

COMMENTARY

Lo! A Pestilence Stalks Us

A danger lurks on campus... insidious and elusive, yet always near. We cannot easily discern this specter, but each of us carries a little piece of it around with us wherever we go, as innocently as cold germs on our hands. Unlike recognized biological contaminants, however, this danger spreads without suffering the stigma that its enormity justifies; indeed, most of us brandish our strips of this specter's sheet as proudly and righteously as any national flag.



Ryan Bounds

But what IS this that is so inimical to our community, to our dream of peaceful, liberated, and self-fulfilling coexistence down on the Farm? Let us acknowledge it for what it is, denounce it, extirpate it! But first, let us brace ourselves, for surely we are not prepared to see this vaunted wretch in its true light — we will want to turn away, but, in matters of community, resolve we must be. Very well, then. Topple the pedestal, lift the curtain, turn the brilliant light of realization on the idol of Sensitivity!

Yes, fearless readers, this is the phantom that threatens us and our community. More than grapes, more than vandalism, more even than the ever feared budget cuts, Sensitivity threatens to corrupt our scholastic experience and tear our student community asunder. Indeed, it has already begun its horrendous task. Anyone who still doubts (and there will be many — false consciousness, as any good Marxist will asseverate, is difficult to abandon) needs only consider the last 6 months in the life of Stanford.

Consider a recent example of Sensitivity casting its evil spell: a reactionary call by a (wisely!) unidentified student for us to boycott Political Science Professor Stephen Kraemer's class in response to his allegedly "anti-Asian agenda." Kraemer revealed his patently anti-Asian agenda in a shocking observation last spring that Jews and Asians are,

relative to the U.S. generally, overrepresented in the student body of Stanford!

A member of our community read his comments to this effect and saw an inflammatory expression of racism, a prejudice that is simply and objectively not manifest in Kraemer's comments. Despite the semantic argument, which is made elsewhere, Kraemer, himself, is Jewish, and persons of Asian descent, who constitute around a quarter of the Stanford student body, certainly do not constitute nearly such a proportion of U.S. residents. So what, most of us certainly ask, is the problem? The problem is that this student, fancying himself more perspicacious than the rest of us, clumped out his vacuous flyers, disrupted

Kraemer's class, and tried to get all of us in a dither, merely because his head was hidden in the hoary mists of Sensitivity: he read of Kraemer's observation that Asians are overrepresented, connected this with the backlash against the stereotypically "nerdy" Asian (of which he is apparently acutely sensitive), and cried "foul" in the loudest shriek he could muster. The result of his Sensitivity, finely tuned by years of multiculturalism and jealous racial identification? Embarrassment and wasted paper (white laser-printer bond — the ecologically worst kind), but Sensitivity prevails again.

Another instance of Sensitivity working its divisive magic: a group of pathetically intoxicated athletes vandalize a statue celebrating "gay pride." No one is certain why they did it; we can bet that they are not going to hold a news conference within 200 miles of here to declare that they were motivated by their deep-seated hatred of homosexuals and thus put all our doubts to rest. But the gay members of our community feel safe here (and well they should) and thus liberated to discuss their Sensitivity to the vandalism of an artwork that represents some of their closely held values (thank goodness we still have such a community). We hear of sensations of personal violation and outrage and of suspicions that male athletes and fraternity

members are bigots whose socialization patterns induce this sort of terrorism. Perhaps all of this is true, but the castigations of athletics and frat boys for flagrantly anti-homosexual prejudices is predicated on a motivation for this vandalism that has not been articulated. Results? The vandals might face hate-crime charges, fraternity members — regardless of their individually demonstrated prejudices (or, for that matter, sexual orientation) — face mandatory Sensitivity training, the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Center receives \$10,000 from funds the university ostensibly does not have, and Sensitivity insinuates itself a little further into the fissures of our community.

Another headline-grabbing example of Sensitivity's endemic, inimitable allure: members of a Flicks audience boo a showing of the caustic, hyper-politicized documentary film "No Grapes". Contemporaneously, the university administration considers accepting Cecilia Burciaga's proposal that her position be terminated in the budget-cutting process. Students, most of them Chicano, decry the audience's rude outburst at the "No Grapes" screening as racial insensitivity (it should here be noted, not necessarily as an apology, that the Flicks audience often boos at what appears on the screen arbitrarily and, apparently, out of sheer rowdiness or boredom) and the administration's move to terminate Burciaga's position as indicative of a systemic insensitivity in our community toward Chicano faculty, staff, and students (she was the only high-ranking Chicano administrator). Results: rivers of tears, epithets, hunger strikes, negative press for the university, and the formation of presidential committees to examine the "systemic insensitivity" toward Chicanos at Stanford and the potential, for a Stanford-East Palo Alto

community outreach center. Oh, and, once again, Sensitivity can claim responsibility for extortion, rampant dissatisfaction, and a nice week of hand-wringing.

