

# The Attack on the Enlightenment and Campus Free Speech

Matthew Lesh



**IPA** Institute of  
Public Affairs  
*Free people, free society*

**MANNKAL**  
ECONOMIC EDUCATION  
FOUNDATION

Western Civilisation Conference

*The Sun Rises in the West II*

Friday, 24<sup>th</sup> November 2017

## **What is Enlightenment and why does it matter?**

The focus of my speech today is the enlightenment, not *the* Enlightenment per se, which refers to a very fruitful historic period, but rather what it means to be enlightened and how this is under attack today.

German philosopher Immanuel Kant in the brilliant essay, *What is Enlightenment?* That 'Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed nonage'. He defines 'nonage' to mean 'the inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance'. Kant argues that, in order to achieve enlightenment, you need one thing: "freedom to make public use of one's reason in all matters". This means, in sum, being willing to argue, debate, and converse.

It is only through debate and contest, including exploring uncomfortable ideas from a range of competing perspectives, that understanding can be increased. "Both teachers and learners go to sleep at their posts as soon as there is no enemy in the field," wrote J. S. Mill in *On Liberty*.

In my view, enlightenment, the imperfect pursuit of reason, is the West's secret weapon.

It is through enlightenment that we were able to raise ourselves out of the dark ages, and through a process of logic, reason and pursuit of truth emancipate our minds and unleash human flourishing. Science, the process of hypothesis and counter hypothesis about the natural world, and social science, the same for the way we act, depends on enlightenment.

If you look at the history of economic growth over the past two thousand years you'll notice what economists call the 'hockey stick'. That is, for about 1,800 years the global economy was stagnant. Then came the enlightenment, which enabled the scientific revolution which enabled the subsequent market-based industrial revolution and, in the 20th century particularly the technological revolution.

It is because of enlightenment, the willingness to debate and pursue truth, that we have achieved immense human progress. We have gone from a world where practically everyone is in absolute poverty, where life really was, as Thomas Hobbs put it, 'nasty brutish and short', to one where we are all ably provided for.

What I am going to talk about today is how the enlightenment is under attack. This is particularly apparent on university campuses, however is spreading wider and further across society. There is an ideological attack on the pursuit of truth, the notion of progress, and therefore a rejection of the very notion of enlightenment.

## **Campus today**

Our story begins on university campuses, because, as the place of intellectual discovery, they are at the forefront of these trends. Universities, which taxpayers spend billions funding, serve a key role in the Enlightenment process. They research and teach the next generation to increase the sum of human understanding and knowledge.

Nevertheless, there is a growing censorious culture on campus that is endangering the very purpose of higher education and the future of Australian society.

Speakers are cancelled and violently protested because certain groups disagree with their ideas. Students are self-censoring for fear of social ostracism and academic repercussions. Trigger

warnings, alerts before content that could cause emotional discomfort, and safe spaces, are coddling students from intellectual challenge. Activists are demanding censorship of course content that they dislike. Meanwhile, speech codes have institutionalised restrictions on free speech.

The incidents that receive attention, the most ridiculous or psychically violent, are the tip of the iceberg, with much more happening that does not get reported. The incidents themselves are also symptoms of a deeper ideology within universities that are vital to grasp in order to understand the state of the modern university.

## **Postmodernism and the left**

Historically the political left, following the 19th century writings of Marx, was driven by class conflict. Leftists sought to drive divisions between the working (proletariat) class and aristocratic (bourgeoisie) class. Their ultimate aim was to foment a revolution, socialise the means of production, and install a 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. Marx's grand theory of history presupposed that the internal contradictions in capitalism made communism an inevitability.

This logic has, however, fallen apart. Those societies that have followed the communist path, be it the Soviet Union historically or Venezuela and North Korea today, have been abject failures economically and socially.

The left, however, has found a new ideology: postmodernism driven by identity politics.

Postmodernists reject the Enlightenment notions of generalised progress and truth. Instead, postmodernists argue, reality is constructed by individual experience. They reject the liberal notion of universality of certain ideals – like the rule of law or democracy – and focus on how actors use language and power, what they call 'discourse', to oppress others.

Postmodernists claim that language of powerful social actors, which they call 'discourse', creates reality and advances the oppressive 'superstructure'.

We should of course always be prepared to be critical when analysing society. However, the aims of postmodernists, to completely change how society functions, go much further. This is the basis of Sydney University's 'Unlearn' campaign which was discussed by the previous speaker.

Identity politics gives postmodernism practical political meaning.

