

VOLUME XVII, NUMBER 3, SUMMER 2017

CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship



Diversity and Its Discontents: Essay by William Voegeli

Joseph M. Bessette:

*More Prisoners,
Less Crime*

Mark Bauerlein:

Ernest Hemingway

Brian C. Anderson:

Jane Jacobs

Charles R. Kesler:

*Campus Protest,
Then & Now*

Harvey C. Mansfield:

Our Polarized Parties

Robert R. Reilly:

God Bless America?

Angelo M. Codevilla:

*At War with
Eliot Cohen*

Michael M. Uhlmann:

Progressive Eugenics

Mark Helprin:

Thomas Sowell

A Publication of the Claremont Institute

PRICE: \$6.95

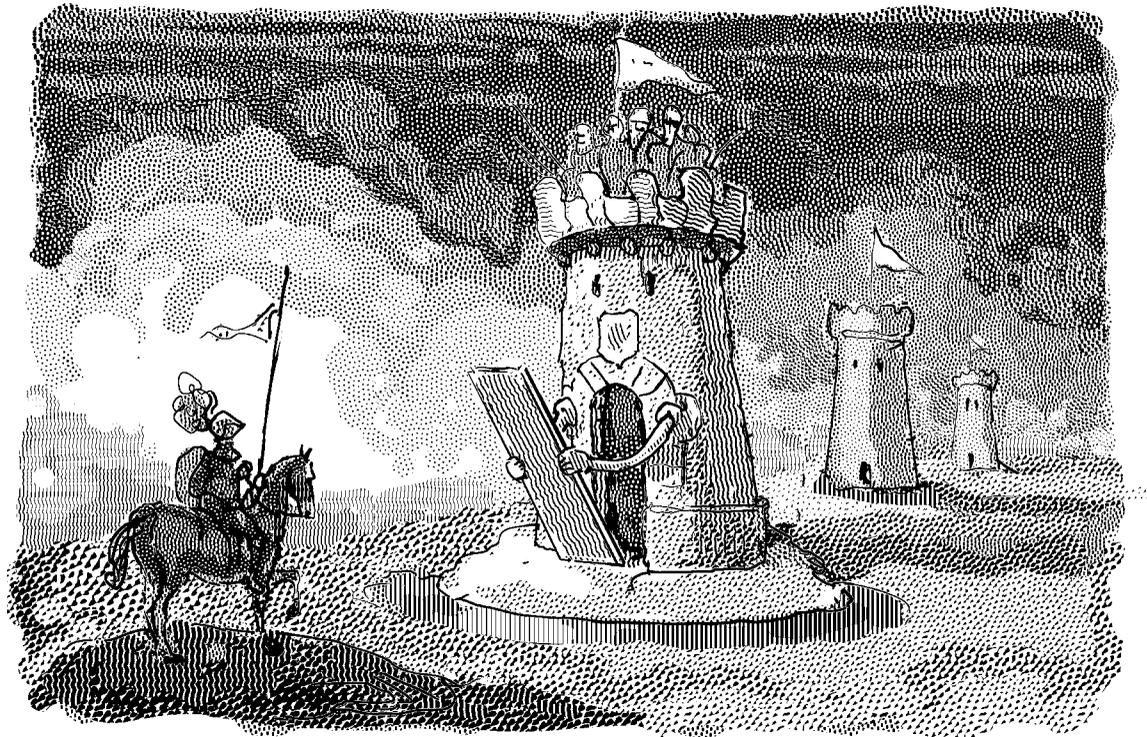
IN CANADA: \$8.95



Book Review by KC Johnson

RAGE OF THE SNOWFLAKES

What's Happened to the University?: A Sociological Exploration of Its Infantilisation, by Frank Furedi.
Routledge, 206 pages, \$155 (cloth), \$26.95 (paper)



CAMPUS GROUPTHINK IS THE MOST important story in American higher education today. Institutions once devoted to the pursuit of truth and the free exchange of ideas now shut down or simply avoid debate about controversial issues, and equate unpopular opinions with physical violence. In *What's Happened to the University?*, British sociologist Frank Furedi examines the roots of higher education's "infantilisation" in the United States and other Western countries. It is a readable analysis of a higher education system in crisis.

