**Jonathan Haidt on the Cultural Roots of Campus Rage**

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By BARI WEISS  
  
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When a mob at Vermont’s Middlebury College shut down a speech by social scientist Charles Murray a few weeks ago, most of us saw it as another instance of campus illiberalism. Jonathan Haidt saw something more—a ritual carried out by adherents of what he calls a “new religion,” an auto-da-fé against a heretic for a violation of orthodoxy.  
  
“The great majority of college students want to learn. They’re perfectly reasonable, and they’re uncomfortable with a lot of what’s going on,” Mr. Haidt, a psychologist and professor of ethical leadership at New York University’s Stern School of Business, tells me during a recent visit to his office. “But on each campus there are some true believers who have reoriented their lives around the fight against evil.”  
  
These believers are transforming the campus from a citadel of intellectual freedom into a holy space—where white privilege has replaced original sin, the transgressions of class and race and gender are confessed not to priests but to “the community,” victim groups are worshiped like gods, and the sinned-against are supplicated with “safe spaces” and “trigger warnings.”  
  
The fundamentalists may be few, Mr. Haidt says, but they are “very intimidating” since they wield the threat of public shame. On some campuses, “they’ve been given the heckler’s veto, and are often granted it by an administration who won’t stand up to them either.”  
  
All this has become something of a preoccupation for the 53-year-old Mr. Haidt. A longtime liberal—he ran a gun-control group as an undergraduate at Yale—he admits he “had never encountered conservative ideas” until his mid-40s. The research into moral psychology that became his 2012 book, “The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion,” exposed him to other ways of seeing the world; he now calls himself a centrist.  
  
  
Paul Gigot says there is a clear disconnect between Wisconsin and New York City.  
In 2015 he founded Heterodox Academy, which describes itself as “a politically diverse group of social scientists, natural scientists, humanists, and other scholars” concerned about “the loss or lack of ‘viewpoint diversity’ ” on campuses. As Mr. Haidt puts it to me: “When a system loses all its diversity, weird things begin to happen.”  
  
Having studied religions across cultures and classes, Mr. Haidt says it is entirely natural for humans to create “quasireligious” experiences out of seemingly secular activities. Take sports. We wear particular colors, gather as a tribe, and cheer for our team. Even atheists sometimes pray for the Steelers to beat the Patriots.  
  
  
It’s all “fun and generally harmless,” maybe even healthy, Mr. Haidt says, until it tips into violence—as in British soccer hooliganism. “What we’re beginning to see now at Berkeley and at Middlebury hints that this [campus] religion has the potential to turn violent,” Mr. Haidt says. “The attack on the professor at Middlebury really frightened people,” he adds, referring to political scientist Allison Stanger, who wound up in a neck brace after protesters assaulted her as she left the venue.  
  
The Berkeley episode Mr. Haidt mentions illustrates the Orwellian aspect of campus orthodoxy. A scheduled February appearance by right-wing provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos prompted masked agitators to throw Molotov cocktails, smash windows, hurl rocks at police, and ultimately cause $100,000 worth of damage. The student newspaper ran an op-ed justifying the rioting under the headline “Violence helped ensure safety of students.” Read that twice.  
  
Mr. Haidt can explain. Students like the op-ed author “are armed with a set of concepts and words that do not mean what you think they mean,” he says. “People older than 30 think that ‘violence’ generally involves some sort of physical threat or harm. But as students are using the word today, ‘violence’ is words that have a negative effect on members of the sacred victim groups. And so even silence can be violence.” It follows that if offensive speech is “violence,” then actual violence can be a form of self-defense.  
  
Down the hall from Mr. Haidt’s office, I noticed a poster advertising a “bias response hotline” students can call “to report an experience of bias, discrimination or harassment.” I joke that NYU seems to have its own version of the morality police in Islamic countries like Saudi Arabia. “It’s like East Germany,” Mr. Haidt replies—with students, at least some of them, playing the part of the Stasi.  
  
How did we get here, and what can be done? On the first question, Mr. Haidt points to a braided set of causes. There’s the rise in political polarization, which is related to the relatively recent “political purification of the universities.” While the academy has leaned left since at least the 1920s, Mr. Haidt says “it was always just a lean.” Beginning in the early 1990s, as the professors of the Greatest Generation retired, it became a full-on tilt.  
  
“Now there are no more conservative voices on the faculty or administration,” he says, exaggerating only a little. Heterodox Academy cites research showing that the ratio of left to right professors in 1995 was 2 to 1. Now it is 5 to 1.  
  
The left, meanwhile, has undergone an ideological transformation. A generation ago, social justice was understood as equality of treatment and opportunity: “If gay people don’t have to right to marry and you organize a protest to apply pressure to get them that right, that’s justice,” Mr. Haidt says. “If black people are getting discriminated against in hiring and you fight that, that’s justice.”  
  