Identity politics defines the oppressed and oppressor. It is not just economic, like the Marxists claimed. It is now based on personal identity categories, typically race, gender, and sexuality. The owner of the means of production is no longer the enemy, it is the white straight male who, through the language he uses, exercises power and dominates society to the detriment of minorities.

Identity politics is not necessarily bad. It can be very useful to analyse power imbalances and mistreatment of certain groups, to fight genuine discrimination and hatred that has always existed in the name of protecting all individuals. This is the essence of liberalism, the early feminists who sought for women to be treated equally, and equal rights activists such as Martin Luther King Jr who wanted to live in a nation where people are "not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character".

Modern identity politics reverses this principle. It seeks to treat people *differently* based upon gender, skin colour and sexuality. Identity politics follows the postmodernist doctrine, that truth is subjective and what matters is the individual experience and discourse, and applies this to oppressed identity groups. That is, the worth of an opinion is assessed on who is speaking, and not what is being said. A white man's opinion, who is inherently racist because he benefits from power imbalances, is worth less than a woman's.

A South African student campaign takes this logic to the extreme. University of Cape Town student activists have established a campaign called '#ScienceMustFall'. 'Science as a whole is a product of western modernity, and the whole thing should be scratched off,' one of the students on a panel said. She then went on to call for a 're-starting' of science from an 'African perspective', and used the example of 'witchcraft' as an alternative science.

This campaign, like the postmodernist identity politics paradigm, is premised on judging what is being said on the basis of who says it.

In Australia, the NUS splits policy debate into welfare, education, and administration, but also identity, such as ethnocultural, women's, and queer. In debate about the latter set of policies, delegates can only speak on the category if they identify as part of the group. You have to be a woman to speak on women's policy, 'ethnocultural' (non-white) to speak on ethnocultural policy, or queer to speak on queer policy. The logic of limiting speakers to an identity asserts that what matters is not ideas, but, rather, subjective experience

As my colleague, Dr Bella d'Abrera found, from a systematic review of Australia's 746 history subjects across 35 Australian universities in 2017, there is an overwhelming bias towards subjects related to class, gender and race.

### **The threat to free expression**

By not separating ideas from personal characteristics, there is a rapid progression towards the feeling of offence.

Expressing a contrary view is taken as a personal attack on an identity – rather than a useful way to explore ideas – and offence is immediately caused. Ideas are not merely wrong, they're immoral and indicative of an oppressive power structure.

The only way to fight back against the superstructure, the dominant cultural values, is to silence its proponents. In other words, free speech is simply a tool of the elites, a tool of the privileged class, to oppress minorities. Demands for censorship are typically put in terms of feelings, to protect mental health from supposedly dangerous ideas.

The University of New South Wales' Diversity Toolkit exemplifies how identity politics can detract from academic pursuits.

The 'Indigenous Terminology' section contains 'More appropriate' and 'Less appropriate' statements. The guide is, in effect, a speech code. In the name of sensitivity, it is not appropriate to say Dreamtime stories are 'myths' and 'folklore'. It also instructs against saying that "Aboriginal people have lived in Australia for 40,000 years" because this supports "migration theories and anthropological assumptions". In the name of identity politics, simply expressing a scientifically established fact – that Aboriginal Australians arrived on the Australian land mass at a historic point – is discouraged

In the latest concerning twist, it is asserted that speech which offends an identity group is violence.

Psychology Professor Lisa Barrett, writing in the New York Times, claims that because language can cause stress and that “prolonged stress can cause physical harm,” speech “can be a form of violence”. Professor Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff responded, in *The Atlantic*, by arguing that while it is true stress can be physically damaging, this does not mean that words are themselves violence. A lot of activities, such as setting difficult work tasks or homework, can cause stress. However, they, like words, are not violence because there is no intention to cause physical damage to a person.

The danger inherent in this logic is that if words are violence then it is justifiable to use violence, and threats thereof, to censor certain words. This chills free speech, as we have seen in violence used against libertarian speaker Charles Murray at Middlebury College, conservative provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos who was forced to evacuate University of California, Berkeley—ironically the historic home of the campus free speech movement—earlier this year.

In Australia we have seen Liberal politicians and pro-Israel advocates faced with physically violent protests. Most recently, during the same-sex marriage postal survey debate, a stall set up by ‘No’ campaigners at the University of Sydney was surrounded by a counter-protest. This rapidly turned physical, ‘No’ posters were stolen, a table up-ended and police attended.

