

THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

Intimidation Is the New Normal on Campus

From now on, any speaker who arouses a protest is at risk of a beating



Elijah Nouvelage, Getty Images

February protests against a speech at UC-Berkeley by the right-wing provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos became violent, but more recent events are a clearer sign of dangers to come for American universities.

By Jonathan Haidt | APRIL 26, 2017

✓ PREMIUM

Images of fires, fireworks, and metal barricades crashing through windows made for great television, but the rioters who shut down Milo Yiannopoulos's talk at the University of California at Berkeley didn't just attack property. Fewer cellphone cameras captured the moments when they punched and pepper-sprayed members of the crowd, particularly those who seemed like they might be supporters of Yiannopoulos or Donald Trump.

Although the violence on February 1 was clearly instigated by outside agitators — "black bloc" anarchists who show up at events with their faces masked — at least some of the people behind the masks were Berkeley students who thought it was morally permissible to use violence to stop a lecture from taking place. As one student wrote

afterward, "Violence helped ensure the safety of students." Another asked, "When the nonviolent tactics [for stopping the talk] have been exhausted — what is left?"

Still, it was easy for the academic community to think of the riot as a special case. After all, Yiannopoulos is a professional troll. He came to campus to provoke, not to instruct. And he had exposed vulnerable individuals to danger before, as when he posted the name and photo of a trans woman on-screen while he mocked her.

A month later, on March 2, the violence was harder to justify. After students shouted down Charles Murray's attempt to give a lecture at Middlebury College, he was moved to a locked room in the student center from which his talk was live-streamed. Angry students pounded on the walls and pulled fire alarms to disrupt the broadcast. As Murray and his faculty host — Allison Stanger, a political-science professor — left the building, they were blocked by an "angry mob" (Stanger's words) including both students and nonstudents. As Stanger and Murray tried to push their way through, with the help of two security guards, several people grabbed and pulled at them, sending her to the hospital with whiplash and a concussion. Stanger later wrote that she had feared for her life.

Perhaps because it was a professor who was injured, Middlebury students did not defend the use of violence in the way that some Berkeley students had. But even the students' coordinated effort to silence Murray is harder to justify than the effort to silence Yiannopoulos. Murray is mild-mannered, came with co-sponsorship from the political-science department, and was there not to provoke but to talk about an issue that is central to students' moral and political concerns: social and economic inequality. When two psychologists, Wendy Williams and Stephen Ceci, asked 70 professors at various colleges to assess the political leaning of Murray's speech — given to them as a transcript with no source attributed — they rated it as "middle of the road," leaning neither left nor right.

But for many students and professors, what Murray intended to say was not relevant. The Southern Poverty Law Center had labeled him a "white supremacist" on the basis of his writings, and that was sufficient for many to believe that they had a moral duty to deny a platform to him. So perhaps Murray was a special case, too — some said his mere presence, like Yiannopoulos's at Berkeley, posed a direct danger to students. (I urge readers to see Murray's line-by-line corrections of the Southern Poverty Law Center's entry on him, then read some of his writings and decide for themselves.)

A month after the Middlebury fracas came the Heather Mac Donald shout-down at Claremont McKenna College. But this was no special case. Mac Donald is a typical campus speaker — a journalist and political commentator who wrote a book challenging prevailing wisdom on a matter of current concern.

In her 2016 book, *The War on Cops*, she argued that overstated claims about systemic racism among police officers have led police departments in some cities to adopt less assertive tactics, which has led to increased crime, including higher rates of murder, particularly of black men. Her thesis, popularly known as "the Ferguson effect," has been hotly debated, but as the left-leaning sociologist Neil Gross summarized the state of play last September, "there is now some evidence that when all eyes are on police misconduct, crime may edge up. Progressives should acknowledge that this idea isn't far-fetched."

Yet because Mac Donald challenged the dominant narrative and criticized the Black Lives Matter movement, some students at Claremont McKenna decided that she, too, must be denied a platform. They mobilized a mass action via Facebook with a call to "show up wearing black" and "bring your comrades, because we're shutting this down." A mob outside the auditorium, estimated at around 300 people, prevented anyone from entering the building. The college decided to stream Mac Donald's talk live from the nearly empty hall as hundreds of protesters pounded on the windows. Immediately afterward, she was whisked away through a kitchen exit by the campus police in an unmarked car.

What are we to make of this? There were no reports of violence or property damage. Yet this event is potentially more ominous than the Berkeley and Middlebury violence, for we are witnessing the emergence of a dangerous new norm for responding to speakers who challenge campus orthodoxy. Anyone offended by the speaker can put out a call on Facebook to bring together students and locals, including "antifa" (antifascist) and black-bloc activists who explicitly endorse the use of violence against racists and fascists. Because of flagrant "concept creep," however, almost anyone who is politically right of center can be labeled a racist or a fascist, and the promiscuous use of such labels is now part of the standard operating procedure. The call to shut down Mac Donald's talk asserted, without evidence, that her agenda is "racist, anti-Black, capitalist, imperialist, [and] fascist." As with accusations of witchcraft in earlier centuries, once such labels are attached to someone, few will dare to challenge their accuracy, lest they be accused of the same crimes.

