

OPINION
GUEST ESSAY

Harvard Derangement Syndrome

By Steven Pinker

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In my 22 years as a Harvard professor, I have not been afraid to bite the hand that feeds me. My 2014 essay “The Trouble With Harvard” called for a transparent, meritocratic admissions policy to replace the current “eye-of-newt-wing-of-bat mysticism” which “conceals unknown mischief.” My 2023 “five-point plan to save Harvard from itself” urged the university to commit itself to free speech, institutional neutrality, nonviolence, viewpoint diversity and disempowering D.E.I. Last fall, on the anniversary of Oct. 7, 2023, I explained “how I wish Harvard taught students to talk about Israel,” calling on the university to teach our students to grapple with moral and historical complexity. Two years ago I co-founded the Council on Academic Freedom at Harvard, which has since regularly challenged university policies and pressed for changes.

So I’m hardly an apologist for my employer when I say that the invective now being aimed at Harvard has become unhinged. According to its critics, Harvard is a “national disgrace,” a “woke madrasa,” a “Maoist indoctrination camp,” a “ship of fools,” a “bastion of rampant anti-Jewish hatred and harassment,” a “cesspool of extremist riots” and an “Islamist outpost” in which the “dominant view on campus” is “destroy the Jews, and you’ve destroyed the root of Western civilization.”

And that’s before we get to President Trump’s opinion that Harvard is “an Anti-Semitic, Far Left Institution,” a “Liberal mess” and a “threat to Democracy,” which has been “hiring almost all woke, Radical Left, idiots and ‘birdbrains’ who are only capable of teaching FAILURE to students and so-called future leaders.”

This is not just trash talk. On top of its savage slashing of research funding across the board, the Trump administration has singled out Harvard to receive no federal grants at all. Not satisfied with these punishments, the administration just moved to stop Harvard from enrolling foreign students and has threatened to multiply the tax on its endowment as much as fifteenfold, as well as to remove its tax-free nonprofit status.

Call it Harvard Derangement Syndrome. As the country's oldest, richest and most famous university, Harvard has always attracted outsize attention. In the public imagination the university is both the epitome of higher learning and a natural magnet for grievances against elites.

Psychologists have identified a symptom called "splitting," a form of black-and-white thinking in which patients cannot conceive of a person in their lives other than as either an exalted angel or an odious evildoer. They generally treat it with dialectical behavior therapy, advising something like: Most people are a mix of strengths and flaws. Seeing them as all bad might not help in the long run. It's uncomfortable when others disappoint us. How could you make space for the discomfort without letting it define your whole view of them?

The nation desperately needs this sense of proportionality in dealing with its educational and cultural institutions. Harvard, as I am among the first to point out, has serious ailments. The sense that something is not well with the university is widespread, and it's led to sympathy, even schadenfreude, with Mr. Trump's all-out assault. But Harvard is an intricate system that developed over centuries and constantly has to grapple with competing and unexpected challenges. The appropriate treatment (as with other imperfect institutions) is to diagnose which parts need which remedies, not to cut its carotid and watch it bleed out.



The Harvard University campus in the early 1930s. William M. Rittase

How did Harvard become such a tempting target? Some of the ire is unavoidable, a consequence of its very nature.

Harvard is huge: It has 25,000 students taught by 2,400 faculty members, spread out over 13 schools (including business and dentistry). Inevitably, these multitudes will include some eccentrics and troublemakers, and today their antics can go viral. People are vulnerable to the availability bias, in which a memorable anecdote lodges in their brains and inflates their subjective estimate of its prevalence. One loudmouth lefty becomes a Maoist indoctrination camp.

Also, universities are committed to free speech, which includes speech we don't like. A corporation can fire an outspoken employee; a university can't, or shouldn't.

Harvard, too, is not a monastic order but part of a global network. Most of our graduate students and faculty members were trained elsewhere and go to the same conferences and read the same publications as everyone else in academia. Despite Harvard's conceit of specialness, just about everything that happens here may be found at other research-intensive universities.

Finally, our students are not blank slates which we can inscribe at will. Young people are shaped by peers more than most people realize. Students are shaped by the peer cultures in their high schools, at Harvard and (especially with social media) in the world. In many cases, students' politics are no more attributable to indoctrination by professors than are their green hair and pierced septums.

