

The Prions of Idiocy



by Theodore Dalrymple

One of the very few valuable institutions created in Britain in the last half-century or so was the Open University. This allowed people who had cut short their education, for whatever reason, to attain a university degree over four or five years by correspondence course and a few weeks' attendance every year at face-to-face teaching by academic staff as near as possible to their homes.

The standard was extremely high: higher, indeed, than in many other universities. The requirements were rigorous and demanded that students devote almost all their spare time to study. The Open University for long resisted the decline in academic standards elsewhere and the fashionable nonsense that

did so much to bring it about. But now the Open University has capitulated to the zeitgeist: It has issued trigger warnings to students of its English literature course, including about such works as "Hamlet."

Who could be "triggered" by "Hamlet?" I suppose habitual or temperamental ditherers might be offended or distressed by the mirror held up by the play to their foible. Perhaps fops also would not like the ludicrous character of Osrice, or gravediggers would be offended by the jocularity of the gravediggers in the fifth act, a depiction harmful to their dignity and self-esteem. (Recently, I overheard some gravediggers in a large cemetery in France: They were indeed jocular, but there's no commentary or portrayal more wounding than that which is accurate.)

Why has the Open University, which for so long resisted fashionable absurdity, collapsed in this way into a spineless heap?

Ideologists are inherently totalitarian, especially when a still small voice tells them that their opinions are vulnerable to criticism. Shrillness then becomes the mental white noise with which they drown out their own doubts. They can't allow any corner of the world to escape their attention. Uniformity will both demonstrate their correctness and, if it lasts long enough, make criticism unthinkable. Just as the white noise of shrillness once did, so will perpetual silence eventually allay their doubts.

Surrender is wrought by cowardice and, slightly less dishonorably, by boredom. What intelligent person wants to spend his life disputing evident absurdity? Behind the concept of trigger warnings, of course, is a whole hinterland of psychological and sociological rubbish, which it would be tedious to have to clear away. I think in this context of "The Walrus and the Carpenter," in "Through the Looking-Glass":

“The Walrus and the Carpenter
Were walking close at hand.
They wept like anything to see
Such quantities of sand:
‘If only this were cleared away,’
They said, ‘it *would* be grand.’

“‘If seven maids with seven mops
Swept it for half a year,
Do you suppose,’ the Walrus said,
‘That they could get it clear?’
‘I doubt it,’ said the Carpenter,
And shed a bitter tear.”

There are one of two possible responses (other than outright opposition) to the Augean stable of ideological folly.

The easiest thing to do in both cases is to give in to the monomaniacs; but the first response is to go into what Germans in the time of Hitler called “inner emigration,” that is to say, to try to find a niche in which to get on with one’s life undisturbed by the surrounding idiocy and viciousness, for example by laying low and taking up an interest that flies below the ideological radar.

This method can’t be a hundred percent successful, because the ideological monomaniacs demand not merely the absence of dissent from their ideology, but also some proof of positive adherence to it: for example, by signing up to policies on equality, inclusion, and diversity.

By signing up to such self-contradictory nonsense, of course, the person who seeks inner emigration feels soiled; he has undermined his own probity. But at least, or so he hopes, he will then be free of interference. This hope is usually dashed because, to quote another poem:

“... that is called paying the Dane-geld;
But we’ve proved it again and again,

That if once you have paid him the Dane-geld
You never get rid of the Dane.”

In other words, the ideologist always comes back for more self-abasement: Today it's transgenderism, tomorrow it will be—what? The glories of incest, the social necessity and benefit of infanticide? It doesn't matter: The aim is not improvement, it's the exertion of power, for one of the cultural or psychological characteristics of the age, at least among the educated, is the belief that, in human relations, everything is a matter of power and therefore that only power counts or is to be trusted.

Another way of dealing with the ideologists is to obey the old slogan that if you can't beat them, join them. People therefore join up to what is, in effect, a new secular religion, and since most people who do so are not out-and-out villains or opportunists, they have to persuade themselves that they actually *do* believe the tenets of the new religion; and, as is often the way with converts, they become fanatics, not merely to persuade themselves, but to expunge their wicked past in which they were not believers and were quite possibly mockers.

Management is a little like a religion also. I have noticed the terrible effect that joining management has on professional people who previously had always seemed to me good and sensible. Within weeks of being absorbed into management, though they may well have sworn that they would never be co-opted into its ways, they start to speak a strange hieratic language and claim to believe passionately in what they're doing, for example sacking people or closing down a department. They are like the Fore people of New Guinea, who used to eat their deceased relatives' brains, thereby becoming infected with a molecule called a prion that led to dementia and death, passing through a phase of fatuous laughter.

The prions of idiocy seem to have infected universities above

all. This is a serious matter because the university tower is not so much ivory as a water tower that exerts pressure on the whole water system. University idiocy soon becomes political and social idiocy, of which only a certain amount can be withstood without severe damage and even total collapse.

First published in the [*Epoch Times*](#).