

The Kathleen Stock affair: Identity politics versus socialist politics and democratic rights

Thomas Scripps
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Former University of Sussex Professor Kathleen Stock has become the British figurehead of the newly founded University of Austin (Texas, US) which advances itself as an answer to “campus illiberalism” committed to the defence of free and challenging speech.

Introducing the institution in a *Bloomberg* article, founding member Niall Ferguson, a right-wing historian, denounced “a sustained campaign to impose ideological conformity in the name of diversity”, including the routine deployment of terms such as “Trigger warnings”, “Safe spaces”, “Checked privileges” and “Microaggressions”, leading to “career-ending ‘cancelations’ and speaker disinvitations” and “a pervasive climate of anxiety and self-censorship.”

He placed the blame for campus “Totalitarianism Lite” on “the leftward march of the professoriate”, “left-leaning” administrators and “wokeism”.

How has the political right been able to make this increasingly common pitch, presenting itself as the last bastion of democratic thought and academic rigour against what it falsely designates as “the left”?

Stock’s history provides a textbook example. Until recently a professor of philosophy at the University of Sussex in the UK, she resigned on October 28 citing a “medieval experience” of ostracism and intimidation on campus.

Her exit, to take up her new and lucrative post followed a vicious and ongoing conflict within feminist circles between a “gender-critical” faction, who broadly oppose the idea that a transgender person’s self-identification as a woman overrides the social and legal implications of their biological sex, and their opponents, who denounce the holders of such views as Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists, or “Terfs”. The feud is one expression of the toxic culture created on campus by the affluent middle class through its reframing of politics entirely in terms of the struggle of gender, racial and sexual “identity” groups. Its implications are profoundly anti-democratic and politically disorienting.

Stock was the target of protests by a small group of students at her university who denounced her for espousing “a bastardised version of ‘radical feminism’ that excludes and endangers trans people”, being “dangerous to trans people”, making “trans students unsafe”, and showing a “distaste for [their] existence”.

A statement issued by the protestors demanded the university sack her since she was being allowed to “profit from transphobia”. They continued, “The university is actively enabling and encouraging her transphobia by not firing her,” concluding, “Our demand is simple: fire Kathleen Stock. Until then, you’ll see us around.”

Identity politics and democratic rights

One need not support any of Stock’s views to identify her hounding and denunciation as a reactionary affair. She is not consciously practising

pseudo-science or using her platform to call for and organise the oppression of others. Her arguments, moreover, have support among significant sections of the population in no way affiliated with the political right and who are opposed to any discrimination against transgender people.

The protest against her was not a popular, progressive struggle but one example of many on campus of a campaign to impose a particular ideological orthodoxy, by censure, waged by a small number of students and academics: falsely presenting intellectual criticism as a mortal threat, organising witch-hunts, and “no platforming” opponents.

Numerous other cases can be cited, including of Oxford academic Selina Todd, Open University Professor Jo Phoenix, prominent feminists Germaine Greer and Julie Bindel, and gay rights campaigner Peter Tatchell.

These episodes have a devastating anti-democratic effect, which extends far beyond the narrow confines of the transgender argument—setting a precedent for the silencing of anyone on the say-so of largely self-appointed gatekeepers.

This danger was highlighted in 2012 when the National Union of Students (NUS) no platformed George Galloway over his defence of the heroic journalist and WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who was the subject of a sexual assault smear campaign. Galloway was accused of being a “rape denier”.

In 2016, Sheffield Students’ Union tried to no-platform Assange himself, due to appear virtually, citing its “zero tolerance” approach to sexual assault and commitment to creating a “safe space” on campus.

To the extent that these campaigns portray themselves as left-wing, they sow political confusion about what genuinely constitutes socialist politics and strengthen the right.

There is nothing remotely “left” about any of these incidents. “No platforming” policies, first adopted by student unions in the 1970s, were always based on a rejection of class politics, instead appealing to the authorities, and ultimately the state, to enforce proscriptions. The practice nevertheless won popular sympathy in the 1970s and 80s through its focus on opposing the far right, but always carried the risk of creating mechanisms that would be turned against the left.

Today such campaigns, with a few exceptions, have become weapons in the hands of a rarefied layer of the petty-bourgeoisie for whom politics consists of staking the claim of their own personal “identity” for a place in the sun within the upper echelons of academia, the state apparatus, cultural institutions and corporate management, by levelling accusations of “privilege” and/or bigotry against their competitors.

This divisive politics, rooted in postmodern philosophy, rejects the central Enlightenment idea of universal truth and equality attainable through the upholding and extension of universal democratic and social rights. It is deeply hostile to the struggle for those rights which, as Karl Marx identified, is fundamentally a class struggle—and in the imperialist epoch, as Leon Trotsky identified, the struggle of the working class for

socialism.

Preparing the way for the right

After dominating life on campus for years, identity politics has produced two results: the machinery for anti-democratic crackdowns which can now be taken over by the government and the right, and a growing resentment against what calls itself “progressive” politics that greases the right’s wheels.

