

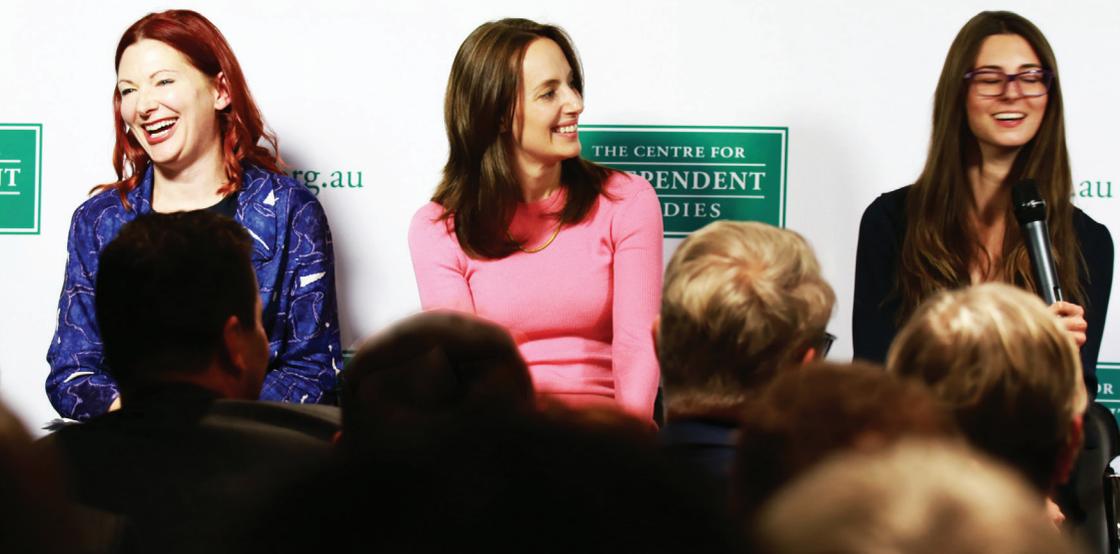
Have We All Gone Mad? The Snowflake Epidemic

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Emeritus Professor Steven Schwartz

I'd like to begin with a trigger warning. Beware. Our panellists tonight are going to address the Holy Trinity of campus politics: race, gender and identity. If you feel threatened by these subjects, we don't have any counselling for you. We don't have any happy puppies. The CIS believes in civilized but robust debate. This ain't a safe space to protect you from ideas you might find challenging.

These days, every story seems to be the same story. Consider, for example, Bettina Arndt — who conveniently is with us tonight. Bettina was initially denied the opportunity to speak at Melbourne's La Trobe University because — this is the important part of the story — her views on sexual violence on campus did not 'align with the university's views'. Apparently, the university has official views on social issues. Now, those of you who know Bettina will not be surprised to learn that she's forced them down, and she is in fact going to speak at the university next week.

Unfortunately, not everyone has been this successful. Brandeis University in Massachusetts withdrew an honorary degree they had awarded to the Somali campaigner for women's rights, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and refused her permission to speak on campus. The university said her words would be hurtful and dangerous to students.

Closer to home, Chinese international students at the University of Newcastle right up the road complained that a lecturer had insulted them because he implied that Taiwan might be an independent country. Mindful of the high fees that international students pay, he was whisked off and quickly re-educated and sent back to make a grovelling apology for his transgression.

A lecturer at Sydney University met the same fate when he showed international students a map that depicted territories claimed by China as actually being part of India. In his apology, he promised to buy a new map.

At the National University of Ireland, Alan Johnson attempted to argue against the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement against Israel, and he was met with a din of profanity and protest and literally driven from campus.

In London, South Bank University has instituted a ban on blasphemy — in 2018, a ban on blasphemy.

