Academics and students oppose Cambridge University appointment of eugenicist Noah Carl—Part 2

Thomas Scripps
31 December 2018

Social Darwinism and its political corollaries are not new to university campuses. In the early to mid-1900s, eugenics had a significant following in ruling and academic circles. In 1907, the British Eugenics Education Society was established, followed by the American Eugenics Society in 1921 and the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics in 1927. International Eugenics Conferences were held in London in 1912 and in New York City in 1921 and 1932. Prominent adherents included John Maynard Keynes, H.G. Wells, Bertrand Russell and George Bernard Shaw.

These ideas gained currency for very definite social and political reasons. Eugenics had first been formed as a school of thought in the late 1800s, but found a wider hearing from the turn of the century as world capitalism entered an extended period of collapse. In the course of these tumultuous decades, the question of revolution was posed in country after country.

A number of those thinkers who were tied to a belief in the essential rationality of capitalist economy, however, would not accept that the system was at fault and were pushed into searching for the origin of persistent social problems in "defective" human material. These efforts were also driven by fear of "national degeneration," inflamed by fierce imperialist rivalries and the threat of war.

The mentally ill were often the first to be targeted, subjected to compulsory sterilisation programmes in the United States, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Canada, Belgium and Japan, among other countries. Some eugenicist thinkers went further and suggested their extermination. In certain circles, definitions of "unfit" populations came to include the "residuum," i.e., the most disadvantaged, chronically unemployed, poverty-stricken and sick in society. This thinking combined with ideologies of empire to create a new "scientific" justification for claims of racial and national superiority. The unleashing of fascist counterrevolution brought these ideas to their horrific conclusion in the death camps of Nazi Germany.

After 1945, eugenics was forced into the shadows by popular revulsion. Today, however, as the crisis of capitalism is again reaching a fever pitch, eugenics is being revived amid a general rehabilitation of far-right ideology by the ruling class worldwide. In Britain, the Tory government's Office for Students (OfS) was established this January with the explicit purpose of spearheading this campaign. Its mandate, as described by then-universities minister, Jo Johnson, was to "go even further to ensure that universities promote freedom of speech within the law," allowing the government to sanction institutions it felt to be stifling debate.

The nomination of Toby Young to lead the OfS said everything necessary about the sort of "free speech" it would be promoting. Young's only credentials for the job were a close affiliation with the Conservative Party, a long history of attacking alleged left-wing authoritarianism on campus, and a back catalogue of tweets including, among numerous lewd remarks, references to "vaguely deformed" working-class students and "functionally illiterate troglodyte(s)."

In view of Noah Carl's appointment at Cambridge, it is especially significant that Young had also previously written on "progressive eugenics" and—it emerged just a few days after the announcement of his OfS appointment—had attended the London Conference on

© World Socialist Web Site

Intelligence.

Young was forced to resign after a massive popular outcry, but not before senior government figures, including then Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, weighed in with a major defence of their appointee. Young was selected because of his far-right views and was only let go when his position became untenable.

His departure did not change the agenda of the OfS one jot. It has, along with former universities minister Sam Gyimah, repeatedly declared the need to open up universities to "debate," by which they mean to the Right. Gyimah has said he intends to "clarify the rules and regulations around speakers and events to prevent bureaucrats or wreckers on campus from exploiting gaps for their own ends."

OfS Chairman Sir Michael Barber has expressed the need for "challenging or unpopular" speech. He will have powers to shame or fine institutions which the OfS deems has interfered with these principles. The green light has been given for universities and student societies to invite any reactionary they like onto campus—with the government standing ready to denounce students who protest and expose their ideas.

Meanwhile, Young is playing the same role he would have played as head of the OfS from his position in the press. Responding to the petition against Carl, Young wrote an article in the *Spectator* denouncing "the scandalous shaming of Noah Carl" by "a mob of grievance studies professors." He has followed this up with another piece, "Will Noah Carl get a fair hearing?" which calls for Chris Skidmore, the current universities minister, "to stand up for intellectual freedom and free speech."

Spiked magazine, the right-wing libertarian journal which has long been at the forefront of the "free speech" crusade at universities, and always in support of right-wing figures, published a dishonest defence of Carl, "The rise of academic mobbing," by Joanna Williams. While claiming Carl's views needed to be "rigorously challenged," Williams suggested that, "Instead of piling on a young academic and calling for him to lose his job, the mob would be better off spending their time taking up the views they find so objectionable."

Attempts to portray Carl as a junior researcher being "mobbed" and silenced by more senior academics are bogus. The whistle was blown on his appointment by over 200 concerned students at St Edmund's College Cambridge, where Carl is now based. They wrote an open letter to the college fellowship, describing his research as "methodologically flawed" and "openly racist" and his appointment as "indefensible."

Young and *Spiked* are playing to a right-wing trope well established in the press over the past few years. Melanie Phillips, writing in the *Times*, has wailed before that "Universities have caved in to [the] dogma and thuggery" of "left-wing bullies and craven authorities."

In June this year she wrote a *Times* opinion piece headlined, "Left-wing hate mobs can't stand free speech" after students at Stanford University demanded that a speaking invitation to Charles Murray, author of *The Bell Curve*, a right-wing book mirroring the views of eugenics, be rescinded. The *Daily Mail* 's Stephen Glover has accused universities of producing a "left-wing fifth column" while the *Telegraph* has lamented a 2017 report by the Adam Smith Institute claiming eight in 10 academics in Britain to be left-wing.

Carl has written papers in a similar vein, such as "How Stifling debate around race, genes and IQ can do harm," and "The left-liberal skew of Western media."

The most reactionary forces feel increasingly emboldened to advance their agendas on campus. Only last month, Steven Bannon was invited to speak unchallenged at the Oxford Union.

A political response must be organised.

The WSWS and International Youth and Students for Social Equality support the campaign against Carl's appointment. His promotion by Cambridge University is part of a broader right-wing offensive rooted, as in the past, in an extreme crisis of capitalist society. Bourgeois politics demands an "intellectual" justification for rising social inequality at home and predatory imperialist looting abroad. This must be countered with a programme of socialist revolution, the only basis for the defence of genuine free speech and academic discourse.

Concluded

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site