"University life," Furedi begins, "has always been subject to pressures to fall in line with the outlook of dominant political and economic interests." In the past this pressure has mostly come from off campus; today "such calls are likely to emanate from inside the university, and their most vociferous proponents are often students." A toxic combination of identity politics, an increasing tendency to perceive campus problems as medical problems, and altered parenting styles has produced a student body intent on ridding their environment of any ideas deemed threatening.

This requires the bastardization of language. Though the mainstream media portrays campuses as extraordinarily unsafe, the crime rate at most U.S. universities is far below the national average (not counting underage drinking). But the perceived danger has called forth a new vocabulary, with "vulnerable" students demanding "safe spaces" to protect them from the unknown. The label "vulnerable," first used by U.S. media to refer to university students in 1991, appeared 1,407 times in indexed publications in 2015-16. The "remarkable increase in allusions to the vulnerability of students," Furedi writes, "provides a striking illustration of an important transformation of the way that university students are represented and perceived."

Students and their bureaucratic campus allies demand protection in a variety of ways. "Safe spaces"—like vulnerability, a term that has proliferated and broadened in meaning in recent years—allow students to avoid viewpoints with which they disagree. As an Oberlin College student put it, while "there's something to be said about exposing yourself to ideas other than your own...I've had enough of

that." Combating "microaggressions," meanwhile, provides cover for restricting the most innocent speech, if "marginalized" students interpret it (regardless of intent) as hurtful. Students obsessed with identity politics perceive "slights as a form of victimisation" and employ "rhetoric that continually reminds the world of [their] victim status." Furedi cites an op-ed from the *Columbia Spectator*, in which the student begins "by stating some crucial facts: I am a queer, multiracial woman of color. I am a survivor of sexual assault and suffer from multiple mental illnesses. I am a low-income, first generation student." The writer's multiple victim status substitutes for argument. Readers are expected to adopt the author's thesis—that a "war on political correctness invalidates the existence and experiences of marginalized people"—so as not to compound her oppression.

CAMPUS SOCIAL LIFE IS AN EASY TARGET for adherents of this new, infantilized order. Harvard's senior administration recently resolved to penalize students for joining off-campus, private, single-sex social



clubs—a policy enforceable only if students report on their colleagues. (Harvard employed this same tactic against gay students in the 1920s.) At Bowdoin in early 2016 some students held a tequila-themed birthday party. Moved to act by the “traumatizing” presence of tiny sombreros, the school offered counseling to students “victimized” by the morally offensive “cultural appropriation.” Two student government members who attended the party faced impeachment hearings. Other students had to move out of their dorm. It’s no surprise that some Bowdoin undergraduates informed the *Washington Post* that the lesson they learned from the affair was to keep their opinions to themselves.

Calls for outright restrictions on campus speech have become common. Writing in *Slate*, University of Chicago Law School professor Eric Posner justifies campus speech codes on the grounds that “students today are more like children than adults and need protection.” He contends that speech codes, far from reflecting the ideological agenda of “lefty professors” (although speech codes are almost always targeted at non-leftist speech), are popular because “universities are simply catering to demand in the marketplace for education,” supplying “what most students want.”

IF UNIVERSITIES CAVE IN TO STUDENT DEMANDS about speech codes, what rationale exists for preventing students from dictating curricular matters? Furedi discusses recent protests against the Yale English curriculum, which students claimed was insufficiently diverse. A petition put together by student protesters warned Yale English professors (who are hardly racist misogynists) that “it is your responsibility as educators to listen to student voices.... We have spoken. We are speaking. Pay attention.” Similar uprisings have occurred on other campuses. It took little pressure to get Harvard’s English Department to institute a required course in “marginalized” authors.

When universities fail to respond quickly enough, student protesters demand other accommodations, such as delays in academic assignments, to compensate for the harms (fatigue, psychological trauma) that come from the act of protesting. Choosing not to protest is apparently not an option.