Universities, with some notable exceptions such as the University of Chicago and more recently the University of California at Berkeley, are often supporting this censorship.

The Institute of Public Affairs’ Free Speech on Campus Audit 2016 found eight-in-ten Australian universities have taken action or maintain speech codes that stifle freedom of expression on campus. Just one university, the University of New England, received a Green ranking for no threats

Universities, often in the name of diversity and tolerance, have explicit policies that forbid “insulting” and “unwelcome” comments, “offensive” language, and, in some cases, “sarcasm” and hurt “feelings”.

It is practically impossible to have an open debate in which you cannot hurt someone’s feeling – particularly considering how easily people’s feelings can be hurt in the modern age. Universities have, in effect, institutionalised the identity politics paradigm.

### **The latest from Canada**

A fascinating new case at a Canadian university, in which we have access to the audio recording of a meeting between a teaching assistant, what we would call a tutor, at Wilfrid Laurier University, and two academics and an administrator.

The tutor in question, Lindsay Shepherd, is being reprimanded for playing the video of a televised debate about gender pronouns in a communications class. The debate featured psychology professor Jordan Peterson, who was a prominent opponent of legislation that *requires* Canadians to refer to people by their chosen gender pronouns.

It is important to note that Shepherd was not a previous student of Peterson, we know this because that's what the academics assumed, and in fact states that explicitly that she does, and I quote, "disagree with Jordan Peterson".

Nevertheless, the academics in question, during this 43-minute interrogation that literally turns this woman to tears, accuse her of creating an “unsafe learning environment.”

Her response, after she was told he is alt-right which is certainly not true, was brilliant: 'I follow him. But can you shield people from those ideas? Am I supposed to comfort them and make sure that they are insulated away from this? Like, is that what the point of this is? Because to me, that is so against what a university is about. Very against it. I was not taking sides. I was presenting both arguments.'

A few minutes later she is told, in effect, that she cannot present information impartially because this creates a "toxic environment" and makes some students "feel uncomfortable," and that certain ideas are "not up for debate". Shepard then responds by saying: "But when they leave the university they're going to be exposed to these ideas," and this is when her voice starts cracking, "so I don't see how I'm doing a disservice to the class by exposing them to ideas that are really out there. And I'm sorry I'm crying, I'm stressed out because this to me is so wrong, so

She was also informed that "these arguments are counter to the Canadian human rights code," which is almost certainly untrue as the code explicitly protects free expression, nevertheless it is potentially counter to the Gendered and Sexual Violence Policy which defines gendered violence as “an act or actions that reinforce gender inequalities resulting in physical, sexual, emotional, economic or mental harm.” Under these parameters, a YouTube video that made a student feel uncomfortable would qualify.

"They don't have the critical toolkit to be able to pick it apart yet. This is one of the things we're teaching them." This is, in effect, saying that because they're 18 and haven't been propagandized yet, that is, told what to think, they can't be shown a video.

## **Conclusion**

The plague of postmodernist identity politics has infected the culture of Australia's universities, threatening a key purpose of higher education: to explore ideas. Universities cannot function without a need to strive for the truth. This is their core mission. Identity politics prioritises hurt feelings above facts, logic and challenging ideas.

This threatens the purpose of universities, as well as establishes a culture in which students, who will now be graduating, are going into the workforce and ultimately leadership positions within our society with a censorious outlook. This endangers, a free, tolerant and open society.

Conservative, classical liberal and libertarian students often feel too uncomfortable to express their political opinion for fear of abuse and potential bad marks. This hurts the education of all students, who are exposed to fewer ideas as a consequence. This creates a 'snowflake' generation, lacking resilience and unprepared for the real world. Ironically, it actually empowers liberals and conservatives who are challenged the most, and leaves minorities weaker.

There are worrying trends, however, we should put this in perspective. The vast majority of students and academics are completely uninterested in this nonsense that is pursued by an aggressive minority.

Despite limited publicity, there are now 18 Australian members of Heterodox Academy, who promote a diversity of viewpoints in academia. They join over 1,250 academic members across the

Anglosphere. In the United States, there are a number of state legislators enacting law to protect free expression on campus.

We can fight back against it with relentless vigilance. This is where you come in. You need to be able to recognise censorship and fight back, call it out, and get it attention. This will put pressure onto the universities to improve their culture, and encourage other students to speak out.

Australia's universities may be weakened by a censorious culture – but we can all help salvage. The challenge for all free-thinking students is to continue challenging, questioning and debating without fear.