

The myth of student intolerance

Universities have always been hives of activism—and long may that continue
Kieran Devlin Prospect Magazine September 15, 2017



Photo: Chris Radburn/PA Wire/PA Images

As the new academic year approaches, we are once more subjected to the fallacy that students are suppressing ideas which conflict with their left-wing biases. That university campuses are places of free speech fascism thanks to “snowflake” students banning controversial speakers. Ignoring the obvious irony—those complaining about “snowflakes” themselves throw tantrums at the hint of a “no-platform” policy—the claim that students today are in any way “tyrannical” is (1)_____. The fact is that they have always fought for what they believe in—and are right to do so.

The (2)_____ is everywhere. Take, for instance, [this](#) recent piece in the Spectator by Brendan O’Neill. It’s worth (3)_____ what’s happening here step by step.

First of all, whatever conservative commentators would have you believe, protests on campus aren’t new. Universities have always been hubs of activism. Historians record that students in 13th century Paris and Bologna staged demonstrations against compulsory gown use, while in the UK, as civic university colleges emerged in the latter half of the 19th century, students formed councils to represent their interests at a national level. (This was before the National Union of Students was established in 1921.) The examples get more serious: from the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign and the (4)_____ Movement to the 2010 fees hike marches, it’s no secret that students have always campaigned against (5)_____. Protest is as intrinsic to the university experience as two-day hangovers and library all-nighters.

True, sometimes the line is crossed and the ends—a fair society for all—do not justify the means. But the suppression of free thought depicted in the press is largely exaggerated. Instances of genuine censorship are (6)_____ but hardly earth-shattering, and the plural of anecdote is not data. The portrayal of campuses as repressive (7)_____ for social conservatives, where no one dare start an Ayn Rand bookclub, is (8)_____.

“Protest is as intrinsic to the university experience as two-day hangovers and library allnighters”

It isn't tyranny to (9)_____ those with abhorrent views—as UC Berkeley did when it cancelled a speech from ex-Breitbart writer Milo Yiannopoulos following student pressure. Rather, it is satisfying a moral obligation to (10)_____ what is awful by the standards of civil society. The line which distinguishes what speech is valid and what isn't is invariably murky, but there are ideas that can be agreed upon as (11)_____ because they are demonstrably (12)_____ or are (13)_____ repugnant. Flat-earthism falls into the former category. (14)_____ falls into the latter.

Our propensity for balanced debate has legitimised ideas that should be considered (15)_____. Platforming climate change deniers and Holocaust deniers alongside climate scientists and historians might be a victory for (16)_____, but it's morally negligent, instilling credibility to views (17)_____ of any. When media outlets publish ambivalent profiles of the white supremacist Richard Spencer in the wake of Trump's election win, they somehow forget that white supremacism is objectively awful; and the scenes in Charlottesville a few weeks ago remind us of the dangers of legitimising racism. Karl Popper's “Paradox of Tolerance” theory is pertinent;

(18)_____ tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance. If we extend (19)_____ tolerance even to those who are (20)_____, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the (20)_____, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them.

This extract underpins student protest within the context of the free speech debate: students have a duty to regulate speech they view as anachronistic or deplorable, to be (20)_____ towards the (21)_____. The value of a civil society should not be measured by its zealotry for absolute freedom. Perhaps British society at large can learn something from student protestors: young people have historically pushed against (22)_____ social norms, consigning archaisms to the proverbial scrapheap; the gears of generational progress continuing to turn.

Lastly, a point which should be obvious but apparently isn't. Just because you have freedom of speech doesn't mean that anyone is required to listen, and it doesn't mean you're (23)_____ for the consequences of your speech. If people don't want to engage with your ideas, that's reflective of you, not them. Maybe your ideas have no intellectual merit—and so no place in a university anyway.

Perhaps it's this notion that the free speech zealots find truly frightening: that their ideas simply aren't worth debating. What these commentators convey isn't the despotism of political correctness, but the increasing (24)_____ of their own value systems.

Put appropriate negative forms of these words in the gaps in the article;

account	honest	relevant
agree	ingenuous	Semite
Apartheid	just	sense
conceive	limit x 2	tolerate x 4
date	partial	utopia
deserve	pick	valid
equivocal	platform	