

The politics and origins of Britain's Spiked-Online—Part 1

Zach Reed
30 May 2016

The past few years have witnessed an unprecedented wave of “student-led” censorship on British campuses through the use of “No Platforming” and other measures such as controlling speech, clothing and even body language.

The minutiae of life on campus are now subject to scrutiny, condemnation and even proscription—all in the name of protecting from harm. Censorship has reached the level of absurdity—evoking indignation, ridicule and concern over its implications for democratic rights.

Censorship is the outcome of official National Union of Students’ (NUS) and local Student Unions’ policy to turn campuses into what are described as “Safe Spaces.” It is largely driven by student groups steeped in identity politics. Words and symbols, regardless of their context or their intent, are deemed to cause as much violence as physical acts when employed against selected “oppressed groupings.” By reducing the world to competing subjective identities based on postmodernist and irrationalist conceptions, the feeling of offence and its remedy are now presented as the sole practical concern on campus.

The policy of “no platforming” was first practised by the NUS in 1974 against fascist groups such as the National Front. It was tied to measures that hindered any effective struggle against fascism by placing this as a task of the state and other bourgeois authorities, including those on campus. As with all such appeals for bans and proscriptions, it ultimately provided the ruling class with the means to attack what is their main target, the working class and socialists, while allowing the right wing to pose as victims of state repression. Today “no platforming” is routinely employed against genuine victims of state repression.

In 2010, after Julian Assange and WikiLeaks had exposed imperialist war crimes and became the target for a massive state witch-hunt, Assange met with denunciations and slander by feminists and pseudo-left groups. Organisations such as the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party have solidarized themselves with bogus accusations of rape to demand that Assange accept being deported to Sweden, where he would face extradition to the United States. When Assange defended himself against the trumped-up rape allegations, he, and others supporting him, were accused of “rape apologism,” and faced bans and proscriptions.

For its pains, the SWP and its student organisations on campus were given similar treatment, following rape allegations in 2013 against one of the group’s leading members. Today, anyone is a potential target for censorship on campuses. It only takes a trawled-up sentence on social media to demand a ban, as demonstrated by the ongoing campaign alleging anti-Semitism against political critics of Israel’s oppression of the Palestinians.

The political confusion created is compounded by claims that it is coming from a “left” and even Marxist perspective. In reality, it expresses the interests of a privileged upper middle class layer who use demands for preferential treatment for their designated identity group—based on ethnicity, sex or sexual preference—to further their own careers.

This plays into the hands of Conservative and right-wing groups, who

portray censorship as the child of the “radical left” while they assume the mantle of defenders of free speech. It mirrors the more general phenomenon where the bankrupt politics of the pseudo-left have allowed far-right and fascist forces to exploit rising social and political discontent.

It is in these circumstances that forces grouped around the Internet publication *Spiked-Online* have come to play a prominent and pernicious role, largely thanks to the extensive publicity secured by their campaign against censorship on campuses.

Earlier this year the publication of *Spiked’s* annual Free Speech University Rankings was widely cited by mainstream media publications to highlight the scale of the censorship and bans taking place. *Spiked* also hosted a public conference on campus free speech and published a book on the subject. At some universities, *Spiked* has established “Speak Easy” groups with the stated aim of providing a platform for all individuals banned by the student unions from speaking. It presents itself as the champion of Enlightenment values that it wields as a “metaphorical missile against misanthropy.”

Through such self-serving and dishonest claims, *Spiked* provides both an apologia and a platform for corporations and right-wing individuals and groups. Indeed “free speech” for *Spiked* overwhelmingly centres on the democratic rights of such layers, often in alliance with Conservative Students societies.

A flavour of this was on display at *Spiked’s* conference in February, “The New Intolerance on Campus.” A session devoted to “No Platform: Is hate speech free speech?” featured Brendan O’Neill, the current editor of *Spiked-Online*, and Douglas Murray, associate editor of the Conservative magazine, *The Spectator*.

