arts and Humanities at Durham University circulated a memorandum instructing staff teaching the liberal arts that they should not lecture on controversial and sensitive topics unless they had approval from an ethics committee. It was not good practice for lecturers to catch students unaware by raising issues such as abortion or suicide or domestic violence. To my surprise, a lot of my colleagues thought the memo was not a big deal. Why should we care, they asked, if a university dean tells lecturers to censor themselves and to reorganise their teaching material in a way that does not offend the sensitivities of students?

That was a long time ago, and as it happened the instructions were not implemented. It was too early then. It would take another ten years or so before what the dean asked came to be seen as the convention in many universities.

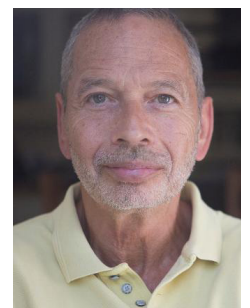
Let me note at the outset that critics of what is happening in universities often overstate the issues. There is no plot or movement that is driving these changes. If there were, it would be easier to deal with because it would be possible to pinpoint the responsible individuals. What we are witnessing in universities is the product of wider cultural forces that are working themselves out according to their inner logic in the university environment.

Another point to note—because it is often misunderstood—is that the current *zeitgeist* on campuses that supports safe spaces, trigger warnings and censorship does not represent the continuation of the radical student movements of the 1960s or 1970s. Nor is it simply another step in the relativist

turn that took place in the social sciences in the 1980s. It is something that has its own origins, and it is clearly distinct with regards to some of the problems and issues that were raised in the past. This is a more apolitical therapeutic phenomenon rather than the conscious development of issues from decades ago.

Three stages of freedom

We have gone through several stages in terms of freedom of speech on campus. In the old days of student radicalism in the 1960s and 1970s, the focus was on expanding the realm of freedom—more free speech not less, more experimentation not less, more risk-taking not less. In other words, this was a radical moment that perhaps had its limits and problems, but it was not a movement towards censorship. It did not have the puritanical censorious impulse that is a feature of student political protest today.



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In the 1960s, most of the 1970s, and even the 1980s people on campus would have all signed up to the view that academic freedom is inviolable and that free speech is a value worth fighting tooth and nail to protect. Free speech was seen as untouchable.

Around the year 2000—around the same time as the dean’s memo at Durham University—this notion of freedom began to shift to what I call, ‘I believe in free speech, but’. What really mattered was the ‘but’. Everyone had their own reasons for why in this or that case free speech was not allowed—because it was so insensitive, provocative or offensive that a different standard needed to apply to the way the right to free speech was exercised.

From the ‘I believe in free speech, but’ stage we have arrived at the current stage. For the first time in modern times—for the first time since the Enlightenment—a significant group of academics and students now argue that free speech and academic freedom are not such a big deal. There are more important things to worry about in the world. Whilst these people are still a minority, they are significant because of their influence.

Not only do some say that free speech is not such a big deal, but also a significant number of people in the academy argue that free speech is often used as an instrument of privilege by elites to oppress the rest of society. In this way, they totally invert reality. They forget that it was people from below who struggled for freedom of speech. Free speech was never a gift that was given to society. It had to be wrested from the elites in previous times. But the way it is presented now is that free speech is the privilege of elites, particularly white heterosexual males who have this strange notion that it is something worth defending and cultivating.

That is a very important moment. There are now numerous surveys, particularly in the United States, where in many places 38% to 45% of the students when asked what they think of the First Amendment, which guarantees the right to free speech, or when asked about academic freedom, say ‘what’s the big deal?’. This is a new development.

The rise of non-judgementalism

In my recent book, *What’s Happened to the University?*, I argue that what we are seeing play out on campus is what I call the freedom/security

trade-off. What I mean by this is that historically authoritarian governments have argued: if you give up a bit of your freedom, we’ll make you more secure. We’ll protect you. Now we all know that when we give up our freedom we never become more secure, but nonetheless that’s the argument that’s used.

What we have on campuses is the academic version of the freedom/security trade-off, which holds that it is worth giving up a little bit of freedom to protect students from insensitive remarks. This is a new idea that it’s legitimate to constrain the domain of freedom in order to immunise young people from the horrors of criticism, the horrors of offence, the horrors of being challenged, and the horrors of being judged—particularly judged.

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One of the core values of universities in Australia, as much as in England and America, is non-judgementalism. Yet in a civilised world we judge each other all the time. The very idea of tolerance is based on the idea of judgement—I find your ideas objectionable but nevertheless you have the right to express them. Without judging one another we cannot take each other seriously. Without being able to judge each other, there is no such thing as a public debate or public dialogue. Yet we have come to the point where non-judgementalism is celebrated as a core value. In many American universities, this attitude has been internalised so that students are quarantined from judgement.

