

Ann Coulter and Blowhard Politics

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Canadian Universities and the War on Thought

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Wednesday 31 March 2010

This has been a tough week for Canadian universities. On the one hand, a small but daring group of professors at the University of Regina called for a public forum on the war in Afghanistan and on the militarization of Canadian culture, especially the culture of higher education. Unless and until such a forum took place, they argued, the university should do its very best to stand for peace. Two practical strategies were offered: work toward ensuring broader access to education and reject forms of student funding tied specifically to the celebration of the war dead as "heroes."⁽¹⁾ No one called for the overthrow of the university administration, much less a mass march on Ottawa. No, this was an open invitation to rational debate and meaningful political dissent that was nevertheless ferociously vilified in the media and in the blogosphere, well in excess of the relatively modest suggestions that were being made. On the other hand, we witnessed the debacle around the canceled visit of the ultra-conservative American infotainment star, Ann Coulter, at the University of Ottawa. Organizers of the event - one of several nationwide - prevented Coulter from speaking on campus in the face of unspecified security concerns and mounting student protest. What the Coulter camp found especially objectionable was a welcoming letter from the university's Vice President Academic and Provost Francois Houle, who did nothing but remind Coulter that "promoting hatred against any identifiable group" was not going to fly on a Canadian campus, or, for that matter, anywhere in Canada. What I want to suggest is that the two university events are in fact quite closely related, because each brings out the degree to which the higher education today is facing an assault on reason.



If we are to believe the dominant media in Canada, the central question concerning the firestorm over both Coulter's racist remarks to a Muslim student and her eventual refusal to speak at the University of Ottawa is about censorship. But there is a much larger issue in play here over whether Canadian universities can indeed meet their primary social responsibility - and that is to ensure that a much more wide-ranging and critically robust debate about whether the university can model and embody thoughtfulness, dissent and informed dialogue. Instead of having that kind of debate, we got the mutual denunciations and the media frenzy swirling around Coulter's stagily aborted visit. All the mostly uninformed talk about "free speech" in this instance (I say "uninformed" because so many journalists wrongly assume that Canada swears unswerving allegiance to the principle of "First Amendment rights," conveniently forgetting that the Canadian legal constitutional framework is fundamentally different from the American one, precisely around the relationship between equality rights and free speech) masks the degree to which Canadian universities have already effectively censored themselves about a number of issues of far greater importance to our shared political future - the prosecution of the war in Afghanistan and the impoverishment of Canadian political culture that shores that war up being the most egregious case in point. The professors at the University of Regina, to their huge credit, recognize this fact and are attempting to speak truth to it. Spectators of the scrum around the University of Ottawa, however, worried themselves silly about what Coulter might or might not be permitted to say, while avoiding the altogether far more consequential obligation: creating a space where a serious and agonized discussion about the war and about similarly significant matters could and should take place. The war is run out of the nation's capital, after all, so you'd hope and expect that the capital city's university would have better things to talk about than Coulter's show of not showing.

Such a discussion would begin with a frank analysis of the Canadian university's complicity in evading the matter of questioning the war and of the animating role that it should by rights play in promoting public education about the meanings and practices of democracy in a state of war. But as I said, in place of that good work and as a way of fleeing from the responsibilities of conducting that good work, we find ourselves mesmerized by the minoritizing spectacle of Coulter and the putative "violation" of her rights. Issues of urgent public importance, like the lives and resources lost forever to the unwinnable war in Afghanistan, are handily trumped by all the hand wringing over the fate of Coulter's racial fantasies. Coulter pitches these fantasies as her privately held beliefs and, thus, supposedly without any public consequences for real human beings. They are imagined to spring fully formed from her overheated brain, rather delivered out of a larger history of fear-mongering, race-baiting and paranoia about others and otherness. But the students and the provost at the University of Ottawa know better, committed as they are to a democratic polity premised on historical analysis, logical argumentation

and the use of evidence - i.e., to fostering the minimal conditions of rational thought and ethical consideration that professors regularly expect in their first-year students. Of course, the media eats up the story of Coulter's rights being crushed, hungry to put the whole spectacle into the service of further marginalizing the university's all-important role in linking an educated citizenry to a more just and more expansive public life. Capacious discussions about the present and future of public intellectuals - students and professors - in a democratic polity get overwritten by pundits who bleat about our universities becoming "finishing schools in political correctness" (as Ian Hunter complained in the *Globe & Mail*(2), self-described as "Canada's leading newspaper"). If the universities are as ineffectual and irrelevant to civic existence as Hunter claims, one wonders why they are under such sustained attack. In any case, while we worry about - and are earnestly instructed to worry about - Coulter's free speech rights, we entirely miss discussing the censoring and delegitimizing functions of the conservative government's foreign policy - for example, its cynical indifference to the recent Supreme Court ruling about the torture and incarceration of the child soldier, Omar Khadr, or its largely successful attempt to isolate and demonize Richard Colvin, the diplomat who has tried to cast a critical light on the unjust treatment of Afghan detainees. The same media outlet that condemns the university for "silencing" Coulter simultaneously denounces academics at the University of Regina for criticizing the war in Afghanistan and for trying to ensure that the university grows into a recognized public space that dissents from the militarization of Canadian society and politics. Yet that rare but significant attempt to bring Canadians into political consciousness about the question of the war, that relatively minor act of resistance to the bellicose status quo, is characterized by the *Globe & Mail*'s editors as an example of "the pervasive and doctrinaire leftist analysis of the mission in Afghanistan."(3)