Today justice means equal outcomes. “There are two ideas now in the academic left that weren’t there 10 years ago,” he says. “One is that everyone is racist because of unconscious bias, and the other is that everything is racist because of systemic racism.” That makes justice impossible to achieve: “When you cross that line into insisting if there’s not equal outcomes then some people and some institutions and some systems are racist, sexist, then you’re setting yourself up for eternal conflict and injustice.”  
  
Perhaps most troubling, Mr. Haidt cites the new protectiveness in child-rearing over the past few decades. Historically, American children were left to their own devices and had to learn to deal with bullies. Today’s parents, out of compassion, handle it for them. “By the time students get to college they have much, much less experience with unpleasant social encounters, or even being insulted, excluded or marginalized,” Mr. Haidt says. “They expect there will be some adult, some authority, to rectify things.”  
  
Combine that with the universities’ shift to a “customer is always right” mind-set. Add in social media. Suddenly it’s “very, very easy to bring mobs together,” Mr. Haidt says, and make “people very afraid to stand out or stand up for what they think is right.” Students and professors know, he adds, that “if you step out of line at all, you will be called a racist, sexist or homophobe. In fact it’s gotten so bad out there that there’s a new term—‘ophobophobia,’ which is the fear of being called x-ophobic.”  
  
That fear runs deep—including in Mr. Haidt. When I ask him about how political homogeneity on campus informs the understanding of so-called rape culture, he clams up: “I can’t talk about that.” The topic of sexual assault—along with Islam—is too sensitive.  
  
It’s a painfully ironic answer from a man dedicating his career to free thought and speech. But choosing his battles doesn’t mean Mr. Haidt is unwilling to fight. And he’s finding allies across the political spectrum.  
  
Heterodox Academy’s membership has grown to some 600, up about 100 since the beginning of March. “In the wake of the Middlebury protests and violence, we’re seeing a lot of liberal-left professors standing up against illiberal-left professors and students,” Mr. Haidt says. Less than a fifth of the organization’s members identify as “right/conservative”; most are centrists, liberals or progressives.  
  
Balancing those numbers by giving academic jobs and tenure to outspoken libertarians and conservatives seems like the most effective way to change the campus culture, if only by signaling to self-censoring students that dissent is acceptable. But for now Heterodox Academy is taking a more modest approach, focusing on three initiatives.  
  
The first is its college guide: a ranking by viewpoint diversity of America’s top 150 campuses. The goal is to create market pressure and put administrators on notice. The University of Chicago currently ranks No. 1—rising seniors, take note.  
  
The second is a “fearless speech index,” a web-based questionnaire that allows students and professors to express how comfortable they feel speaking out on sensitive subjects. Right now, Mr. Haidt says, there are a tremendous number of anecdotes but no real data; the index aims to remedy that.  
  
The third is the “viewpoint diversity experience,” a six-step online lesson in the virtue and practice of open-minded engagement with opposing ideas.  
  
Heterodox Academy is not the only sliver of light. Following the Middlebury incident, the unlikely duo of Democratic Socialist Cornel West and conservative Robert P. George published a statement denouncing “campus illiberalism” and calling for “truth seeking, democracy and freedom of thought and expression.” More than 2,500 scholars and other intellectuals have signed it. At Northwestern the student government became the first in the country to pass a resolution calling for academic freedom and viewpoint diversity.  
  
“What I think is happening,” Mr. Haidt says, is that “as the visible absurdity on campus mounts and mounts, and as public opinion turns more strongly against universities—and especially as the line of violence is crossed—we are having more and more people standing up saying, ‘Enough is enough. I’m opposed to this.’ ” Let’s hope.  
  
If you’re not a student or professor, why should you care about snowflakes in their igloos? Because, Mr. Haidt argues, what happens on campus affects the “health of our nation.” Ideological and political homogeneity endangers the quality of social-science research, which informs public policy. “Understanding the impacts of immigration, understanding the causes of poverty—these are all absolutely vital,” he says. “If there’s an atmosphere of intimidation around politicized issues, it clearly influences the research.”  
  
Today’s college students also are tomorrow’s leaders—and employees. Companies are already encountering problems with recent graduates unprepared for the challenges of the workplace. “Work requires a certain amount of toughness,” Mr. Haidt says. “Colleges that prepare students to expect a frictionless environment where there are bureaucratic procedures and adult authorities to rectify conflict are very poorly prepared for the workplace. So we can expect a lot more litigation in the coming few years.”  
  
If you lean left—even if you adhere to the campus orthodoxy, or to certain elements of it—you might consider how the failure to respect pluralism puts your own convictions at risk of a backlash. “People are sick and tired of being called racist for innocent things they’ve said or done,” Mr. Haidt observes. “The response to being called a racist unfairly is never to say, ‘Gee, what did I do that led to me being called this? I should be more careful.’ The response is almost always, ‘[Expletive] you!’ ”  
  
He offers this real-world example: “I think that the ‘deplorables’ comment could well have changed the course of human history.”  
  
Ms. Weiss is an associate book review editor at the Journal.  
  
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