None of this should be surprising. Washington's Brookings Institution reports that 50% of university students believe that it's acceptable to disrupt speakers by shouting and making noise, and 19% go so far as to condone violence in order to silence speakers whose views they find objectionable. This is not just theoretical. In Connecticut, a sociologist, Charles Murray, who has spoken here at the CIS was physically attacked when he tried to speak to some students, and an academic who was accompanying him wound up in hospital, was seriously injured. Ironically, the topic that Murray wanted to talk to the students about was the evils of polarized social division.

It sometimes seems that universities are no longer institutions of inquiry but sort of soft, safe spaces where students must be protected from any challenging idea. I ask you, is that the proper role of universities? Is higher education at risk? These are the questions that we've assembled an eminent panel to discuss tonight

Lindsay Shepherd

Last November and December, I was involved in a controversy, and I'm going to explain. As mentioned, I am a graduate student at Wilfrid Laurier University, and I was also a teaching assistant. I was a teaching assistant in the Department of Communication. I was teaching a course called Canadian Communication in Context, CS 101. Every week, we had a topic or a theme that we were going to address, and so sometimes it would be punctuation, sometimes style and language, APA formatting, etc. This particular week, it was grammar. Instead of just going over the do's and don'ts and the dry material as to grammar, I also wanted to address how something like grammar can be actually a politicised issue.

To demonstrate this, I chose to play some video footage from public television in my province, Ontario, from a show called The Agenda with Steve Paikin, a highly regarded show in Canada. On this panel, the footage that I showed was Jordan Peterson. Has anyone heard of him? There was also another professor of transgender studies, Nicholas Matte. The context of this was Bill C-16. It's a law in Canada that passed. Jordan Peterson saw it as compelling gender neutral pronoun use, and therefore he refused to use those pronouns. Nicholas Matte, the other professor, was arguing, "Well, these pronouns are related to a trans student or non-binary student's dignity, so it's better to just use them."

I showed them in conversation to my class. We had a discussion about it. No one left the room. No one cried. No one yelled. I thought it went quite normally. I took a neutral approach to the clip that I showed, so I didn't denounce Peterson's views. I didn't feel the need to do that. I also just don't denounce them. I think he's added immensely to public conversation, not only in Canada but internationally. We talked about this issue. Some people said that they agree with Peterson. Some people agreed with Matte, but the conversation was good.

However, the next week, I got an email saying that I had to come into a meeting with the professor of the course, as well as the program coordinator for my master's degree, and a diversity and equity official. That will become very relevant. I was told in this meeting that someone or some people, we don't know if it's one or multiple, they had a problem with the clip that I played, and so there was a complaint or complaints. I asked how many people and can I see the complaint? Can I know the content of it? Just so I know exactly what the problem was. No, I was told I can't, so I'm just going to have to take their word for it that something went wrong.

I was told that by playing a clip from public television in the classroom, I had created a toxic climate, an unsafe learning environment. The video I played was threatening. I targeted trans folks. I violated three policies. One was Bill C-16 itself. By presenting criticism of C-16, you're violating C-16. Also, the Ontario human rights code. These two were debunked, but I did violate the university's gender and sexual violence policy for transphobia. I actually did violate it. Though the president did later admit that it was an overreach and they need to review the policy.

Most shockingly perhaps, I was told that by playing that clip neutrally and not denouncing Peterson's views, this was akin to neutrally playing a speech by Hitler. It was my neutrality that was the problem.

If you're familiar with my story though, you'll know that one major thing changed the narrative here, and it's that I secretly recorded this meeting and released it to the media. I received an apology from the professor and the president, but I think what's particularly interesting about this situation is the outcry and the activism that happened as a result.

One thing, for example, is a professor named Greg Bird, who first came on my radar not only because he's a professor in my own department, but because he wrote an op-ed for the local paper. He said that the campus had become unsafe as a result of the free speech debate that was occurring. The debate had opened up so that was unsafe. He asks in his op-ed, this is a direct quote, "Is freedom of speech more important than the safety and wellbeing of our society?" He sees free speech and societal wellbeing as mutually exclusive, and you just can't have both. You have to choose one.

