Review of: "Support for Campus Censorship"

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It's common knowledge that the left dominates higher education and generally favors the regulation of speech. In the Clark, Winegard, and Farkas study, left respondents exhibit a particularly marked inclination to silence ideas they deem harmful to historically disadvantaged groups. The notion that ideas themselves wreak harm exemplifies the erasure of the traditional liberal distinction between speech and action. In its own way, the study thus documents the transformation of liberalism from a creed of free expression to a creed of restricted expression—a "censorious" creed, in the study's terms. For this reader, the study's one surprising finding is that even moderate and conservative respondents favored the suppression of offensive ideas to some degree. Has the liberal ascendancy so normalized the practice of suppression, and the theory that ideas cause harm, that even non-liberals are coming to think like censors?

Note that "censorious" actually means carping, hypercritical, fault-finding; it does not mean "inclined to censor." Words should be used with due care. In the case at hand, "censorious" respondents favor the removal of certain ideas from the university classroom or the university itself (at least to the extent of checking a box). It would be instructive to see if their protective instincts carried over to statements less loaded and less overtly inflammatory than those used in the study's tests. After all, alarmism sees threats everywhere. It is a formula for hypervigilance and overreach, not a guide for prudent decision-making. If the liberal seeks to protect vulnerable others from the harm or possible harm of objectionable ideas, this concept of harm, or mere risk, is so open-ended that one would like to know just how far it extends. For the protective liberal who prefers to err on the side of safety, does censorship itself become a default position?

Perhaps we can rightfully interpret a checked box on a survey as an endorsement of the radical act of purging campuses of wrongful ideas. But what about the removal of such ideas from society at large? When respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the statement, "They should remove the book from the library"—the first statement they encountered—who are "they" and what is "the library"? There are many libraries, not all of them on university campuses. The Kennedy quote that serves as the paper's epigraph refers to *public libraries*. It seems like one thing to remove wrongful ideas from the gated community of the campus and quite another to remove them, or seek to remove them, from the public domain. Yet if wrongful ideas are judged "dangerous to society" (as the authors observe in closing), then the act of extinguishing them will not limit itself to universities. Do the study subjects who look kindly on censorship want to turn society itself into one big well-controlled campus? How far are they willing to go? The answer to a question like this is unlikely to be as predictable as the reflexive hostility of liberal respondents to statements designed to push their buttons.

Once the principle of suppressing "harmful" speech becomes legitimate, or once the proclivity to suppress is in place,

where does the practice of suppression stop? Does it stop anywhere? Not only does the motive of protecting the oppressed lend itself to a crusade, but a standard as vague and hysterical as “dangerous to society” gives the censor (and the censor’s accomplices) a seemingly unlimited grant of repressive power.

No doubt there are many zealous protectors of the oppressed who would find the Clark et al. study itself objectionable and worthy of suppression. After all, as the authors observe, liberals may disapprove of findings that are empirically well supported. If this is so, do enclaves dominated by liberals, such as universities, risk becoming Potemkin villages—utopias of cardboard?

Such questions are provoked by this study.