It is crucial to note that at all three colleges — Berkeley, Middlebury, and Claremont McKenna — the crowd included a mix of students and locals, some wearing masks. It is therefore no longer possible to assume that a crowd on a college campus will be nonviolent, as crowds of protesting students were in the fall of 2015. What would have happened to Mac Donald had she tried to enter or exit through the main entrance, without a police escort? From now on, any campus speaker who arouses a protest is at risk of a beating. Can this really be the future of American higher education?

I do not doubt that many students face indignities and insults because of their race, gender, sexual orientation, or ability status. I respect students who take actions motivated by their concern for their fellow students. But these actions reflect choices that have far-reaching and potentially damaging consequences. First, there is the decision to appraise events in ways that amplify their harmfulness. A common feature of recent campus shout-downs is the argument that the speaker "dehumanizes" members of marginalized groups or "denies their right to exist." No quotations or citations are given for such strong assertions; these are rhetorical moves made to strengthen the case against the speaker. But if students come to believe that anyone who offends them has "dehumanized" them, they are setting themselves up for far greater vulnerability and isolation. Life, love, and work are full of small offenses and misunderstandings, many of which will now be experienced as monstrous and unforgivable.

Second, students in the past few years have increasingly opted for collective action to shut down talks by speakers they dislike, rather than taking the two traditional options available to all individuals: Don't go to the talk, or go and engage the speaker in the question-and-answer period. The decision to turn so many events into collective moral struggles has profound ramifications for the entire college. Everyone is pressured to take sides. Administrators are pressured to disinvite speakers, or at least to condemn their scholarship and morals while reluctantly noting their right to speak. Petitions are floated, and names of signers (and abstainers) are noted.

The human mind evolved for violent intergroup conflict. It comes easily to us, and it can be so emotionally rewarding that we have invented many ways of engaging in it ritually, such as in team sports. But the tribal mind is incompatible with scholarship, open-minded thinking, toleration of dissent, and the search for truth. When tribal sentiments are activated within an academic community, some members start to believe that their noble collective ends justify almost any means, including the demonization of inconvenient research and researchers, false accusations, character assassination, and sometimes even violence. Anyone not with the movement is against it, and its enemies — students, faculty members, administrators — are often intimidated into acquiescence. This is how professors and students are increasingly describing their campus climate, at least at elite four-year residential colleges.

What can be done to change course? College professors, more than anyone else in the country, have a professional duty to speak up for the freedom of scholars, authors, and journalists to present unpopular ideas, theories, and research findings, free from intimidation and harassment. The next time an unpopular speaker is invited to campus, professors should talk to their classes about the norms of the academy, the benefits of having one's cherished ideas challenged, and the impropriety of making slurs and ad hominem arguments. Then they should attend the event themselves — especially if they dislike the speaker.

But while professors are best placed to act as role models, it is only administrators who can set and enforce rules. At New York University, where I teach, the policy on protests is detailed and reasonable. It allows silent protests and brief outbursts within the lecture hall, but it states clearly that "chanting or making other sustained or repeated noise in a manner which substantially interferes with the speaker's communication is not permitted." Most colleges have such policies, but they are rarely enforced, even after the college president offers fine words about freedom of speech. From now on, administrators must ensure that any students who violate protest policies will be disciplined or expelled. There must be zero tolerance for mob rule, intimidation of speakers, and intimidation of political minorities among students as well as faculty members. Alumni can help by making it clear that they will give no further funds to colleges that permit students to shout down speakers with impunity.

And finally, when responsible campus leaders all fail to create a campus where diverse perspectives can be heard and discussed, students who desire such a campus must stand up and make their wishes known. There are encouraging signs on this front. In the wake of the unexpected outcome of the 2016 presidential election, the editors of Harvard's main student newspaper called on administrators and faculty members to "take active steps to ensure that students of all political stripes feel comfortable voicing their ideas, especially in the classroom." More recently, Northwestern University became the first in the country whose student government passed a resolution calling on the administration to promote viewpoint diversity and to enforce its policies against disruptive protests.

This year may become a turning point in the annals of higher education. It may be remembered as the year that political violence and police escorts became ordinary parts of campus life. Or it may be remembered as the year when professors, students, and administrators finally found the moral courage to stand up against intimidation, even when it is aimed at people whose ideas they dislike.

Jonathan Haidt is a social psychologist at New York University's Stern School of Business and the author of The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion (Pantheon, 2012). He is a founder of Heterodox Academy.

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