His example of the campus being unsafe, because you'll know that when people make these claims of feeling unsafe, often they actually don't really point to an exact example, but he did, which I give him credit for. He said that he was receiving rants on his voicemail and email from angry members of the public. I talked to a journalist about this because she noticed that op-ed too, and she said, "Well, that's just a normal Tuesday for me, is listening to the rants on my voicemail." If you're putting your opinions out there, people are probably going to talk back to you.

There was a free speech rally that was held in my name in the midst of everything that was happening. One professor from the Department of Communications, they seem to ... You can see a theme. It's this hub of people who have major issues. The free speech rally happened. This professor, Jonathan Finn, told students in the Department of Communication, "Do not come to class the day of the free speech rally because it will not be safe. The campus will not be safe." I think maybe what we need to understand about people like him is they genuinely believe that free speech supporters, anyone who cares about it, are outright Neo-Nazis who will storm his office with torches. He probably really thinks that, so I guess we shouldn't be too hard on him.

Also, as a result of that free speech rally, there was one activist from the LGBTQ centre. He and others were claiming that there was a spike in transphobic violence that was directly related to the free speech rally. You have to question their use of violence because also playing a debate with Jordan Peterson is violent. It's epistemic violence. He was saying that there was a spike in violence. Myself and a lot of other people in the media, we're concerned, obviously. I don't want anyone getting physically assaulted or anything.

The media looked into it and asked the police department, what kind of reports have you been getting? There was nothing. They asked the activist in a news article, you can read it, "Can you provide proof of the things that are happening to the members of your centre?" He said that he doesn't have to provide proof because he doesn't have to perform his trauma. He's allowed to directly connect violence with a rally that I spoke at, but then when we asked him to back it up, "he doesn't have to perform his trauma".

Claire Lehmann

I've been paying attention to the pages that Facebook has been removing from their platform due to them being linked to Russian trolls. I've been paying attention. One page was called Resistors, which posted anti-racist pro-feminist anti-fascist memes. Another page was called Black Elevation, which was like a replica of a Black Lives Matter page. They promoted the counter protest to the Unite the Right rally, which recently happened in Washington. Russian trolls were pushing the anti-fascist agenda on Facebook, and Facebook has taken these pages down because of political interference. What I want to know is, why are the Russians wasting their rubles when the academics within western universities are doing the job for them?

A concept that has become quite popular in academia and on campus is this concept of micro aggression. It's an unintentional slight that can hurt a person, but the intention of the speaker is irrelevant. This concept has come out of critical race theory and whiteness studies. Now, if you don't know what whiteness studies is, it is taught at Melbourne University, so it is here in Australia. It's not just an American phenomenon. It teaches concepts such as white privilege, white fragility, toxic whiteness. It teaches this idea that racism is entirely a social construct and whiteness is at the apex of a hierarchy and everything in society has to be aimed at dismantling that hierarchy.

The president of the American Sociological Association, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, is a leading proponent of whiteness studies. He has coined a concept called colour-blind racism. His idea or theory is that colour blindness is Martin Luther King's vision of not judging people by the colour of their skin. He considers that to be racist and

considers that to be a barrier to a truly racially equal society. He calls openly for equality of outcomes, not just equality of opportunity. This is at Melbourne University, unfortunately, under whiteness studies.

I saw in the news that academics teaching whiteness studies at Melbourne University wanted to make whiteness studies a compulsory component of all training for nurses and doctors in Victoria. This is how it gets into the institutions. It has to be a compulsory component of a law degree, or a teaching degree, or a health or medical degree. A couple of papers in whiteness studies include, I looked these up on the weekend, *The Psychosis of Whiteness*. The abstract said whiteness is a form of psychosis framed by its irrationality which is beyond any rational engagement.

Another paper was called *Unpacking Desensitization, Whiteness, and Violence*. The authors of this paper asked themselves, “Why didn’t they empathize with the victims of the Sandy Hook massacre or the Boston Marathon bombings?” The conclusion of the paper was because the victims were white. Critical whiteness studies can be found in the *Oxford Education Encyclopedia*. It’s taught at Harvard. It’s taught at all of the Ivy League universities in the United States.