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Yet some of the enmity against Harvard has been earned. My colleagues and I have worried for years about the erosion of academic freedom here, exemplified by some notorious persecutions. In 2021 the biologist Carole Hooven was demonized and ostracized, effectively driving her out of Harvard, for explaining in an interview how biology defines male and female. Her cancellation was the last straw that led us to create the academic freedom council, but it was neither the first nor the last.

The epidemiologist Tyler VanderWeele was forced to grovel in "restorative justice" sessions when someone discovered that he had co-signed an amicus brief in the 2015 Supreme Court case arguing against same-sex marriage. A class by the bioengineer Kit Parker on evaluating crime prevention programs was quashed after students found it "disturbing." The legal scholar Ronald Sullivan was dismissed as faculty dean of a residential house when his legal representation of Harvey Weinstein made students feel

“unsafe.” The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression tallies such incidents, and in the past two years ranked Harvard last in free speech among some 250 surveyed colleges and universities.

These cancellations are not just injustices against individuals. Honest scholarly inquiry is difficult if researchers constantly have to watch their backs lest a professional remark expose them to character assassination, or if a conservative opinion is treated as a crime. In the Sullivan case, the university abdicated its responsibility to educate mature citizens by indulging its students’ emotions rather than teaching them about the Sixth Amendment and the difference between mob justice and the rule of law.

But a woke madrasa? This is black-and-white splitting, in need of behavior therapy. Simply enumerating cancellations, especially at a large and conspicuous institution like Harvard, can overshadow the vastly greater number of times that heterodox opinions are voiced without anyone making a fuss. As troubled as I am by assaults on academic freedom at Harvard, the last-place finish does not pass the smell test.

I’ll start with myself. During my decades at the university I’ve taught many controversial ideas, including the reality of sex differences, the heritability of intelligence and the evolutionary roots of violence (while inviting my students to disagree, as long as they provide reasons). I claim no courage: The result has been zero protests, several university honors and warm relations with every chair, dean and president.

Most of my colleagues, too, follow the data and report what their findings indicate or show, however politically incorrect. A few examples: Race has some biological reality. Marriage reduces crime. So does hot-spot policing. Racism has been in decline. Phonics is essential to reading instruction. Trigger warnings can do more harm than good. Africans were active in the slave trade. Educational attainment is partly in the genes. Cracking down on drugs has benefits, and legalizing them has harms. Markets can make people fairer and more generous. For all the headlines, day-to-day life at Harvard consists of publishing ideas without fear or favor.

Another area in which Harvard’s shortcomings are genuine, but seeing it as all bad does not help in the long run, is viewpoint diversity. According to a 2023 survey in The Harvard Crimson, 45 percent of members of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences identified their politics as “liberal,” 32 percent as “very liberal,” 20 percent as “moderate” and only 3 percent as “conservative” or “very conservative.” (The survey did not include the option “woke Radical Left idiot birdbrain.”) FIRE’s estimate of conservative faculty members is slightly higher, at 6 percent.

A university need not be a representative democracy, but too little political diversity can compromise its mission. In 2015 a team of social scientists showed how a liberal monoculture had steered their field into scientific errors, such as prematurely concluding

that liberals are less prejudiced than conservatives because they had tested for prejudice against African Americans and Muslims but not against evangelicals.

A poll of my colleagues on the academic freedom council turned up many examples in which they felt political narrowness had skewed research in their specialties. In climate policy, it led to a focus on demonizing fossil fuel companies rather than acknowledging the universal desire for abundant energy; in pediatrics, taking all adolescents' reported gender dysphoria at face value; in public health, advocating maximalist government interventions rather than cost-benefit analyses; in history, emphasizing the harms of colonialism but not of communism or Islamism; in social science, attributing all group disparities to racism but never to culture; and in women's studies, permitting the study of sexism and stereotypes but not sexual selection, sexology or hormones (not coincidentally, Hooven's specialty).

