

Chapter 5

Not Possible to Destroy Opinions by Force: Arendt, Guevara, Foucault, and Limiting Free Speech

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ABSTRACT

This chapter surveys the influence and thinking of Hannah Arendt and Che Guevara regarding education. Despite their many differences, both thinkers are surprisingly similar in seeing authority in an ideal community as self-justifying and therefore authorizing a certain amount of repression by the state. The essay turns to the later thinking of Michel Foucault and his theory of a utopian liberalism to provide individuals a way to both join in but not be subjugated by larger collectivities. The chapter concludes that universities can embrace a form of Foucault's utopianism and allow the left and right to debate their respective positions and not need to censor views except in the most extreme cases. The goal in free speech should be to make students into thinking subjects.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter deals with how university administrators are coping with handling controversial speakers who come to campuses. Most recently, right-wing speakers like Richard Spencer and Milo Yiannopoulos have been prevented from speaking at Berkeley due to left-wing protests (Butler, 2017).

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education has tallied that there have been “at least 240 campaigns ... on U.S. universities to prevent public figures from appearing at campus events” since 2000 (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). Censoring has grown to include even images some students deem offensive. In 2008, a student at Indiana University was reprimanded for simply reading a book on the Ku Klux Klan. While the book itself was actually against the Klan, it showed a picture of a Klan rally and that was sufficient to be breaking the university's rules (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015).

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Cumulatively, these efforts at censorship come from a wider phenomenon called political correctness, the effort to be more sensitive to the needs of various minorities. But political correctness itself on campus is not the only issue. These speakers are coming to campus at a time of crimes against various minorities rising and sometimes leading to mass murder (Edwards & Rushin, 2018). The question turns to how much free speech is permissible in a context where violence is also pervasive.

BACKGROUND

Scholarship is divided as to how real political correctness is as a phenomenon. Some on the left consider political correctness largely a myth or even mainly benign (Rorty, 1998). Some on the right frame it as an existential threat to liberal society (Bloom, 1987; Kimball, 1998). Still others see some areas for legitimate concern but largely dismiss it as a right-wing hoax (Chomsky, 1971; Pollitt, 2007). Some go so far as to question whether the idea of free speech is real seeing it as a social construct that fluctuates due to political factors (Fish, 1994).

Two major issues are in contention. On the one hand, the issue is a debate over how power should be divided in society. There remains disagreement over how the right or reactionary tradition is to be defined or theorized. Yet there is substantial agreement that the right is, overall, defined by wanting to preserve the status quo of (mostly) dominant groups (Diamond, 1995; Harris, Davidson, Fletcher, & Harris, 2017). In the context of the US and, more broadly, Western Europe, defense of privilege often is defense of white nationalism. For instance, in 2017, one year after Trump's election, at Salem State University in Massachusetts graffiti on campus was discovered that read "Trump #1 Whites Only USA" (Edwards & Rushin, 2018, p. 21).

This defense of white privilege is sometimes blatantly articulated as when white nationalist and explicit Trump supporter Richard Spencer states: "America was, until this last generation, a white country designed for ourselves [whites] and our posterity. It is our creation, it is our inheritance, and it belongs to us" (Quoted in Harris, Davidson, Fletcher, & Harris, 2017, p. 6). Reactionary ideologies vary and the defense of privilege is not always racial – it can be sexual or economic or intellectual. Still, the upshot is that the dominant group is entitled to preserve its dominance.

Movements of the left have often arisen to contest such dominance. Contestation occurs at all levels of society. However, universities have always had a curious, paradoxical place in these political battles. Universities are gathering places for elites yet universities also have, historically, been outside the norms of society (Huntington, 1968).

Huntington (1968) traces the relative autonomy of universities to the Middle Ages. University education was largely reserved to nobles and then to only a small elite among the emergent bourgeoisie. But with the onset of modernization in Western countries, university education broadened yet the autonomy universities enjoyed continued. Huntington cites the sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset commenting on how in Czarist Russia: "university autonomy operated at times to allow the adult sections of illegal revolutionary groups to hold meetings in university precincts, without interference by the police. In Venezuela, in recent years, terrorists have exploited this tradition" (Huntington, 1968, 211).

In Britain, in 2007 and 2008, Muslim students or employees at various colleges were arrested for downloading material associated with Islamic extremism (Brown & Saeed, 2015). While there was no evidence, the students planned to commit terrorist acts the university setting as Muslim activists themselves admitted often made them inherently critical of the larger society (Brown & Saeed, 2015). These

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