"Pervasive"? I wish! What is in fact pervasive is the media's anxiously overgoing defense of Coulter and its denunciation of the most modest signs of dissent in the intellectual public sphere. But here's the point that I really want to make: What is more truly pervasive is the reduction of politics today to the simple matter of ensuring that blowhards can utter stupid things, as if Canadians had entirely discharged their political responsibilities by making sure that the Coulter's of the world have their say and, as important, are seen to have had their say at or around the university. But, of course, what we need is a much more robust, critical, heterogeneous and exploratory idea of universities and of democratic politics, a much thicker notion of political participation and political action than merely congratulating ourselves for "protecting" hateful speech and castigating the universities for somehow failing to do the same. That work to come begins with a frank analysis of the larger contexts, including the militarized contexts, that shape what gets said and done in this country - and, thus, what is left unsaid and prevented from happening. I think that it is telling that the University of Regina professors that attempted to shoulder the burden of such work were instantly dismissed as "doctrinaire," when, of course, defending Coulter as an aggrieved "victim" is the much more obvious example of dogmatic thinking - and the one getting the most attention. In Canadian universities, it seems that all "doctrinaire" views are equal, but some are much more equal than others.

But what is more troublesomely doctrinaire, and, thus, dangerous to critical thinking, is being told that a democracy demonstrates its strengths by narrowing politics to a matter of ensuring that Coulter can say the hateful and irrational things that she does. What is doctrinaire is getting behind and being told to get behind - at the risk of being branded as either unpatriotic or naively censorious - an utterly impoverished idea of democratic life in which politics is reduced to the clash of privately held interests and, thus, to a barren arena in which the invisible hand of the marketplace ensures that the loudest, most obnoxious and best funded claim survives. By mutating political life into the mere competition of personal beliefs, the basic expectations of evidence-based argumentation and rational dissent find themselves hurled out the window. Why? To raise such expectations, so basic to university teaching and research, is now said to trample on someone's putative "rights" to free speech. The broader labor of forming social solidarities in earnest of peace doesn't even occur to those pundits who are focussed on defending the dissolution of society into individual expressions of ruthlessness and carelessness.

Thankfully, to the worried surprise and histrionic dismay of the dominant media in Canada, the university shows hopeful signs of refusing to go down that neoliberal path without a struggle. What is doctrinaire at this moment is aggressively dispensing with a broader understanding of politics that would include a serious-minded discussion of our slavish adherence to what McMaster University's Henry A. Giroux calls a "culture of cruelty"(4) - our strange and unexamined investment in shoring up a savage and atomized social landscape where the militarization of the country, which includes the transformation of the military mission in Afghanistan into a dauntless adventure and a "good war" - a war that is never to be gainsaid and especially not by the university - feeds into the desire to protect Coulter's fantasies about the eradication of the Muslim world. Thoughtlessly affirming a "culture of cruelty" amounts to the obliteration of a genuinely political life. What remains is a desolate and desolating place where military violence is treated as "heroic," and where protecting forms of palpable discursive violence - of the kind that has made Coulter fabulously wealthy - is described as a form of "bravery" in the face of university "cowardice." Where is there a sustained discussion about the public good and about our mutual responsibilities in working toward a more democratic and just future? The professors at the University of Regina have made a good start, as have the students at the University of Ottawa. Let's be clear: those students are not opposed to free speech. In wartime conditions, they are opposed to Coulter's proud indifference to the democratic and rational principles of education, her hyperbolic evasion of the capacity to judge and think and her belief that the humiliation of others constitutes a political act rather than its sorrowful liquidation. What the students oppose is being held hostage to the spectacle of carnival overtaking a rational debate vital to civic life and a more peaceful tomorrow. What they speak freely against is the war on thought.

Notes:

1. The University of Regina professors "Open Letter to President Vianne Timmons" has been widely circulated in Canada. See, for example, "New Socialist: Ideas for Radical Change," <http://www.newsocialist.org/index.php?id=2022>.
2. Ian Hunter, "Political Correctness: Universities are bastions of free speech? Not in Canada," *Globe & Mail* (March 25, 2010), p. A17.

3. "Anti-Scholarship Scholars," *Globe & Mail* (March 27, 2010), p. A22.

4. See, for example, Henry Giroux, "Living in a Culture of Cruelty," *Truthout*, 2 September 2009.

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Sources: <http://www.truthout.org/ann-coulter-and-blowhard-politics-canadian-universities-and-war-thought58167>

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