Though Harvard indisputably would profit from more political and intellectual diversity, it is still far from a "radical left institution." If The Crimson survey is any guide, a sizable majority of faculty across Harvard locate themselves to the right of "very liberal," and they include dozens of prominent conservatives, like the legal scholar Adrian Vermeule and the economist Greg Mankiw. For years the most popular undergraduate courses have been the introduction to mainstream economics taught by a succession of conservatives and neoliberals, and the resolutely apolitical introductions to probability, computer science and life sciences.

Of course, Harvard also has plenty of offerings like Queer Ethnography and Decolonizing the Gaze, but they tend to be boutique courses with small enrollments. One of my students has developed an artificial-intelligence-based "Woke-o-Meter" that assesses course descriptions for Marxist, postmodernist and critical social justice themes (signaled by terms like "heteronormativity," "intersectionality," "systemic racism," "late-stage capitalism" and "deconstruction"). He estimates that they make up at most 3 percent of the 5,000 courses in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences' 2025-26 course catalog and 6 percent of its larger General Education courses (though about a third of these had a discernible leftward tilt). More typical are offerings like Cellular Basis of Neuronal Function, Beginning German (Intensive) and The Fall of the Roman Empire.

And if Harvard is teaching its students to "despise the free-market system," we're not doing a very good job. The most popular undergraduate concentrations are economics and computer science, and half of our graduates march from their commencement ceremony straight into jobs in finance, consulting and technology.

How to achieve an optimal diversity of viewpoints in a university is a difficult problem and an obsession of our council. Of course, not every viewpoint should be represented. The universe of ideas is infinite, and many of them are not worthy of serious attention, such as astrology, flat earthism, and Holocaust denial. The demand of the Trump administration to audit Harvard's programs for diversity and jawbone a "critical mass" of

government-approved contrarians into the noncompliant ones would be poisonous both to the university and to democracy. The biology department could be forced to hire creationists, the medical school vaccine skeptics and the history department denialists of the 2020 election. Harvard had no choice but to reject the ultimatum, becoming an unlikely folk hero in the process.

Still, universities cannot continue to ignore the problem. Though obsessed with implicit racism and sexism, they have been insensitive to the most powerful cognitive distorter of all, the “myside bias” that makes all of us credulous about the cherished beliefs of ourselves or our political or cultural coalitions. Universities should set the expectation that faculty members leave their politics at the classroom door, and affirm the rationalist virtues of epistemic humility and active open-mindedness. To these ends, a bit of D.E.I. for conservatives would not hurt. As the economist Joan Robinson put it, “Ideology is like breath: You never smell your own.”

Students on Harvard's campus in May. Sophie Park for The New York Times

The most painful indictment of Harvard is its alleged antisemitism — not the old-money WASP snobbery of Oliver Barrett III, but a spillover of anti-Zionist zealotry. A recent, long-awaited report detailed many troubling incidents. Jewish students have felt intimidated by anti-Israel protests that have disrupted classes, ceremonies and everyday campus life, often met with a confused response by the university. Members of the

teaching staff have gratuitously injected pro-Palestinian activism into courses or university programming. Many Jewish students, particularly Israelis, reported being ostracized or demonized by their peers.

As with its other maladies, Harvard's antisemitism has to be considered with a modicum of discernment. Yes, the problems are genuine. But "a bastion of rampant anti-Jew hatred" with the aim of "destroying the Jews as a first step to destroying Western civilization"? Oy gevalt!

In response to the infamous statement by 34 student groups after Oct. 7 holding Israel "entirely responsible" for the massacre, more than 400 Harvard faculty members posted an open letter in protest. A new collective, Harvard Faculty for Israel, has attracted 450 members. Harvard offers more than 60 courses with Jewish themes, including eight Yiddish language courses. And though the 300-page antisemitism report reviews every instance it could find in the past century, down to the last graffito and social media post, it cited no expressions of a goal to "destroy the Jews," let alone signs that it was the "dominant view on campus."