Freedom has also become subservient to three important values. The first value is diversity, which is seen as being the principal value at the moment. Diversity trumps everything else. Yet when you scratch below the surface, diversity is one of those empty concepts that doesn’t mean anything. When you ask people what diversity means, they are not

able to explain it because in English diversity means ‘the many’. That’s not a value.

After diversity comes safety and security. Nearly every university advertises that it is a safe space or a safe university, and that the safety of students is their greatest concern. The third value is the right not to be offended. This right has been sacralised. To be offended is almost like a form of irredeemable crime.

Socialisation as validation

In the Western world, we have created a form of socialisation in the way we parent and school children so that young people are socialised into a mode of validation. Instead of getting young people to engage with values—about what is right and wrong—and instead of communicating the values that parents were socialised into, increasingly we live in a world where children are socialised by raising their self-esteem. Throughout school and high school, they become immunised from criticism. For instance, a few years ago some Australian schools banned the use of red pen on the grounds that crossing out something in red pen was a form of violence. In this way there is an impulse, or rather an imperative, for teachers to validate rather than to question or criticise.

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Given this kind of education and socialisation, it is not surprising that by the time schoolchildren get to university, they look for security and safety. In this way, a large number of students actually invite a paternal reaction to their predicament. From their point of view, they want to be looked after. University is considered such a difficult transition from school that some campuses even have transition counselling because students might feel insecure when they start at university.

In other words, if young people are socialised into a therapeutic way of engaging with the world, then it is not surprising that they will feel so mentally insecure that they will feel a need to be immunised

from the pressure of being challenged. We have created this problem. They are not responsible for it. But the unfolding of this dynamic in universities is what is behind the trigger warnings and the demonstrations asking to be protected from Trump being elected.

The assumption is that students are simply biological children, and need to be treated like children. But if we treat students like children then they will behave in accordance with the kind of assumptions that we have endowed upon them.

The turning point was in the 1990s when the idioms of therapeutics entered into the mainstream. Children were socialised into that. The use of language has changed quite fundamentally since then. For instance, the word ‘vulnerable’ never used to be used in relation to human beings. It was used to describe the physical attributes of bridges, and the like. If you look at the usage of the word ‘vulnerable’ it has increased alongside other words like ‘traumatised’, ‘depressed’, and ‘stressed out’. Suddenly the language changed, and when language changes it influences our imagination and the way we think.

Mental health cases are increasing at universities, just as they are also increasing in schools and workplaces—indeed, in every domain of public life including the army and police. My analysis is that it’s the cultural moment: the therapeutic interpretation of existential problems predisposes people to medicalise the everyday problems of life in the idiom of mental health. That has created a condition where young children at a very early age, when they feel challenged or distressed or feel criticised, will often react in a way that uses psychological idioms—they talk about being stressed out, depressed, traumatised. By the time they go to university it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. So they become living patients and as far as they are concerned the university has become a *de facto* clinic.

This is the main problem we are dealing with today. Identity politics is the obverse side of this problem. Identity politics is no longer what it was in the 1970s. For example, the movement for gay marriage today has nothing to do with gay liberation movements in the 1960s and 1970s, which were different in their dynamics. The movement that

exists today is based on a single principle: it's all about me. And when it is all about you, your identity becomes so important that if I criticise you, if I say that you are wrong, the way that is interpreted is not that I think your ideas are wrong but that I am attacking you as an individual. That is why we get these hysterical scenes on university campuses in the Anglo-American world.

Conclusion

It is important not to blame the younger generation. There is always a temptation to look back at the good old days when we were hardier and more robust. What has happened to young kids is our fault. Adult society has given up on being authoritative. Parents and educators have deferred to the experts and have avoided the socialisation of young people in the right way. Now we are paying the price. But it is not a hopeless cause. Even today there is a substantial minority of young kids who are just as idealistic as before, who are just as interested in exploring new

ideas, and who are prepared to experiment and take risks.

What we need to do is simply stand up and be counted. There is a silent culture war being fought on campus. The tragedy is that the people who are against censorship, and who have decent enlightened values and still believe in tolerance, have kept quiet. They are partly responsible. Instead of pointing the finger, we should be more self-critical and examine why we have simply evacuated the space.

To reiterate, people often interpret what is happening at universities through the prism of the 1960s and 1970s, and fail to realise that what's happening on campus has nothing to do with Marxism. This is radically different from anything we have experienced before. It is important to realise that otherwise we will be fighting the war the way the French did in World War II by building a Maginot line rather than recognising that there is a new problem that has emerged.

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