Book Review

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Shepherd, Lindsay (2021). Diversity and Exclusion: Confronting the Campus Free Speech Crisis. Lightening Source. 254 pages. ISBN: 9780993919572 (softcover) $ 30.62

Who would have suspected that a clip from a public TV current affairs program could upend the world of Canadian higher education? In her self-published book Diversity and Exclusion: Confronting the Campus Free Speech Crisis (2021), Lindsay Shepherd recounts her journey from reticent grad student to polarizing national political figure. Her experiences illuminate what she and many (e.g., Furedi, 2017; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018) see as an escalating hostility toward intellectual pluralism in universities. In keeping with a broader political climate that goads people into reducing complex social and political phenomena to simple binaries, Shepherd describes a university culture where free speech and the rights and wellbeing of marginalized people are situated as opposing entities. By her chronicling, she would spend her time at Ontario's Wilfred Laurier University attempting to challenge this false dichotomy amid muscular resistance.

The main portion of the book is divided into two parts, with Part 1 and 2 respectively consisting of 12 and 8 short chapters. An Afterword section and four appendices follow. Part 1 details the incident that would hurtle the author onto a national political stage. For most in the Canadian academy, summarizing this incident would be akin to reminding ardent comic book fans of a superhero's origin story (or supervillain, depending on where one stands vis-à-vis the Shepherd affair). Nonetheless, for the sake of context before offering my assessment of the book, I briefly summarize Shepherd's account of the incident and the aftermath.

In the fall of 2017, Shepherd, then a graduate student and teaching assistant at Laurier, showed her first-year grammar students two clips from the show The Agenda, which aired on the publicly-funded television network TVO. The clips featured controversial psychologist Jordan Peterson, a critic of gender-neutral pronouns and Bill C-16, which proposed protecting gender

expression and gender identity under the Canadian Human Rights Act and Criminal Code (the bill is now law in Canada). Appearing in one of the clips was historian Nicholas Matte, who challenged Peterson by arguing that refusal to recognize people's preferred pronouns represents a dismissal of their identities and humanity.

Despite the seminar having gone smoothly and without complaint, Shepherd would soon find herself the subject of a long and uncomfortable interrogation at the hands of the course professor, the graduate program director, and the acting manager of Laurier's Gendered Violence and Sexual Assault Prevention Centre. The author uses the details of this meeting to bolster her assertion that young adults who attend university are infantilized. Shepherd was lambasted for screening the Agenda clip for students, relatedly accused of creating an inhospitable learning environment (thereby allegedly contravening the university's code of conduct), and confronted with hyperbolic concerns and analogies, such as comparisons between Peterson and Adolph Hitler. The course professor claimed to receive complaints from students, but Shepherd was not told which students complained or how many. (As it turned out, a university investigation into the matter would later reveal that, in fact, no student complaints were made.) The instructor insisted that, going forward, he would vet Shepherd's seminar preparation before it was implemented in class.

In what is aptly described in the back cover book description as a "game changer," Shepherd secretly recorded this meeting and would share the recording with a reporter at The National Post newspaper. (The author provides the full transcript of the meeting in Chapter 4 of the book; she makes a point of including all relevant correspondence and documentation, unedited and in their entirety, which punctuate the chapters and appendices.) The National Post story caused Shepherd's ordeal to go viral, inflaming the Canadian culture wars and positioning her as a central lighting rod.

The remainder of the book documents her ensuing adventures as a chasmic activist and media personality, with some reflection on what her experience conveys about the academy sociologically and politically. In a heartbeat, Shepherd's quiet, largely uneventful existence became marked by a constant barrage of media requests, endless Twitter feuds, heated battles with campus activists, and ostracization from her graduate program peers and professors. In one corner she was hailed as a heroic free speech advocate; in the other corner she was an alt-right sympathizer at worst, and an

entitled "crying White girl" (dubbed such by one of her detractors on a CBC TV program) at best (Shepherd, 2021, p. 139).

Shepherd, who engaged in little political activism previously, embraced the role of the provocateur activist raising awareness of what she saw as a genuine problem of free speech in Canadian universities. She founded the Laurier Society for Open Inquiry (LSOI), a student organization that aimed to "bring back a culture of free discussion and free expression to the Wilfred Laurier campus" (Shepherd, 2021, p. 152). True to its mission, Shepherd's organization invited speakers who would force discussion on topics many left-leaning academics and activists want cleared from the debate table, such as immigration, the validity and place of Indigenous knowledge, and trans women's entitlement to women's spaces and their participation in women's sports. LSOI initiatives, particularly efforts to stage talks by conservative speakers, were vehemently protested by activists and challenged by exorbitant security fees charged by the university.

