



Campus groups host 'Mob Rule' panel on free speech and campus discourse

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March 28, 2022

The Princeton Open Campus Coalition (POCC), Princeton Federalist Society, and Princeton Clisophic Party played host to a panel featuring three advocates on issues of academic freedom for an event titled “Mob Rule: The Illiberal Left’s Threat to Campus Discourse” in the Whig Senate Chamber on March 24.

The panel was moderated by POCC co-founder and Senior Research Assistant at the James Madison Program Solveig Gold ’17 and included three panelists: former Portland State University assistant professor of philosophy Peter Boghossian, Ilya Shapiro ’99, and Samantha Harris ’99.

Harris is a lawyer who frequently takes on cases regarding academic freedom and freedom of speech at universities. She spent 15 years at the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education before starting her own firm.

In 2018, Boghossian, with two other scholars, wrote 20 fake papers using language from contemporary social theories in fields such as queer and gender studies. The papers included "Human Reactions to Rape Culture and Queer Performativity at Urban Dog Parks in Portland, Oregon" and "An Ethnography of Breastaurant Masculinity: Themes of Objectification, Sexual Conquest, Male Control, and Masculine Toughness in a Sexually Objectifying Restaurant."

By the time they went public with the hoax, seven had been accepted and seven more were still under review by various journals. As a result of this project, Boghossian was put under a research misconduct inquiry by Portland State University. He resigned from his position in 2021.

“I don’t view myself as a victim. I knew exactly what I was doing, and I would do it again in a heartbeat,” Boghossian said at the panel.

Shapiro, the former Vice President and Director of the Cato Institute, had been recently hired by Georgetown University Law Center when he tweeted a controversial response to Biden’s vow to nominate a Black woman to the Supreme Court on Jan. 26.

The tweet, which has since been deleted, wrote, “Objectively best pick for Biden is Sri Srinivasan, who is solid prog & v smart. Even has identity politics benefit of being first Asian (Indian) American. But alas doesn’t fit into latest intersectionality hierarchy so we’ll get lesser black woman. Thank heaven for small favors?”

Five days later, Georgetown placed him on leave. Shapiro said at the panel that he was still on paid leave and that there was a “pending investigation whether [his] tweet violated University policies.”

At the panel, Shapiro expressed regret for the wording of his tweet, but expressed disappointment that there was “no margin for making a simple mistake in phrasing.” When a student pressed him about his decision to apologize, he stood by it.

“Don’t apologize for something if you truly did no wrong. I think I did wrong. I phrased things poorly,” he said.

Harris argued that their status as public intellectuals with platforms protected them from the more severe consequences. She claimed that most people who are the center of similar controversies are not as well known and do not have resources in place to protect them.

“The people I represent are very different often,” she said. “I have clients who have lost their homes, who have lost the ability to support themselves.”

Boghossian added that any “redemption narrative” was “absent in critical social justice ideology.” Before the event, he had tweeted about posters advertising the panel allegedly being torn down by students.

Towards the end of the panel, a student asked the panelists for their thoughts on disparities in achievements between people of different races.

Shapiro said that “posing that question would get you fired in a lot of places” and continued by remarking it was beyond his “area of expertise.”

“Asians in particular happen to study more than African Americans and we know that,” Boghossian said in response to the student’s question. “The idea [...] that any disparity in outcome is due to systemic racism, that’s just false. That’s demonstrably false.”

“I would never have taken that question if I’d still been employed,” he added.

At various points throughout the event, panelists discussed legal issues in relation to academic freedom, such as the question of whether it is legal for a professor to be fired for their statements.

Shapiro — who noted that he had filed briefs in support of both same sex marriage and a Colorado baker’s right not to make cakes for same-sex weddings in *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission* — emphasized that “the rules for how the government has to treat us are different [...] than private individuals, businesses, and organizations.”

“Generally speaking, if you're employed by a private employer and you tweet something they don't like, they can fire you,” Harris said. “Unless they have policies that say ‘we value our employees right to free speech.’”

“If you are employed by a public university, and you tweet something from your private account about a political issue, your university can't fire you for it, legally,” Harris said.

Free speech is protected for tenured professors at public universities as long as they are “accurate, exercise appropriate restraint, [show] respect for the opinions of others, and [make] every effort to indicate that they are not speaking for the institution.”

Private universities are private employers, and Harris claimed that many have adopted policies that promise faculty academic freedom. If such policies are in place, legal cases could arise if a professor is fired or punished by a university for their views or statements.

Shapiro noted that, regarding the investigation into his tweet at Georgetown, “the First Amendment doesn't technically apply, because Georgetown is a private institution. But Georgetown has a policy on free expression which applies.”

He declined to speak about the administration, but stated that he was not planning on resigning.

Princeton University's policies state that “it is not the proper role of the University to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive,” and that there are only “narrow exceptions” to its commitment not to restrict freedom of expression, such as for expression that violates the law.