# The forced resignation of Erika Christakis at Yale University

**David Walsh**
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Yale University lecturer Erika Christakis, at the center of controversy since the end of October, has decided not to continue teaching courses at the university. Christakis is an associate master at Yale's Silliman College who taught courses on child development and psychology.

As the result of sending an email October 30 about Halloween costumes, Christakis—and eventually her husband Nicholas, the master of Silliman College, a physician and a professor of sociology (who has decided to take a one-semester sabbatical)—found themselves the target of forces who claimed to be fighting racism and the university's supposed insensitivity to minority students.

In her email Christakis was responding to an October 27 campus-wide message from Yale's Intercultural Affairs Committee that advised students against wearing offensive Halloween costumes and urged them to "actively avoid those circumstances that threaten our sense of community or disrespects, alienates or ridicules segments of our population based on race, nationality, religious belief or gender expression."

In Christakis's thoughtful reply, in which she discussed the issues from the point of view of "an educator concerned with the developmental stages of childhood and young adulthood," she worried out loud quite legitimately about "the consequences of an institutional (which is to say: bureaucratic and administrative) exercise of implied control over college students."

Christakis went on: "Even if we could agree on how to avoid offense…I wonder, and I am not trying to be provocative: Is there no room anymore for a child or young person to be a little bit obnoxious…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 transgressive, experience; increasingly, it seems, they have become places of censure and prohibition. And the censure and prohibition come from above, not from yourselves!"

She concluded her email, "In other words: Whose business is it to control the forms of costumes of young people? It's not mine, I know that."

Christakis's dispatch of the innocuous Halloween email coincided with the series of protests against alleged racism that began at the University of Missouri and reached the Yale campus in early November. As the result of his wife's email, Nicholas Christakis was accosted by a group of students November 6, in a scene captured in part on video. For daring to speak in defense of elementary democratic rights, Christakis was denounced and abused, and told to resign. One enraged individual screamed, "It is not about creating an intellectual space! It is not! … Do you understand that? It is about creating a home here!"

The campaign against Erika and Nicholas Christakis has a thoroughly antidemocratic and right-wing character. There is not a whiff of racism or any other prejudice in their comments. Those leading the campaign against the Christakises are not taking up a struggle against serious injustice—they are using the incident as leverage in their pursuit of greater privileges for already privileged African American and other minority professionals.

As the WSWS noted November 17: "None of the burning issues affecting millions of people of all backgrounds have been raised in the protests: growing poverty and social inequality, the assault on democratic rights, the imperialist war drive, the enormous debt burden faced by students and the fact that higher education as a whole is increasingly out of reach for working class youth."

An open letter to Erika Christakis signed by several hundred students and faculty members sums up the self-absorbed, self-pitying approach of these upper-middle class forces. The letter asserts: "To ask marginalized students to throw away their enjoyment of a holiday, in order to expend emotional, mental, and physical energy to

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explain why something is offensive, is—offensive… The role of marginalized people on campus is not, and should not be, to constantly educate our peers if they ignore the many opportunities offered—like the one provided by the Intercultural Affairs Committee's email—to self-explore and learn."

It goes on: "To be a student of color on Yale's campus is to exist in a space that was not created for you. From the Eurocentric courses, to the lack of diversity in the faculty, to the names of slave owners and traders that adorn most of the buildings on campus—all are reminders that Yale's history is one of exclusion."

This is absurd. The "marginalized" and "excluded" students at Yale are among the most privileged in America. The university's tuition fee for the academic year 2015–2016 is $46,500, and the total cost of attendance is $65,725. While no doubt there are students assisted by scholarships, grants and loans, *class* is the principal barrier to attendance at Yale and other major universities, not race or ethnicity. According to Postsecondary Education Opportunity, while 79 percent of students born into the country's wealthiest 25 percent of households obtain bachelor's degrees, only 11 percent from the bottom quarter graduate from four-year universities.

Providing some sort of idea of the value of a Yale education, 73 percent of *Yale Alumni Magazine* 's 131,000 subscribers belong to the professional or managerial category. The subscribers' average household income is $338,000 and their average family net worth is $1.8 million.

The relentless striving for privileges by a small number of African American or other minority students has a sinister and reactionary logic, as does every movement based on race, ethnicity or gender. The witch-hunting of Erika Christakis is only the first indicator of where this is heading.

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