These sweet victories of Sensitivity reveal one thing: if we fancy ourselves oppressed (regardless of how oppressed, ignored, or downtrodden we objectively are) we will see the world, however unrealistically, as overflowing with instances that support our perception. But we must recognize that the real issue is one framed in signal detection theory: we can put a priority either on calling "hits" or on keeping silent during "misses," but there is always noise in the equation. That is, we can place a premium on catching every instance of our interests being undervalued only at the cost of increasing

the risk that we will call "foul" when, indeed, no foul has occurred (the golden path of Sensitivity), or, alternatively, we can put an emphasis on being certain (which is really an emphasis on not repelling those whom we wrongly accuse of insensitivity to our plight) by being willing to turn the other cheek in instances in which we reasonably suspect we were violated.

As members of a close-knit and extraordinarily diverse community we cannot afford to participate in the heresy of Sensitivity; it divides, it discomfits, and it almost never gets us what we really want: freedom from the misunderstanding, prejudice, and strife that inhere in each of us appreciating our own problems more than anyone else possibly could. So, intrepid hunters of the false idol, search no longer. Turn your eyes from the enticing chimera of Sensitivity toward a less egotistical outlook of mutual acceptance and support and discover a community that Sensitivity compels to destroy.

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ridiculous... The hypocrisy [of administrators] is readily evident."

The University of Pennsylvania is not alone in experiencing newspaper thefts. At Stanford, a Resident Fellow in the Mexican theme dormitory recently blocked three members of *The Stanford Review* from entering his dorm and distributing copies of their newspaper. "Get that trash out of here!" Resident Fellow José Burciaga yelled at the students. He then grabbed three stacks of papers, throwing them away in a trash bin outside the dorm. After the students informed Burciaga that the University did not prohibit them from distributing newspapers in the dorm, he became even more angry. "Get the hell out of here!" he shouted repeatedly, before eventually calling the police.

The *Stanford Review* did not take Burciaga's verbal assault lightly. In response, they filed a formal complaint with the University, in which *The Review* demanded "that Mr. Burciaga apologize [to] the three students whom he confronted physically and violently, and submit a formal, written apology to the editorial board of *The Stanford Review*...[and] that Mr. Burciaga participate in a seminar to teach him sensitivity to the principles enshrined in the First Amendment, and to the principles of free enquiry and expression requisite of any university."

Ann Porteus, acting co-director of residential education, considered the event unfortunate: "The incident...was regrettable in many ways," she wrote in her response to *The*

Review's complaint. "[C]ensorship based on content violates our commitment to open discussion of all ideas, even difficult or unpleasant ones." While Porteus apologized for José Burciaga's behavior, she couldn't resist criticizing the *Review*. "[A]lthough [*The Stanford Review*] had the right to distribute the paper, I think it was unwise and in poor judgment that you did so," she commented.

Porteus concluded that she did not wish to punish Burciaga, or even ask him to apologize. This inaction drew the ire of current *Stanford Review* editor Aman Verjee. "It galls me to no end that José Burciaga would not have to take responsibility for his actions," Verjee said. "Here is a man to whom the University pays a great deal of money and/or benefits to foster an atmosphere of openness and tolerance. Yet his actions in this incident could not have been more to the contrary."

Newspaper thefts have taken place on at least 36 other college campuses over the past academic year, according to Mark Goodman, executive director of the Student Press Law Center. These schools include: John Hopkins University, East Texas State University, University of Maryland, University of Nebraska, West Valley College, Ohio State University, Tufts University, Pittsburgh State University, Briar Cliff College, El Camino College, Stevens Institute of Technology, SUNY-Old Westbury, Brandeis University, University of California at San Diego, University of Maryland-Baltimore County, Webster University, Northeastern State University, University of Detroit Mercy, East Tennessee State University, Marshall University, Fort Lewis College, North Carolina State University, St. Bonaventure College, Long Island University, University

of New Orleans, Franklin & Marshall College, University of Louisville, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, University of Northern Colorado, SUNY-Brockport, Midland Lutheran College, Northwestern University, University of Alabama at Birmingham, California State University Fullerton, California State University Northridge, and Los Medanos College.

Most journalism and free speech experts agree: Newspaper thievery on college campuses is unfortunate for everyone involved. As Washington Times education reporter Carol Linnert notes, "Stealing is not right, and whoever steals something should be punished." Jeff Muir, Program Officer for the Madison Center, concurs: "The appropriate way to deal with [stealing newspapers] is to press charges for theft."

Another issue is freedom of speech. Because the aforementioned thefts were done explicitly to prevent the distribution of a newspaper, they are tantamount to censorship of expression. And while universities publicly champion free speech, they very seldom punish perpetrators of this thievery. This sad reality leads many observers to the same conclusion: that until administrators punish these blatant assaults on free speech and open discourse, they are tacitly endorsing the very theft and censorship that are — by any and all accounts — antithetical to a higher education.

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