O’Neill is also a contributor to *The Spectator*. His mission, he said, is to encourage people to balk at the phrase “Hate Crime” as much as they do at the Orwellian term “Thought Crime”. O’Neill ascribed this legislative “tyranny” to the Soviet Union, which following the Second World War had pushed for international treaties to criminalise hatred and incitement to hatred, he claimed. “[A]mazingly,” the Soviet Union ended up winning—with the 1965 UN convention outlawing ideas based on racial superiority, he said.

Thus, students trying to clamp down on hate speech today are placed in the tradition of a tyrannical and oppressive “left.” This anti-communist rant concluded with O’Neill asserting that censorship had been adopted in Britain and elsewhere because Western society had lost its belief in Enlightenment values and the concepts of the “robust individual” and “moral autonomy.” This in turn was the end result of parenting styles and anti-bullying initiatives at schools that placed self-esteem as the most sacred thing in the world and had produced “poofs” and “wimps.”

There was not one mention of censorship of left-wing ideas, much less the government’s so-called Prevent strategy, which targets Muslims under the banner of combating “radicalisation” and “extremism.” O’Neill boasted that since his days at university he has been fighting for the

freedom of speech for racist people, who he said face the most censorship on campus and in society. At one point, he declared that it was incumbent on those students who believe in free speech to do the very thing that has been banned as a matter of principle—such as playing “sexist” songs through loud speakers.

O’Neill’s claims of the special persecution of racists and xenophobes parallel those of the right wing more generally. Racism is treated as some form of popular expression that the powers-that-be cannot tolerate and the defence of racist speech as the cutting edge of progressive democratic and enlightened politics.

Murray expressed the same thought. With all the Etonian public school arrogance of the British ruling class, he declared that too many people attend universities who should not be there because they “don’t have the mental faculties to cope with it.” They should instead be training for a useful profession like plumbing. It is not hard to work out who Murray believes are the select few fit to engage in critical thought and the free exchange of ideas.

In another session, Education Editor of *Spiked-Online* Joanna Williams utilised a critique of the Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign’s politically bankrupt targeting of Israel academics to provide a platform for pro-Zionist propaganda. Outrage over Israel’s crimes was dismissed as the result of unabashed anti-Jewish bigotry.

Spiked has long acted as a soundboard for right-wing and far-right forces and ideas. In response to the 2011 London riots, Mick Hume, its former editor, blamed the social unrest on “The undermining of a sense of belonging and commitment to a community, and the consequent collapse of the authority of local adult figures.”

He added, “One arch villain in this destruction of community ties has been not gang culture but the culture of welfarism which makes people more dependent on the state than on one another.”

The riots were the result of “the effective collapse of the authority of the state—primarily embodied by the police—in London and other cities,” he said, concluding, “The Met [Metropolitan Police] is clearly happier pursuing thought criminals on the tweets than real ones on the streets.”

Absent from Hume’s pro-state narrative was any mention of the kangaroo courts and punitive punishments meted out to youth, not to mention the police killing that triggered the riots.

Another piece by Neil Davenport, “Ignoring the real lessons of the riots,” put *Spiked*’s anti-working class credentials on full display. There is a “corrosive sense of infantile entitlement among the young,” he wrote, a “sense of therapeutic entitlement, of demanding undue rewards.” The left is responsible for creating an “anti-work” attitude that “encourages a parasitical relationship of some on the labour of others” and “does much to encourage lumpenised passivity and defeatism, factors that can spark destructive anti-social (rather than political) behaviour.”

Youth unemployment is the result of this sense of entitlement, he argued, which means European Union migrants fill the job vacancies that British youth refuse to take. He described then Education Secretary Michael Gove’s decision to abolish the Education Maintenance Allowance—a stipend enabling poor students to study—as “a positive corrective to the childish entitlement that helped inflame the 2011 riots.”

“It is not just about cutting back on welfare,” he said, “but cutting out the culture of incapacity that therapeutic norms have encouraged.”