Why does this matter? Students who get inculcated into this ideology graduate and enter the professions, and enter the media, and enter corporations. I think one result of this kind of toxic identity politics impacting on an institution can be found in the story of Google. Google is currently being sued by a Republican lawyer defending on behalf of white males. They’re being accused of discriminating against white males in their organization. This is after the sacking of James Damore.

The evidence that has been presented in this lawsuit documents gratuitous, derogatory, inflammatory language used against white men on message boards and just throughout the organization. Some examples: senior managers froze the head counts of white and Asian males in order to promote diversity candidates. White men were told to decline invitations to speak on panels. When interviewing candidates for positions, the interviews were preloaded with diversity questions before the technical questions, so if you didn’t pass the ideological litmus test, you never got into the meaty stuff that the position is ostensibly about.

For this kind of ideology to become harmful to companies, to public institutions, to broader society, it does not need to be held by a majority. It only needs a motivated minority to hold these views. What happens is that the majority acquiesce to the fixed fanatical minority. You can take the analogy of primary schools. You cannot take peanuts into a primary school because there'll be one or two kids in each classroom who are allergic to peanuts. You only need a tiny minority who have fixed values or fixed demands and the majority end up acquiescing.

I think this is what we're seeing in universities and we're seeing in companies like Google. There's a tiny minority, but they're very stubborn and very determined to get their way. And then the majority of people who are moderates, who are apolitical acquiesce to their demands.

Going back to why this matters, The New York Times recently appointed a new member to its editorial board, a woman called Sarah Jeong, a graduate of Harvard and Berkeley. It created a controversy because people went through her Tweet history, and she's had years and years of Tweets with inflammatory hashtags such as #killallmen, #cancelwhitepeople, #whitepeoplearebullshit ... and so on.

There is an asymmetry. There are microaggressions that white people can commit or men can commit against women, but these rules are not reciprocated, so people who determine themselves as being part of a special victim group minority don't have to reciprocate with the same rules of courtesy and politeness. I see this asymmetry in rules. One group of people are protected by microaggressions and we have to be exquisitely attuned to the feelings and needs of certain groups and other people just have to copy it with the hashtag kill all men.

I see that as extremely damaging to a harmonious civil society. Civil principles are supposed to be reciprocal; I treat you fairly, you treat me fairly. When we erode that with these ideas of privilege-toxic whiteness, toxic masculinity, when we group people according to their identity and then place them on a hierarchy where certain members of groups are morally more pure and other groups have to atone for sins of the past, I think that sets up a really dangerous environment for civil society. I'll leave it at that.

Dr Tiffany Jenkins

In 1964 at the University of California, Berkeley student protestors were hauled off campus in handcuffs by the police. They were then protesting a ban on political activities on campus. It was a really, I think, exciting time. It was the birth of the free speech movement that would mould student protests for the rest of the '60s that supported the civil rights movement and took a stand against the civil war.

It was a really different time then for free speech. In 1969 in a case *Brandenburg versus Ohio*, the ACLU (The American Civil Liberties Union) defended the first amendment rights. Just think about this. They defended the first amendment rights of a Ku Klux Klan leader prosecuted for addressing a small rally calling for 'vengeance' against blacks and Jews. They defended him in a shocking and quite remarkable case. The US Supreme Court reversed the clan leader Brandenburg's conviction narrowly defining incitement to violence as speech both intended and likely to cause imminent harm and a legal action.

Brandenburg made an essential distinction between advocacy and action, which activists today who equate hate speech with discrimination or words they do not like which causes the feelings of harm they seek to erase. But today it's a really different story, and we're already talking about 40 years, so quite a lot has happened.

On campuses, you see campaigns against free speech. The banning and the non-inviting of speakers that may challenge orthodoxies or just run foul of the most sensitive students. You see all kinds of disciplines, especially the humanities are subject to the trigger warning where you apologize in advance and warn students who say they want to read *The Great Gatsby* that they had better be careful because, after all, it deals with themes such as suicide, domestic violence, adultery.

You also hear of microaggressions, which Claire touched upon, which is the term used for brief and commonplace daily verbal behaviour and indignities which as she said, crucially, are not necessarily intended, but they are unintended. Tom mentioned at the beginning

how this has been kind of rampaging through the academy for decades, but I think microaggressions are what's new and perhaps the most damaging because I think it causes people just to second-guess everything they say to each other. In the everyday informality of how we deal with each other, we have to tiptoe around.

I don't know about you, but my friends and colleagues all say that they do this, and it's paralysing. You also have obviously the concerns about cultural appropriation which suggests you do not look at a sari and wear it because you're appropriating somebody else's culture. This concerns speech, thought, everyday behaviour, and respecting and enjoying other people's culture.

What I want to do today is three things. One is to identify a little bit further what's distinctive about it, how it happened, where this has all come from, and to reinforce some of Claire's points and take it further in terms of why it matters and, as Lenin would say, "What is to be done?"

What is distinctive about the free speech issue? The present day advocacy against free speech is a reverse of some of those positions taken early in the 1960s and indeed earlier. Free speech was fought for. It had to be fought for, for a long time, and then it was students fighting for it often with faculty against officials of the university. In broader society free speech was fought for against the government because, traditionally, censorship was top-down and now it's bottom-up.

I think one of the other interesting things about it is that it often doesn't denounce itself as censorship. They both celebrate it when it's removed free speech but also slightly deny it. They call it protection. It's remarkable how many people are calling for limits on free speech so that they are not censors.

A distinctive feature of the campaigns today is the association of freedom of expression with the infliction of emotional injury, as Lindsay was talking about. A feature of the protests or agitation today is not 'I disagree with you', but 'I feel harmed you've threatened me'. 'I feel distressed by what you may or may not say'. With feelings, the discussion is entirely shut down because when somebody disagrees with you or if they object to the content, at least you can have a conversation with them about that content.

The ACLU, who I referred to earlier, has just endured the view that free speech can harm marginalized groups by undermining their civil rights, and this is what they say. This is the ACLU who defended that clan member in 1969. They now say speech that denigrates such groups can inflict serious harms and is intended to and, often will, impede progress towards equality. I think that's an important shift. The censorship in the past was often what was morally unacceptable. Now it's what is psychologically disturbing as defined by the subject.

Lady Chatterley's Lover, which I'm sure you've all read, was banned because you wouldn't want your wife and servant reading about, well, sex with the common gardener. Public obscenity laws said it would "deprave and corrupt readers." Now *The Great Gatsby* is still read, but you have a trigger warning around it because the themes of adultery may cause emotional distress.

Where has this come from? I want to talk about three developments that I think are really important in the university context. I don't think we can underestimate how important this is. I think it is a crisis of purpose within institutions. The university for some time has not been fully committed to the pursuit of knowledge, truth, beauty. You can see it from the very top of the university structure to special classes on whiteness.

But, I mean, I'm a sociologist, and one of the key texts is Durkheim's *Suicide*. That in some cases isn't taught or there's a trigger warning around it. The humanities are sometimes being dominated by critical theory which seeks to find hidden meanings in the text and ask students to deconstruct meanings. I think that means the academy is uncomfortable, unconfident, hesitant in according academic freedom or the integrity of the disciplines. Therefore, it can be hijacked for all sorts of purposes. Most recently, it no longer pursues truth. It seeks to have a duty of care for students, so they're responsible for their safety. I'll come back to the point about safety in a minute.

The second point. I grew up with the left. I loved the left for a while. I think actually that time in the '60s was a really crucial time because you have initially social transformation and reform animated by ideas. It's a key turning point when the left moves away from trying to change society to economic improvement, material progress towards

transforming culture, and the key is that old phrase: “The personal is political,” so let’s change people in how they behave in private, the words that they use, rather than give them a little bit more money.

Let’s help workers fight for better working conditions so the left no longer critiques state power, and this is why I think it’s a fundamentally conservative move by ordinary people.