Conservative universities minister Michelle Donelan commented after Stock’s resignation, “This incident demonstrates only too clearly why this Government is pressing ahead with legislation to promote and defend free speech on campuses.” The campaign to force Stock’s resignation has also created the pretext for the Office for Students (OfS) to launch an investigation into the University of Sussex.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained, the OfS and the “Free Speech” bill have nothing to do with defending democratic rights. They are tools for government intervention on campus to boost right-wing and far-right voices and suppress left-wing opposition.

Both are connected with a longstanding campaign in right-wing circles to exploit widespread hostility to the suffocating climate on campus for their own ends. Criticisms of identity politics feuds are used to attack popular protests against pseudo-scientists like Noah Carl, and fascists like Steve Bannon and Marine Le Pen, and to insist that right-wing, nationalist, pro-imperialist, pro-war perspectives are underrepresented, suppressed, and deserve special support.

The student protests against Carl and Le Pen are the exceptions to the generally reactionary rule of campus politics, which prove its noxious effect. There are clear occasions when it is necessary to organise action, mobilising broad support, against the far-right’s legitimisation through the universities and in defence of the democratic rights threatened by their filthy ideologies. But this fight is undermined by the regular association of student protests with a wholly anti-democratic politics.

The WSWS commented this February, in response to the government’s plan to appoint a university “free speech champion”: “The de facto drawing of a line between someone like Tatchell and members of the far-right is hysterical nonsense and has repulsed large sections of the population, opening the door to government intervention on the campuses, which will be used to invite in the real fascist right.”

Stock’s resignation is fuel on the fire. She has now been granted martyr status, with sympathy extending beyond the political right, with which to promote the University of Austin venture. She has already lent her hand to the Conservative government’s Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill, giving evidence in its support earlier this year.

At the same time, the government uses the language and methods pioneered by identity politics to suppress its opponents. This October, Professor David Miller was sacked by the University of Bristol after a sustained campaign alleging his anti-Zionist views were “endangering the personal safety of Jewish students”. The government supported this campaign. Conservative MP Robert Halfon, who leads the education select committee, berated the University of Bristol for failing to create a “safe space for Jews”.

The Conservatives, and all the main parties, are also pressuring universities to adopt the anti-democratic International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s definition of anti-Semitism, which equates criticism of Israel with hatred against Jews.

The role of the trade unions, the Labour Party and the pseudo-left

The right-wing’s rotten appeal can only gain ground in the absence of a genuine left-wing opposition to identity politics. The trade unions, the Labour Party and pseudo-left organisations like the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) have all embraced these ideas in opposition to class, that is, genuinely socialist, politics.

Stock’s own union, the University and College Union (UCU), responded to the campaign against her by issuing a statement calling on management “to take a clear and strong stance against transphobia at Sussex.” While stating pro-forma its opposition to “the call for any worker to be summarily sacked”, it called for “an urgent investigation into the ways institutional transphobia operates at our university,” i.e., an investigation targeting Stock. This statement of the UCU’s Sussex branch was then supported by the national organisation.

Labour’s Shadow Equalities Minister Taiwo Owatemi described the UCU statement as “strong and principled” and declared herself “concerned” by Stock’s positions.

Cynically trying to sidestep the censorious consequences of its own politics, the SWP stated “calls for sacking don’t fit here and should be directed against fascists and organised racists” but sent its solidarity to the student protests demanding Stock’s sacking! It made no attempt to explain the political issues involved, simply branding any opponent of the campaign against Stock “transphobic” and aligned with the right.

The SWP also likely played a significant part in the actions of the UCU. Its six members on the union’s national executive committee issued a statement, “Stand with trans students and workers at Sussex university”, along with SWP members in the leadership of the National Education Union, Unison and the Public and Commercial Services Union.

Socialism and democratic rights

Through the actions of the SWP and other pseudo-left organisations, advancing identity and other forms of petty-bourgeois politics, a toxic climate has been created on university campuses. The ultimate victims will not be those like Stock, whose CV for the University of Austin was effectively written by the campaign against her, but left-wing students and academics.

A cornerstone of socialist politics is a genuine defence of free speech and academic freedom, which are vital weapons in the struggle against the ruling class, ignorance and oppression. Identity politics threatens these rights directly with its anti-democratic practices, and indirectly by handing the mantle of defending democratic principles to the conservative right.

The issue for socialists is not to politically solidarise themselves with either Stock or her opponents—or whoever the parties are in tomorrow’s feud—but to take up a defence of democratic rights in the interests of the working class, the vast majority of the population and the sole revolutionary force on the planet.

There is no shortage of fiercely contested discussions to be had, from the murderous pandemic policy of “herd immunity” and worsening social inequality in all its forms, to the threat of war, dictatorship and fascism—all of which will deeply upset somebody.

Addressing these questions means resolutely defending the right to free debate and research against both the identity politicians and the government and its right-wing allies, whose professed democratic ideals will evaporate the moment mass social questions begin to be seriously discussed. This requires the building of a genuine Marxist movement in the universities. It means the expansion of the International Youth and

Students for Social Equality (YSSE), which has exposed the left-wing pretensions of identity politics and democratic pretensions of the right, while consistently opposing government intervention on campus.



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