

The New ‘McCarthyism’ Exists, but It Has Nothing to Do with Ted Cruz

By Charles C. W. Cooke
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Less than an hour elapsed between Ted Cruz’s announcing that he would be running for the presidency and the beginning of the oh-so-predictable “McCarthy!” taunts. On Twitter, the comedian Bill Maher sardonically endorsed Cruz’s candidacy, asking, “What’s not to love about a guy who acts like Joe McCarthy and sweats like Richard Nixon?” On MSNBC, meanwhile, Chris Matthews revived his old critique, charging that Cruz was “deliberately channeling McCarthy again today.” This, alas, is a line that has been trotted out before.

All is fair in love, war, and politics, and as illiterate as the comparisons to McCarthy may be, I suppose I would almost be disappointed if someone, somewhere, did not choose to advance them. But for the more serious-minded among us, it is truly peculiar to see the specter of McCarthy dragged into quotidian party politics when it is so desperately needed elsewhere. Certainly, Cruz’s style can rub the wrong way. Certainly, his debate-champion mien is occasionally inappropriately deployed. But the truth is that if Arthur Miller were writing *The Crucible* today he would likely be less interested in effusive senators from Texas and more interested in the more modern pathologies that the Cruzes of the world tend typically to disdain. Presumably, Miller would look at our universities and our media, at our malleable “speech codes,” our self-indulgent “safe spaces,” our preference for “narrative” over truth, and at our pathetic appeasement of what is little

more than good old-fashioned illiberalism, and he would despair. Ted Cruz, frankly, wouldn’t enter into his thinking.

Over the weekend, a Purdue-based doctoral student and teacher named Fredrik deBoer took to Twitter to rail bitterly against the toxic climate that the advocates of “tolerance” have created on his campus. “Students,” deBoer wrote, are “very quick learners,” and they have realized that they can use our present hysteria to advance their interests. Indeed, far from helping to educate, deBoer added, our current penchant for hyper-sensitivity is having a deleterious effect on the quality of the critical training he is expected to provide. “If you question even the most obviously dishonest and self-interested invocation of trauma/triggering/etc,” deBoer lamented, “you will be criticized severely.”

And if you don’t? Well, then the growing cast of hecklers is permitted its intellectual veto. “The chilling effect is very real,” deBoer confirmed in frustration, “and I hear that from my very large network of academic friends across the country. It’s real and powerful.” How powerful? Certainly powerful enough that deBoer admits that he has taken to “self-censoring.” “The terrible job market leaves everyone in fear of accidentally giving offense,” he fretted, and so, afraid of losing his job, he now avoids teaching “anything that might be remotely triggering . . . like discussions of genocide, racism, or historical violence.”

To sum up, then: Because his students insist that they are not to be challenged in any way, deBoer is unable to teach what he needs to teach for fear of losing his job. And he can’t criticize this arrangement because to criticize it is . . . to risk losing his job.

Welcome to Salem, 1692.

Writing anonymously on the “White Hot Harlots” blog, a “passionate leftist” friend of deBoer’s painted a disquietingly similar picture. “Saying anything that goes against liberal orthodoxy,” he declared, “is now grounds for a firing.” Indeed, “even if you make a reasonable and respectful case, if you so much as cause your liberal students a second of complication or doubt you face the risk of demonstrations, public call-outs, and severe professional consequences.” You will note, perhaps, that it is not Ted Cruz who is causing these problems. Quite the opposite, in fact. “I would not get fired for pissing off a Republican,” our anonymous friend insists. Rather, “liberal students scare the shit out of me,” for:

all it takes is one slip — not even an outright challenging of their beliefs, but even momentarily exposing them to any uncomfortable thought or imagery — and that’s it, your classroom is triggering, you are insensitive, kids are bringing mattresses to your office hours and there’s a twitter petition out demanding you chop off your hand in repentance.

For a prime example of this tendency in action we need look no further than the weekend edition of the New York Times, in which Judith Shulevitz offers up a bizarre story about a Brown University senior named Kathryn Byron who sought to involve the university’s authorities when she thought she might have to hear arguments that contradicted her beliefs:

When she heard last fall that a student group had organized a debate about campus sexual assault between Jessica Valenti, the founder of feministing.com, and Wendy McElroy, a libertarian, and that Ms. McElroy was likely to criticize the term “rape culture,” Ms. Byron was alarmed. “Bringing in a speaker like that could serve to invalidate people’s experiences,” she told me. It could be “damaging.”

Ms. Byron and some fellow task force members secured a meeting with administrators. Not long after, Brown’s president, Christina H. Paxson, announced that the university would hold a simultaneous, competing talk to provide “research and facts” about “the role of culture in sexual assault.” Meanwhile, student volunteers put up posters advertising that a “safe space” would be available for anyone who found the debate too upsetting.

Later in the piece, a fellow student of Byron’s is shown condensing this peculiar attitude into an almost impossibly perfect sound bite. At college, she complained, she was “feeling bombarded by a lot of viewpoints that really go against my dearly and closely held beliefs.”

Well, good?

These attitudes have — funnily enough — found their way into the real world. In November of last year, Rolling Stone published an explosive “investigative” piece in which it was alleged that a freshman student named “Jackie” had been “brutally assaulted by seven men at a frat party.” At first, the story garnered an outpouring of outrage and sympathy. But then, slowly but surely, it all began to fall apart. At first, observers began nervously to suggest that the details didn’t quite add up, and to ask skeptical questions of the sourcing and its corroboration. For their trouble, they were accused of being “rape apologists.” Next, a number of conscientious reporters looked into the question, and they did not like what they found. For this diligence, they were slammed as “idiots” and “misogynists.” And finally, after the considerable interest in the case prompted the police to conduct their own investigation, it became clear that there was no evidence that anything had happened at all. The “Rolling Stone story,” declared an irritated Washington Post yesterday, “is a complete crock” — “built on a mix of naiveté and advocacy.”

And what, pray, was the reaction from those who had sold the story to this final piece of news? Alas, it was precisely the same as was Kathryn Byron's: denial, dissembling, distraction. In the Guardian, the tirelessly obtuse Jessica Valenti proposed pathetically that the story was ultimately likely to be fake but accurate, and suggested that the confusion as to what happened ultimately falls "at the feet of a culture that fundamentally distrusts women" rather than on the shoulders of the people who made up the lie. On CNN, meanwhile, Sunny Hostin submitted that we should not be focusing on this particular question, but on the broader rape statistics instead; and her co-host wondered irrationally whether the collapse of Jackie's story was in fact bad for other women. What seems to be really "important in this case," Hot Air's Noah Rothman wrote sarcastically yesterday, is not whether the accused are innocent or not — in other words, the facts — but "the Greater Cosmic Truth that exists independent of objective truth." Or rather, as Kathryn Byron might have put it, what is important here is that we do not permit reality to "invalidate people's experiences."

At its root, *The Crucible* is such a terrifying and illuminating piece of work not because it involves witches and because witches do not exist, but because it depicts the gradual victory of delirium over reason and of passion over truth. In the heat of a hysterical moment, a putatively civilized community elects to abandon the vital traditions that have been slowly built up over centuries and to hand over its institutions to the transient anxieties of an unruly and jealous mob. "It were better that ten suspected witches should escape than one innocent person be condemned," warned Increase Mather, a critic of the trials. "Not on your life," replied the crowd; for we have some evils to spike. Free expression? Damn you to hell. Presumption of innocence? Hie thee to a monastery. All that we have held dear? Abandon it now, for there are monsters at the gate, and

they need to be destroyed post haste. There is a McCarthyite panic in America, alright, and it is scouring the land at a frightening pace. But the virus has jumped from Salem's lips to Purdue's ears directly — and Ted Cruz has been nowhere to be seen.

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