

The Myth of Safety in the 'Free Speech on College Campuses' Debate

There is often a deep irony in invoking the language of "safety" to justify the silencing of controversial ideas. When we invite speakers to universities to discuss ideas out of step with the dominant line of thinking on campus, they are often obstructed or outright banned in the interest of preserving a safe learning environment.

Such was the case during Dr. Jordan Peterson's visit to Queen's University in Kingston, Ont., on Monday. He was invited by a Professor of Law to give a lecture entitled "The Rising Tide of Compelled Speech in Canada".

Dr. Peterson, a tenured professor of psychology at the University of Toronto, is at the tail end of a world tour to promote his book, *12 Rules for Life*, which currently ranks at the top of Amazon's bestseller list. In it, he offers such contentious advice as: stand up with your back straight, look ahead of you when you walk, treat yourself as you would treat somebody you are responsible for taking care of, and to tell the truth.

While his message sounds benign enough, Peterson's lecture drew roughly 150 protesters on Monday. Most of them were Queen's students themselves, who took to barricading doors, blocking fire exits, harassing and intimidating fellow students, smashing a stained-glass window, and, in one case, assaulting a police officer.

In a video captured outside the venue, one protester is heard shouting "lock 'em in and burn it down", a remark met with laughter and applause. In their defense, one of the organizers of Monday's protest alleged that Peterson "tends to incite hatred wherever he goes".

During the lecture, some demonstrators managed to invade the building and force their way onto the stage where Peterson was speaking. They held a banner which read "Freedom to Smash Bigotry". I do not believe they stand behind the meaning of their own slogans.

I can admit that Dr. Peterson may be out of his depth when discussing some matters of the law: despite objections from the Canadian Bar Association, he has boldly condemned Canada's bill C-16 as an infringement of freedom of speech. In effect, the law added gender identity and expression as protected grounds under the Canadian Human Rights Act.

While Peterson has stated that he would be willing to respectfully accommodate the preferences of his gender non-conforming students, his position is that he should not be compelled by law to use them. He also denies the utility in using any pronouns that deviate from the conventional three in the English language: *he*, *she*, and *they*. More recently, Peterson has made ill-considered comments about women's dress, and has argued that hard-wired biological differences between the sexes has a strong influence on career decisions.

Despite this, the term “bigot”, which refers to a person intolerant toward those holding different opinions, does not apply to him. Rather, Peterson is trying to foster a climate of critical discussion toward ideas that are held as gospel on campus.

To the gospel’s acolytes, Peterson’s speech is tantamount to violence. They allege that it denies the humanity of gender non-conforming people, or those whose gender deviates from that which they were assigned at birth. Thus, it is violent, unsafe, and undeserving of a platform for expression.

The metaphorically “unsafe learning environment” was also used by administrators at Wilfrid Laurier University to condemn Lindsay Shepherd, a teaching assistant, for playing a video to her undergraduates which featured Peterson discussing the use of gendered pronouns.

But, by and large, this perception of violence is still limited to a vocal few. Who, under the susceptibility of their organizers, are willing to retaliate with violence and intimidation to advance their agenda.

Justin Trottier’s case is instructive here. Trottier, executive director of the Canadian Association for Equality (CAFE), was once a prominent campus speaker and activist in the late 2000s. Before the Peterson’s of the world arrived on the scene, Trottier was at the forefront of the campus culture war over the limits of speech and expression.

Trottier’s events at the University of Toronto were notoriously controversial. They played host to controversial second-wave feminist speakers such as Janice Fiamengo and Katherine Young, who have amassed public followings for speaking out about issues specific to men and masculinity in society.

In November 2012, one of Trottier’s talks at the University of Toronto featured Warren Farrell, a bestselling author and educator who once served on the Board of the National Organization for Women (NOW). Despite being a self-proclaimed feminist, Farrell has become controversial for challenging modern feminist orthodoxy, often by arguing that university gender studies departments rarely discuss masculinity except to demonize it.

Farrell was not brought in by Trottier to discuss feminism, but to discuss suicide, addiction, and dropout rates among men in post-secondary education.