In chronicling her experiences, Shepherd attempts to illustrate that a leftist hegemony currently animates the university landscape where appeals to victimhood are used to stifle debate. Activists insisted that the media spotlight that Shepherd brought to campus resulted in students being targeted for harassment. And in the academic world that Shepherd describes, almost anything can be construed as 'harassment'. (According to the author, none of these allegations were ever substantiated.) Shepherd (2021) describes being the subject of a dubious harassment investigation in response to a complaint made by an activist rival who objected to being called "petty and pathetic" by the supposedly dangerous Shepherd when she refused to vacate the graduate student lounge at his insistence (p. 161). (After this incident Shepherd discovered that her student card no longer granted her entry to her department's facilities, suggesting that the electronic reader codes had been changed to deny her access.)

To be sure, some of Shepherd's actions did appear to be motivated by spite rather than good faith. Examples include an attempt to platform Faith Goldy, an individual with documented ties to alt-right circles, and the decision to Tweet the Indigenous land acknowledgment from a professor's syllabus, which she took as empty moral exhibitionism. Nevertheless, her experience at Laurier illuminates potential concerns within the university spotlighted by Peterson, Frank Furedi, Greg Lukianoff, Jonathan Haidt, and

others, namely an intolerance of intellectual diversity, the seeming glorification of victimhood, and, relatedly, the conceptual inflation of harm and wrongdoing. In Shepherd's (2021) words, it seemed "[e]verything [activists] didn't like was against the human rights code" (p. 171). Lukianoff and Haidt refer to this as "concept creep." As they explain, because of this phenomenon, "just about anything can be perceived as having a harmful – even violent – impact on vulnerable groups" (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018, p. 105).

In Part 2 of the book, most pointedly in the final chapter and Afterword, Shepherd reflects on how her experience has shaped her personal intellectual growth along with what it signifies about the state of Laurier and the academy more broadly. Her discussion raises critical questions regarding the proliferating social justice ethos within university culture. The author portrays a campus social justice movement - manifest not only through student activism but also firmly embedded in university policies, academic program missions and curricula - that deems its aims so noble that its worldview is best shielded from critique. Expanding definitions of harm is one means by which to shut down debate. The reader is left to contemplate the compatibility of this disposition with the historical mission of the university: the pursuit of truth via open and unrestrained inquiry. Shepherd maintains that her objective in muscling Laurier into the media limelight was to identify and ameliorate this trend that she views as anti-academic. She laments that change has failed to materialize despite her efforts.

Shepherd engagingly conveys the emotional highs and lows brought about by her surreal political expedition, the trials of which most in the academy would experience in substantially smaller doses. The heart-pounding 'walls-closing in' feeling triggered by the initial email from the course professor and subsequent investigation; the simultaneous and oscillating exhilaration and anxiety brought about by a sudden catapult into national recognition; the emotional turmoil induced by, and gradual habituation to, ongoing clashes with those who opposed her. This politically charged, fight club-like grad school experience is well chronicled along with the author's evolving worldview, which veered decidedly right over the course of her Laurier adventure. Even if you lament how that worldview evolved, an open-minded reading forces you to think about the factors that pushed her in that direction along with the implications for higher education.

Beyond this human dimension, the book offers a graduate student's insider perspective on the present-day intellectual climate and power struggles within Canadian universities. Higher education is increasingly critiqued for an intellectual homogeneity, a lack of commitment to free speech and open debate, the perpetuation of a grievance culture and expanding definitions of harm, an ongoing 'oppression olympics' and resultant divisiveness, and the accentuation of subjectivity and lived experience at the expense of empirical rigour. The stories and anecdotes shared by Shepherd – the various complaints and accusations leveled against her, the obstacles she faced staging public talks on campus, and her run-ins with school officials and activists – illustrate these concerns vividly. Granted, the reader is only privy to Shepherd's interpretation of these events. But if we are going to value lived experience, we cannot in good conscience discount hers, regardless of political leaning. In many ways, the book is a provocative critique of higher education grounded in one person's lived experience.

If there is a criticism to be leveled at Shepherd's work, it is that she makes little effort to draw on prevailing scholarship to contextualize and make sense of her experience at Laurier, or consider how the free speech problem in higher education impacts the wider society. Some historical perspective on how university culture evolved in this way, a discussion of the political and sociological forces that sustain this culture, and greater reflection on the implications of the university "free speech crisis" for liberal democracy more broadly would have made for a more insightful book that scholars in the field of higher education might engage. While she offers some reflection on the broader implications of her experience in the final chapter and Afterword, the discussion is fleeting and superficial. I can anticipate the counter-argument that scholarly excavation of this sort is beyond the scope of the book. Indeed, a selling point of Shepherd's work is that it adds weight and insight to a familiar thesis via a unique and illuminating autobiographical story. Still, by centering herself as a mostly infallible sympathetic protagonist, and largely eschewing scholarly contextualization and discussion of the wider implications of the issue to which she draws attention, she leaves herself open to further "crying White girl" taunts, however unfair such chiding might be.

This point of contention notwithstanding, Shepherd's book, while not a work of academic scholarship in a strict sense, is still

worthwhile reading for those with an interest in matters of academic freedom and the 'culture wars' that rage within universities. The memoir also provides insight into what it is like to find oneself suddenly navigating treacherous political waters amid a massive media spotlight.

References

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