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Darkness at Noon on the Campus Quad

By **Thomas K. Lindsay**

It's come to this. No less a figure than the U.S. Commission Civil Rights' Michael Yaki is **reported** to have proclaimed that college students do not merit the free-speech rights of adults, because students' brains are still "in a stage of development."

For over two millennia, higher education had been animated by Socrates' assertion that "the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being." Apparently Yaki's new maxim is, "The unexamined life is not worth living -- except by college students."

How did we get here? How can 18-year-olds have the constitutional right to vote, but somehow lack the First Amendment right to debate the pressing issues their votes will help decide? How are students "developed" enough to pick their courses (after universities dismantled required core curriculums in the '60s), but lack the right to raise questions based on what they've learned in these courses?

To understand this, we should start by refusing to highlight Commissioner Yaki alone. Nor should we dismiss this latest assault on freedom as a passing fad. It is, instead, a conscious, unrelenting project to transform American higher education and therewith American political life. Yaki's defense of speech restrictions on campus is but the logical extension of some professors' rationale for squelching free discussion in the classroom. Duke's Michael Munger makes this clear in a **recent Pope Center article**, where he relates that a fellow professor told him, "I don't need to spend much time with my liberal students, because they already have it right. I spend most of my time arguing with the conservative students." As Munger demonstrates, this tack denies a liberal education -- Socrates's examined life -- to liberal and conservative students alike.

But what if some students remain unconvinced, and continue to voice their out-of-season questions and concerns after they've left the Star Chambers that such classes have become? Yaki answers: They will face similar oppression on the campus quad, for they lack the "development" to question the reigning orthodoxy. Then, having locked down our campuses into Thinking Prohibited Zones, the oppressive project to end oppression will extend to the faculty, as a recent *Harvard Crimson* **op-ed** demands (the author would deny support for the scholarship of gadflies like Professor Harvey C. Mansfield).

But didn't universities restrict students in the "bad old days" prior to the '60s campus revolts? Under the powers arising from universities' acting *in loco parentis* ("in the place of a parent"), schools restricted visitation to dorms of the other sex, imposed curfews, etc. Back then, administrators believed they possessed objective knowledge about the good life, and felt it their right and duty to enforce the conditions of optimal learning on campuses. All that fell with the rise of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll in the '60s, justified by arguments rooted in moral and cultural relativism.

But the "Campus Spring" of untrammelled freedom has now collapsed into repression, as *in loco parentis* has transmogrified into *in loco Big Nurse* -- into the simultaneous infantilization and repression of "underdeveloped" students, denying them the difficult and rewarding intellectual exercises required to become informed citizens and effective leaders. This development was far from a reversal. It was the culmination of the principles animating the revolution from the outset. How?

Moral relativism, taught in our universities for the past half-century, closes human reason off from access to and guidance by natural standards of justice and injustice. All that is left in the academic vision to "support community": the solitary, unsupported "self." As a result, **the question for our universities** became how to construct community out of a diversity of unconnected selves. The answer: Only by "celebrating diversity" can society do justice to the self without a soul (fixed nature). On these premises, it's unsurprising that the new vision of community requires for its implementation the oppressive imposition of diversity-celebration on those who would dare voice a standard (natural or divine) superior to standard-less self-creation.

More simply, the new academic vision replaces *in loco parentis*, but does so on the basis of relativism; hence, diversity-as-monolith (political correctness, campus speech codes, sensitivity-training seminars) imposes the communal value of value non-imposition (diversity-celebration) in the name of the lawless liberty of the soulless self.

Add to this brew the "discovery" by our academics that, not only is the quest for objective truth impossible (because there are no absolutes to discover, except for -- and contradictorily -- the absolute truth that there are no absolutes) but also, all alleged truth-seeking in the past, as well as the freedom required for such seeking, was merely a rationalization in the service of maintaining power over those disenfranchised on the basis of race, class, and gender - the universities' new Trinity. A Harvard committee **report** praises humanities research of "the last thirty years" for "unmask[ing] the operations of power" and exposing how "domination and imperialism underwrite cultural production."

With this, the unfortunate, sometimes racially insensitive pranks of campus fraternities -- Yaki's Exhibit A in his case for curbing campus speech -- are put on the same moral plane as all "cultural production," including all texts previously thought to be the "Great Books" of civilization. The minds of Socrates, Aristotle, and Locke were apparently as "underdeveloped" as Yaki deems undergraduates to be. Their unfiltered voices, like those of students must accordingly be silenced.

If those on the left dismiss such criticisms with "we won, conservatives lost; shut up," they fail to see that this is far more than a partisan battle. It is a struggle over whether genuine intellectual liberty, or freedom of the mind, is possible. It is thus a struggle between civilization and barbarism, between light and darkness.

At this point, the darkness is winning.

Witness how a civilization commits suicide.

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