On this basis, *Spiked* has made clear its sympathy with the anti-immigrant UK Independence Party (UKIP), led by Nigel Farage. Writing on “Nigel Farage and the fury of the elites,” O’Neil presented UKIP and other right-wing populist parties as the result of a groundswell of popular opposition to the “establishment.”

Describing UKIP glowingly as an “assertion of something, of a desire, a sentiment, an idea, however ill-formed it might currently be,” he asserted that anti-immigrant measures emanate from “a profound feeling of cultural insecurity,” where populations have a “strong feeling that they

now live in something like a foreign land”—language that would not be out of place in *Mein Kampf*.

Playing to anti-Islamist sentiment, O’Neil declared that the problem is “the divisive ideology of multiculturalism and the censorious culture of relativism that allowed large parts of Western Europe to become tradition-trouncing, speech-suppressing, alienating places, not immigration itself.”

O’Neill followed this up with an interview with Farage under the headline, “I’m taking on the establishment, and they hate me for it.”

“Listening to Farage, I don’t hear a racist or a fruitcake or a loon,” O’Neill wrote. “Actually, I hear someone who says things that aren’t a million miles away from what Old Labour used to say ... there’s often a leftish feel to Farage’s arguments. That the left in particular hate him reveals, I think, more about how the left has changed, and how it has abandoned some of its core ideals, than it does about any innate hatefulness on the part of Farage.”

Asking rhetorically whether or not to vote UKIP, O’Neill said, “a few more consensus-kickers in British politics, whether they’re of a right-wing or left-wing hue, would be no bad thing, no bad thing at all.”

The fraud of *Spiked*’s supposed championing of free speech is demonstrated by the contrast between its fawning on Farage and its hatred for Assange, Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning and other whistle-blowers, who have been persecuted for their commitment to the truth.

In February 2016, Luke Gittos wrote against the ruling by the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detentions that Assange had been deprived of his rights under international humanitarian law.

The ruling was absurd and another instance of an international team interfering with “our” justice system, Gittos complained, repeating the bogus claim that Assange was fleeing a serious “allegation of rape.”

Whenever *Spiked* comments on Assange, Manning or Snowden there is scarcely any mention of the state crimes they have revealed, merely an assertion that that there is nothing of any importance in these disclosures. They are even accused of fuelling conspiracy theories. In “Let’s call a halt to the worship of whistle-blowers,” O’Neill says the real impact of the “cult of the whistle-blower” is “the further promotion, among polite society as well as impolite, of the idea that evil networks control the unenlightened horde.”

The hostility to Assange et al is bound up with *Spiked*’s support for the “war on terror.” Thus Gittos—its law editor no less—dealt with the revelation that Cameron had ordered the drone killing of two British citizens in Syria in 2015 by insisting that the issue was not whether the government had broken international law by resorting to targeted assassinations but, “Was it the right thing to do?”

“YES! ... ,” he wrote. “Now, the killing of two psychopathic jihadis, a move that almost everyone agrees was a good idea, has been questioned on the basis that it might not accord with the arbitrary standards of international law. ... There is another word for the deference to international law: cowardice. It is a reflection of Western leaders’ inability to make forceful moral and political cases for their actions.”

“We should not balk at the targeted killing of these nutty terrorists merely because someone says it might be illegal,” he continued. “These decisions have to be judged on their moral and political merit. In this case, we should stop the legal handwringing and be glad that we pulled the trigger on two lunatics the world is better off without.”

O’Neill has denounced the “Apologists for Islamist terrorism,” who say that this is the result of Western foreign policy for its “reluctance to face up to the true nature of the problem we face today. Which is that some people who live in our societies, many of whom were born here, have come to loathe those societies so much that they think nothing of obliterating their citizens.”

“We need to deliver two blows to these terrorists: the police blow of tougher investigations, and the social blow of refusing to sacrifice freedom at the altar of fear,” he concluded calling for a “fightback of

civilisation.”

To be continued



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact