

The Economist. Arguments over free speech on campus are not left v right
As Reed College in Oregon shows, left v left clashes can be equally vitriolic

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FRESHMEN crowded the lecture hall at 9am for Humanities 110, the first class of their college careers. Elizabeth Drumm, the head of the programme, made some introductory remarks, her voice quavering. As some faculty members moved to take their places at a panel discussion, three demonstrators emerged from the wings of the auditorium. “We’re protesting Hum 110 because it’s Eurocentric,” one began. “I’m sorry, this is a classroom space and this is not appropriate,” Ms Drumm said, immediately cancelling the lecture. Thus began another academic year at Reed College, a liberal arts college in Portland, Oregon.

Last academic year, a dozen or so students continuously occupied the three-day-a-week lecture series by sitting in front of the auditorium with cardboard signs, sometimes taping their mouths in protest at the absence of non-white voices in the syllabus. One even took to lecturing the freshman class on the podium from an alternate curriculum before the start of each session. But this year, the college’s president sent out an e-mail outlining the school’s dissent policy 16 minutes before the lecture began, warning that the administration would act against potential violations. Reed College students were ranked as the most liberal and the second most studious in *Princeton Review*’s survey of its top 382 liberal arts colleges. That compound of leftist politics and serious scholarship proved unstable last year as activists managed to cow the college’s administration, students and faculty alike.

The protesters argue that the Humanities programme is racist because it ignores many of the world’s great civilisations and because its authors are overwhelmingly male and white. They point out that black students represent less than 3% of the school’s 1,400 students and argue that the administration has not done enough to support them. A good portion of the student body appear to support their goals and tactics.

Assistant professor Lucia Martinez Valdivia, who describes herself as mixed-race and queer, asked protesters not to demonstrate during her lecture on Sappho last November. Ms Valdivia said she suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and doubted her ability to deliver the lecture in the face of their opposition. At first, demonstrators announced they would change tactics and sit quietly in the audience, wearing black. After her speech, a number of them berated her, bringing her to tears.

Demonstrators said Ms Valdivia was guilty of a variety of offences: she was a “race traitor” who upheld white supremacist principles by failing to oppose the Humanities syllabus. She was “anti-black” because she appropriated black slang by wearing a T-shirt that said, “Poetry is Lit”. She was an “ableist” because she believes trigger warnings sometimes diminish sexual trauma. She was also called a “gaslighter” for making disadvantaged students doubt their own feelings of oppression. “I am intimidated by these students,” she later wrote in a blog post. “I am scared to teach courses on race, gender or sexuality or even texts that bring these issues up in any way...I’m at a loss as to how to begin to address it, especially since many of these students don’t believe in historicity or objective facts (they denounce the latter as being a tool of the white cisheteropatriarchy).”

A few weeks later, the college invited Kimberly Peirce, the gender-fluid director of “Boys Don’t Cry”, which was widely praised as the first sympathetic portrayal of trans people in cinema. Protesters ripped down posters promoting the event and put up their own posters that said: “Fuck this cis white bitch” (“cis” being shorthand for cisgendered, or people who identify with their birth sex) and “Fuck your transphobia.” When Ms Peirce tried to speak, they shouted her down because they felt she had profited from violence against trans people and because she had cast Hillary Swank, a non-trans actor, as the lead.

The dean of faculty, Nigel Nicholson, later wrote that students came to the session “asking questions designed to indict the speaker...It felt like a courtroom, not a college.”

Earlier in the year, demonstrators presented the administration with a sensible demand, to make more effort to attract and retain black students, and a lot of eccentric ones, including a beefed-up role for students in judging grievances against faculty, and collegewide racial sensitivity training. They also demanded a paid annual staff holiday honouring the day of their initial demonstration.

Thermidorian reaction

Many students have said privately that the campus has become a place where they are afraid to express dissenting opinions. Students who disagree with the protesters' views, on social media, have been denounced as racists by activist leaders. A newly accepted international student was mocked when she asked her future classmates if there were any libertarian groups on campus. White students have complained that they have been told by other students that they are unjustified in speaking about race and identity in class. When one student voiced a dissenting opinion on social media, his classmate threatened to get him fired from his job at the college bookstore. “It’s an environment with limited representation of opinion, and it can be hostile to students who hold other views,” says Yuta Kato, a sophomore.

Yet at Reed College this term there are also signs of a counter-revolution. A professor of Muslim studies refused to lecture in front of protesters and taught his class of 150 students outside, under a tree. Some freshmen have shouted down protesters. One (black) student told them: “This is a classroom. This is not the place. Right now we are trying to learn. We are freshmen students.” The rest of his speech was drowned out by applause.

This article appeared in the United States section of the print edition under the headline "Blue on blue."

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