So the third development is safety. Students today who come to university have been brought up in a culture of risk aversion basically from birth ... in fact before they’re even born the mother is being lectured on what they can eat. So, before they’re even out of the womb they’re being coddled. And it’s come to be almost like a social value.

My step-son was taking some exams at university, and his first response to stress, which is an entirely normal thing to be stressed about ... exams, these things matter ... was to go to the doctor and be prescribed some sort of beta blockers to calm him down. And I think students are encouraged to see ordinary challenges as a problem that is either helped by drugs or counselling, rather than something that they have to learn to deal with. I mean they are encouraged to do that so is it any wonder that they demand that the university protect them and treat them safely?

I think that keys into the way in which the victim has tremendous moral authority today, and I’m not surprised that people compete. You know I think we almost find ourselves doing it because it’s an easy excuse sometimes. “I didn’t do this, I didn’t achieve that, because well, I had a bad childhood, or I felt vulnerable. There was a man, there was a white man who put me down.” We all want to find excuses for why it didn’t work out for us. So children are encouraged to emotional harm, to find difficulties in ordinary life, to effectively remain children. So why? I mean I think we know why it matters, but let’s just dwell on that.

Scholarship in teaching is hampered, there are questions that are not asked within the academy. There are discussions that are not held, just for fear of saying the wrong thing. Fundamentally the values of the safe space contradict those of the university which is a no holds barred pursuit of truth. Students are encouraged to identify as trends, whatever identity it may be, rather than as a scholar, as a chemist, as a sociologist, and that kind of universality is eroded.

It's entirely conformist, and you see the cultivation of continued offense-seeking and feeling. People are rewarded for being fragile. I think the people who are incredibly influential in the activist groups are a minority, but few people are speaking out against them, and I think that relates to the few points I want to make now about what is to be done.

The problem is not always the behaviour of those small groups of activists although they're tedious, but the absence of the confident opposition. I think we need to rediscover the pursuit of knowledge, the love of learning, the love of literature and sociology. Dare I say as a sociologist, remake the university. Now that's either done within the university, or outside the university. I think we can explore both options.

Expose the problem, challenge those seeking offense. Provide a sensible language in which to confront it. In my experience many students are bemused. I think the lecturers are actually the most cowardly, but the students are bemused and they keep their heads down, but we need to as adults show them that they don't have to do that, that we can challenge this and question this. And want to show them that what matters is not their identity or victim-hood, but their accomplishments as a scholar, or a student. We need to ask more of them, and of ourselves.

I think we need to encourage everyone ... and I can say this as a woman, to grow some balls. Finally, my last recommendation is a book. I read it recently and so I've been recommending it wherever I go. It is a book called *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, and it's by the Iranian author Azar Nafisi. It's written in about 2000, and it's of her experience when living in the Islamic republic of Iran in the 1980s. After she was dismissed from the university for refusing to wear the veil, she secretly brought together seven female students in her living room every Thursday morning.

This was so they could read and discuss forbidden classic works of Western literature. The books were considered anti-revolutionary and morally harmful by the Iranian authorities. So they put themselves at risk to read *The Great Gatsby* without a trigger warning, Henry James, Nabokov, Jane Austin. And she did that under those conditions when she really was at risk. So I think given that, we should take inspiration to return to the great works of literature and challenge ourselves and the limits we put on ourselves.



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Have We All Gone Mad? The Snowflake Epidemic

University campuses throughout the West are in the grip of a troubling social phenomenon, now in danger of spreading beyond the ivy walls. Once bastions of intellectual rigour and freedom of thought, universities have become closed-minded and self-censoring, pandering to what appear from the outside to be ridiculously heightened sensitivities and undeserved entitlement.

Safe spaces, trigger warnings and counselling on demand have become commonplace. Teaching staff who speak out are being intimidated, silenced and vilified. Students who choose to think against the mainstream are harassed and ostracised. Has normal teenage angst been institutionally mollicoddled and even pathologised?

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