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The War Against Free Speech

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Hostility toward freedom of speech in American colleges and universities has been growing quietly for decades, but lately it has become impossible to ignore.

The toleration of unpopular opinion was once considered central to the purpose of a liberal education, which was not to indoctrinate students dogmatically but to teach them how to form beliefs.

But these classically liberal norms of toleration and open inquiry have given way to an activist conception of the mission of higher education. In practice, this amounts to the establishment of a specific ideology that its advocates refer to only in such generic terms as “social justice.”

Dissent from this new orthodoxy is increasingly treated as heresy.

Consider the obsession with diversity, understood almost exclusively in racial and sexual terms, which ignores the decrease in ideological and political diversity.

Ideals of open inquiry and freedom of speech have been so widely rejected in academia because power in academia has shifted from classical liberals who value toleration to progressives who are willing to use intolerance to advance their political ends.

Perhaps the most destructive development is the dogma that dissent from social justice orthodoxy constitutes literal violence against vulnerable groups which must not be tolerated.

This conflation of speech and violence is the inevitable consequence of the popular dogma that so-called “hate speech” falls beyond the pale of free speech immunity. The idea that opinions can trigger traumatic emotional episodes and that people should be safe from offensive views is a menace to the very idea of free expression.

In order to argue that some opinion is beyond the pale of toleration, one merely needs to claim that it constitutes “hate speech.” If putatively harmful speech is banned, then those who wish to suppress unorthodox opinion will attempt to frame it as hateful and violent. This is just what we now see playing out on campus, as when the University of California warns professors against committing such “microaggressions” as saying that America is the land of opportunity, or that the most qualified person should get the job.

This self-righteous intolerance generates pressure to deny conservatives a forum on campus, and to shout them down or threaten them when they are allowed to speak.

By officially discouraging the profession of these ideas, the university undermines the mission of teaching its students how to form their beliefs in a manner worthy of intelligent beings.

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