For what it's worth, I have experienced no antisemitism in my two decades at Harvard, and nor have other prominent Jewish faculty members. My own discomfort instead is captured in a *Crimson* essay by the Harvard senior Jacob Miller, who called the claim that one in four Jewish students feels "physically unsafe" on campus "an absurd statistic I struggle to take seriously as someone who publicly and proudly wears a kippah around campus each day." The obsession with antisemitism at Harvard represents, ironically, a surrender to the critical-social-justice credo that the only wrong worthy of condemnation is group-against-group bigotry. Instead of directly rebutting the flaws of the anti-Zionist platform, such as its approval of violence against civilians and its historical blind spots, critics have tried to tar it with the sin of antisemitism. But that can devolve into futile semantic disputation about the meaning of the word "antisemitism," which, our council has argued, can lead to infringements on academic freedom.

Harvard's antisemitism report has recommended many sensible and overdue reforms, and that's the point: Responsible people, faced with problems in a complex institution, try to identify the flaws and fix them. Blowing off such efforts as "spraying perfume on a sewer" is unhelpful.

One set has already been adopted: to enforce regulations already on the books that prevent protests from crossing the line from expressions of opinion to campaigns of disruption, coercion and intimidation.

Another no-brainer is to apply standards of scholarly excellence more uniformly. Harvard has almost 400 initiatives, centers and programs, which are distinct from its academic departments. A few were captured by activist lecturers and became, in effect, Centers for

Anti-Israel Studies. At the same time, Harvard has a paucity of professors with disinterested expertise in Israel, the Middle East conflict and antisemitism. The report calls for greater professorial and decanal oversight of these subjects.

Harvard can't police its students' social lives or social media posts (particularly on anonymous platforms where the vilest antisemitism was expressed). But it can enforce its regulations against discrimination on the basis of religion, national origin and political belief, and against blatant derelictions such as a teaching assistant dismissing sections so students can attend anti-Israel protests. It could treat antisemitism with the same gravity with which it treats racism, and it could set expectations, as soon as students take their first steps into Harvard Yard, that they treat one another with respect and openness to disagreement.

Just as clear is what won't work: the Trump administration's punitive defunding of science at Harvard. Contrary to a widespread misunderstanding, a federal grant is not alms to the university, nor may the executive branch dangle it to force grantees to do whatever it wants. It is a fee for a service — namely, a research project that the government decides (after fierce competitive review) would benefit the country. The grant pays for the people and equipment needed to carry out that research, which would not be done otherwise.

Mr. Trump's strangling of this support will harm Jews more than any president in my lifetime. Many practicing and aspiring scientists are Jewish, and his funding embargo has them watching in horror as they are laid off, their labs are shut down or their dreams of a career in science go up in smoke. This is immensely more harmful than walking past a "Globalize the Intifada" sign. Worse still is the effect on the far larger number of gentiles in science, who are being told that their labs and careers are being snuffed out to advance Jewish interests. Likewise for the current patients whose experimental treatments will be halted, and the future patients who may be deprived of cures. None of this is good for the Jews.

The concern for Jews is patently disingenuous, given Mr. Trump's sympathy for Holocaust deniers and Hitler fans. The obvious motivation is to cripple civil society institutions that serve as loci of influence outside the executive branch. As JD Vance put it in the title of a 2021 speech: "The Universities Are the Enemy."

If the federal government doesn't force Harvard to reform, what will? There are legitimate concerns that universities have weak mechanisms for feedback and self-improvement. A business in the red can fire its chief executive; a losing team can replace its coach. But most academic fields don't have objective metrics of success and rely instead on peer review, which can amount to professors conferring prestige on one another in self-affirming cliques.

Worse, many universities have punished professors and students who criticize their policies, a recipe for permanent dysfunction. Last year a Harvard dean actually justified this repression until our academic freedom council came down on the idea like a ton of bricks and his boss swiftly disavowed it.

Still, there are ways to let the light get in. Universities could give a stronger mandate to the external “visiting committees” that ostensibly audit departments and programs but in practice are subject to regulatory capture. University leaders constantly get an earful from disgruntled alumni, donors and journalists, and they should use it, judiciously, as a sanity check. The governing boards should be more tuned in to university affairs and take more responsibility for its health. The Harvard Corporation is so reclusive that when two of its members dined with members of the academic freedom council in 2023, The Times deemed it worthy of a news story.

