

Mitchell's Musings 11-30-15: Watching an Impending Train Wreck from Aside the Track

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Academia has long been called an “ivory tower,” presumably implying isolation from reality. Perhaps the notion of being inside a bubble might be a better representation of the concept; the view from a tower, after all, is wide. But apart from the analogy, the key question is how realistic these representation are at present?

Unless you have been in a very small bubble, you must be aware of the campus unrest going on at many universities. Some of it seems linked to a slice of outside reality, particularly the “black lives matter” protests. But other elements do seem divorced from the external world. There has been much written about “micro-aggressions,” “trigger” warnings, and “safe spaces,” all notions that invite parody. In some cases, demands related to all of these concerns have led to resignation of university leaders.

That trend – the demand for top-level resignations - seems to have started at the University of Missouri, perhaps largely reflecting local issues there.¹ (All politics are local, etc.) But the idea of demanding resignations has spread. Undoubtedly, university leadership around the country was particularly thankful for the Thanksgiving holiday which sent students away from their campuses before too much job loss had occurred. And, undoubtedly, when the students return university leaders will be awaiting the Christmas break just as eagerly.

But it isn't just administrators that find their jobs in peril. The resignation calls have moved to demands to get rid of faculty.² And some faculty seem bent on going along with the idea of self-criticism and confession, perhaps hoping that speech codes and a *mea culpa* will make the issue go away.³ But not all faculty are convinced that such steps are the appropriate response. To the contrary.⁴

Some of what has occurred of late is simply bizarre, e.g., the suspension of Yoga lessons at a Canadian university based on some ill-defined cultural objections.⁵ Some of what has occurred may affect university funding, particularly at schools that depend on alumni funding. One wonders, for example, whether the demand to rid Princeton of the name of its past president Woodrow Wilson for his racial attitudes and actions may play out (even though the august *New York Times* seems now to favor the erasure).⁶ Thomas Jefferson (slave owner) is reported to be the next target.⁷

Moreover, apart from big buck donors, one wonders how current events at universities will affect the external political scene. There are a lot of parents out there paying tuitions or contemplating doing so in the future. In California in the mid-1960s, the interplay of the Watts Riots and student demonstrations

¹<http://chronicle.com/article/How-Three-Bad-Decisions/234278>

²<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/11/23/u-kansas-professor-leave-after-comments-race-result-5-complaints>

³<http://chronicle.com/blogs/ticker/occidental-faculty-weighs-system-for-reports-of-microaggressions/106939>

⁴<https://www.facebook.com/glenn.loury1/posts/768490419930039>

⁵<http://chronicle.com/blogs/ticker/yoga-class-is-suspended-after-students-deem-it-culturally-inappropriate/106911> and <http://www.ottawasun.com/2015/11/20/free-ottawa-yoga-class-scrapped-over-cultural-issues>

⁶<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/25/opinion/the-case-against-woodrow-wilson-at-princeton.html>

⁷<http://chronicle.com/blogs/ticker/why-is-dartmouth-still-boiling-over-a-protest-that-happened-2-weeks-ago/106928>

at Berkeley played an important role in unseating incumbent liberal Democratic Governor Pat Brown and in his replacement by the conservative Republican Ronald Reagan. There were then repercussions at Berkeley and the rest of the University of California UC). UC President Clark Kerr was fired, tuition rose, and the impact was felt in the university's budget. And there are other precedents for the notion that the appearance of disorder pushes politics to the right. Law and order as a campaign element appealing to the "silent majority" helped elect Richard Nixon in 1968.

Are we going to see a repeat of history today? Of course, there are differences between then and now. California, for example, is much more firmly in the hands of Democrats than it was in the 1960s and its demographics are quite different, too. But even in California, you can see symptoms of establishment concerns about university developments. The generally liberal *Sacramento Bee's* editorial board, for example, seems to be exasperated with recent campus events.⁸ Members of the dominant (Democratic) political class are uneasy.⁹ Indeed, even the editors of the UC-Berkeley student paper seem annoyed.¹⁰ And there are reports of a student backlash elsewhere where demonstrations have occurred.¹¹

It's easy (at least in the bubble) to dismiss the (counter) reaction as just that, reactionary. White supremacists, for example, have jumped into the fray by creating "white student union" Facebook pages at various universities.¹² (Facebook seems to take some of them down after complaints, but not others.) But as you move away from the extremes, you come to more conventional types. Thus, a conservative online publication asks why, at UC-Merced, after an incident in which a Muslim student stabbed others on campus before being shot and killed by campus police, there was a "teach-in" event which seemed dedicated to "understanding" the stabber.¹³ That may not have been an accurate description of what occurred, but it seems unlikely that the event's organizers considered how what they were doing might be interpreted externally. Or perhaps they didn't care what someone might say.

The external reality, however, *should* make one care, at least in the view of this author. Basically, in the last two presidential elections, the popular vote has more or less split between the major candidates. We live in a divided country. The midterm election of 2014 moved the U.S. Senate into conservative hands (along with a variety of state and local contests). There are now a lot of politicians out there with no strong love for academia and its values.

Recent terroristic attacks in Paris are making ordinary folks nervous. Could what happened in Paris happen in the U.S.? Disorder and threat to security can drive a lot of votes, as it did in the 1960s. Do I really have to point to the rise of Donald Trump in contemporary times to make this point? Or to the fact that he has driven other GOP presidential candidates toward his positions?

⁸<http://www.sacbee.com/opinion/editorials/article46108175.html>

⁹<http://www.latimes.com/local/political/la-me-pc-former-assembly-leader-urges-dialogue-caution-at-california-colleges-20151117-story.html>

¹⁰<http://www.dailycal.org/2015/11/24/bamn-protests-dont-do-students-justice/>

¹¹<http://chronicle.com/blogs/ticker/why-is-dartmouth-still-boiling-over-a-protest-that-happened-2-weeks-ago/106928>

¹²<http://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2015/11/23/white-student-union-uc-berkeley-facebook-page-down/> and <http://www.sfgate.com/education/article/Facebook-yanks-White-Student-Union-page-at-6653063.php>. Of course, it can't be proved that there was no local student involvement in these pages. At this writing, my own university, UCLA, has such a page which continues to operate although there have been complaints.

¹³<http://www.thecollegefix.com/post/25127/>

One of the nice things about being a retired faculty member who, nonetheless, does the blogging for the UCLA Faculty Association is that I can point to impending academic train wrecks coming without being on the train. I watch the train go by from aside the tracks. So if you are a current faculty member reading this musing on the train who thinks everything is going well, I wish you good luck in your journey. But if you are a current faculty member who thinks there is something worth considering in this musing, at least in the probabilistic sense that it might have validity, you might want to pull the emergency brake cord (soon).