Furedi’s analysis anticipated Charles Murray’s Middlebury College imbroglio. A scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, Murray was invited by AEI’s campus branch to lecture in April about his book on the white working class, *Coming Apart* (2012). He was greeted by an organized protest, encouraged by some faculty members. Students shouted in the lecture hall, forcing him to deliver his talk by livestream in a separate, closed room. Protesters screamed and pulled fire alarms; when Murray left, they surged around him and assaulted Allison Stanger, the professor who moderated his talk. Stanger suffered a neck injury and concussion.

In the aftermath, Middlebury students didn’t blame the protesters who had committed a criminal act, but the student AEI branch who had invited Murray to speak. The college’s student government debated a resolution requiring all speakers to conform to “community standards,” as defined by the student government and special juries assembled from the student body. One student cited the distinction between “free speech and hate speech”; another argued that restricting free speech would “protect people from oppressive forces and narratives.” A third student claimed that “Murray’s narrative questioned her own existence which has caused her mental health to suffer.” As a “person of color at Middlebury,” she felt she had no choice but to protest, even though defending her position against opposing viewpoints was “truly exhausting.” Whatever this sentiment is, it reflects no commitment to, or interest in, the free exchange of ideas that ought to characterize university education.

IF STUDENTS ARE TREATED LIKE CHILDREN, they will act accordingly. In 2015, Yale University administrators urged students to self-censor their Halloween costumes, lest they cause racial offense. Erika Christakis, associate master of Silliman College (a Yale residential college), gently pushed back, e-mailing students:

Is there no room anymore for a child or young person to be...a little bit inappropriate or provocative or, yes, offensive? American universities were once a safe space not only for maturation but also for a certain regressive, or even trans-

gressive, experience; increasingly, it seems, they have become places of censure and prohibition.

In response, students demanded the dismissal of Christakis and her husband, Nicholas, as house masters. When a group of students surrounded Nicholas on the campus quad, a female student of color informed him that “it is your job to create a place of comfort and home for the students who live in Silliman.” When he disagreed, the increasingly belligerent student responded,

Then why the f--- did you accept the position? Who the f--- hired you?... You should step down! If that is what you think of being headmaster, you should step down! It is not about creating an intellectual space! It is not!

Yale responded to this embarrassment by designating \$50 million to hire more minority professors. Nicholas and Erika Christakis resigned as house masters, and Erika left the faculty altogether.

EXAMINING EVENTS AT UNIVERSITIES throughout the Western world, Furedi identifies some broad intellectual patterns. But what is gained in breadth is lost in depth; moving from campuses in the United States to Britain, and from New Zealand to South Africa, is not only jarring, but makes for difficult comparisons, understating the structural and ideological differences between U.S. universities and those elsewhere. Moreover, most of Furedi’s U.S. examples come from elite institutions. It would be interesting to know whether student infantilization exists in mid-tier or low-tier schools, and if not, why not. Still, *What’s Happened to the University?* is, for the most part, interesting and well-argued.

Furedi cautions that academic freedom risks becoming a “second order” principle as universities elevate such concepts as civility and diversity (of a particular kind) as their primary goals. As long as such ideas remain widespread on campus, higher education’s infantilization will continue.

KC Johnson is professor of history at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center.

The CLAREMONT REVIEW OF BOOKS is a publication of the CLAREMONT INSTITUTE
FOR THE STUDY OF STATESMANSHIP AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY.

Subscribe to
the *Claremont Review of Books*

*“The Claremont Review of Books is
full of splendid essays and reviews—
well written, based on deep scholarly
knowledge, raising issues of lasting
importance. I read it cover to cover.”*
—Michael Barone

Subscribe to the CRB today and save 25%
off the newsstand price. A one-year
subscription is only \$19.95.

To begin receiving America's premier
conservative book review, visit
www.claremont.org/crb
or call (909) 981-2200.

CLAREMONT
REVIEW OF BOOKS

1317 W. FOOTHILL
BLVD, SUITE 120,
UPLAND, CA

91786

NON PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
PERMIT NO. 504
UPLAND, CA