Foreshadowing Peterson’s fate, 50-100 protesters turned out to the Farrell speech with the hope of shutting down the event and restoring safety to the premises. Their methods involved forming a blockade around every entrance and exit to the venue, and screaming obscenities to passersby. In effect, they transformed a psychologically unsafe environment for *some* into a materially dangerous space for all.

When police finally arrived to diffuse a situation that was in clear violation of the Fire Code, they faced significant resistance. In one case, a man was placed under arrest for assaulting an officer.

While their methods were ill-conceived, their aspirations were noble. Like those gathered outside of Queen's Grant Hall, Farrell's objectors sought to protect students from potential harm. That is, harm caused by the dissemination of ideas that they deemed to be hateful, violent and, in turn, unsafe. Their mission, at least ostensibly, is not to infringe on their opponents' right to speak, but rather to "de-platform" their speech by forcing it off campus.

Critics allege that their opponents' speech, at its core, precipitates discussion over which people we should consider human. A discussion, they insist, that we should never provide a platform for.

However, Peterson's thesis on C-16 was never about who should be considered human or respected; Farrell's take on contemporary feminism was never about marginalizing or trivializing the experiences of women.

In any event, those discussions should be given a platform for discussion. We must not indulge our authoritarian impulse to dictate what can and cannot be talked about. This is because any argument that questions the basic humanity of any category of person is a bad argument. It can be easily dismantled with the presentation of a superior argument.

But no campus speaker is making such a claim. Nobody is attempting to deny anyone's humanity or personal validity. It would be an easy task to dismantle such a ridiculous claim, if that were the actual argument being made. But since it isn't, critics must resort to misrepresentation, hysteria, and obstruction—the tactics of authoritarians and book-burners.

The irony here is twofold.

First, it must be understood that de-platformers are as much a part of the audience as the seated attendees inside the venue. While the protesters are often not the ones listening, they are nonetheless fully in attendance. And their attendance achieves the opposite of its intention: it does not blockade but rather attracts attention toward both the speaker and the platform. In effect, their actions demonstrate that they are not in conflict with the speaker, but with the opposing faction within the audience.

Second, when campus protests are organized in the interest of protecting personal safety they tend to exact the opposite. Under the guise of preventing hate, abuse, and intimidation, protesters often retaliate with the same tactics: barricading exits, bullying the innocent, pulling fire alarms, pounding on windows and doors with the intention to intimidate, and occasionally acting physically aggressive with the intention of causing harm.

This particular kind of hypocrisy not only engenders a physically unsafe environment, but it also entrenches the intellectually unsafe environment that they're attempting to disrupt. Their actions lead to the generation of media coverage, social media hot takes, and greater attention being placed on the ideas they want protection from. They make campus a dangerous place in both their terms and ours.

The champions of censorship throughout history have never proclaimed themselves as being on the side of obstructing access to ideas. Rather, they appoint themselves as public defenders, intent on the preservation of intellectual safety and security. This has been the motivating force behind the treatment of Peterson, Trottier, Farrell, and Shepherd.

But unlike the book-burners of old, campus activists are ineffective in achieving what it is they want. In authoritarian societies, blocking access to ideas is made possible through the forces of the state. Though modernity, for its part, has rebuffed this with a liberal order in which technologies amplify those ideas that gain currency with the public.

The university has served as a bulwark of this liberal order. If the university loses this status, we will have lost immeasurable ground to authoritarian encroachment. It is at this point when safety should become our first consideration.

The battle we must wage, then, should not be over the relative safety of ideas. Neither should it be fought over one's ability to access those ideas. Rather, it should be about empowering individuals—both students and not—to challenge and confront ideas they disagree with. This is the only viable method of suppression.

If the modern University is to remain a liberal institution, and to remain a forum for critical inquiry—for challenging orthodoxy—then the de-platformers must change their course. We must not indulge authoritarian impulses. We need to protect the institution of the university, and its essential role in a free and democratic society. It's our safety at stake, here.