Harvard’s nearly two-year ordeal in the public eye has, perhaps belatedly, prompted many reforms. It has adopted a policy of institutional neutrality, no longer pontificating on issues that don’t affect its own functioning. It has drawn lines on disruptive protests and will create centralized enforcement so that violators can’t jury-shop or count on faculty nullification. The Faculty of Arts and Sciences has eliminated the “diversity statements” that vetted job applicants for their willingness to write woke-o-babble, and its dean has called on program directors to report on their units’ viewpoint diversity. The rogue centers are under investigation, and their directors have been replaced. The task force report, solemnly accepted by the university’s president, Alan Garber, shows that antisemitism is being taken seriously. A new classroom compact enjoins students to be open to ideas that challenge their beliefs.

The uncomfortable fact is that many of these reforms followed Mr. Trump’s inauguration and overlap with his demands. But if you’re standing in a downpour and Mr. Trump tells you to put up an umbrella, you shouldn’t refuse just to spite him.

And doing things for good reasons is, I believe, the way for universities to right themselves and regain public trust. It sounds banal, but too often universities have been steered by the desire to placate their students, avoid making enemies and stay out of the headlines. We saw how well *that* worked out.

Instead, university leaders should be prepared to affirm the paramount goal of a university — discovering and transmitting knowledge — and the principles necessary to pursue it. Universities have a mandate and the expertise to pursue knowledge, not social justice. Intellectual freedom is not a privilege of professors but the only way that fallible humans gain knowledge. Disagreements should be negotiated with analysis and argument, not recriminations of bigotry and victimhood. Protests may be used to generate common knowledge of a grievance, but not to shut people up or coerce the university into doing what the protesters want. The university commons belongs to the

community, whose members may legitimately disagree with one another, and it may not be usurped by one faction. The endowment is not an op-ed page but a treasure that the university is obligated to hold in trust for future generations.

Why does this matter? For all its foibles, Harvard (together with other universities) has made the world a better place, significantly so. Fifty-two faculty members have won Nobel Prizes, and more than 5,800 patents are held by Harvard. Its researchers invented baking powder, the first organ transplant, the programmable computer, the defibrillator, the syphilis test and oral rehydration therapy (a cheap treatment that has saved tens of millions of lives). They developed the theory of nuclear stability that has saved the world from Armageddon. They invented the golf tee and the catcher's mask. Harvard spawned "Sesame Street," The National Lampoon, "The Simpsons," Microsoft and Facebook.

Ongoing research at Harvard includes methane-tracking satellites, robotic catheters, next-generation batteries and wearable robotics for stroke victims. Federal grants are supporting research on metastasis, tumor suppression, radiation and chemotherapy in children, multidrug-resistant infections, pandemic prevention, dementia, anesthesia, toxin reduction in firefighting and the military, the physiological effects of spaceflight and battlefield wound care. Harvard's technologists are pushing innovations in quantum computing, A.I., nanomaterials, biomechanics, foldable bridges for the military, hack-resistant computer networks and smart living environments for the elderly. One lab has developed what may be a cure for Type 1 diabetes.

Practical applications are not the only things that make Harvard precious. It is a phantasmagoria of ideas, a Disneyland of the mind. Learning about my colleagues' research is a source of endless delight, and when I look at our course catalog, I wish I were 18 again. DNA extracted from human fossils reveals the origin of the Indo-European languages. Grimm's fairy tales, with their murder, infanticide, cannibalism and incest, reveal our eternal fascination with the morbid. A single network in the brain underlies remembering the past and daydreaming about the future. Nonviolent resistance movements are more successful than violent ones. The ailments of pregnancy come from a Darwinian struggle between mother and fetus. The "Who is like you?" prayer in the Jewish liturgy suggests that the ancient Israelites were ambivalent about their monotheism.

And if you're still skeptical that universities are worth supporting, consider these questions: Do you think that the number of children who die every year from cancer is just about right? Are you content with your current chance of developing Alzheimer's disease? Do you feel our current understanding of which government policies are effective and which ones are wasteful is perfect? Are you happy with the way the climate is going, given our current energy technology?

In his manifesto for progress, “The Beginning of Infinity,” the physicist David Deutsch wrote, “Everything that is not forbidden by laws of nature is achievable, given the right knowledge.” To cripple the institutions that acquire and transmit knowledge is a tragic blunder and a crime against future generations.

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