



Levin, Salovey, and the Mess at Yale

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Peter Salovey is a nice man, a well-liked man. He arose to his current position as President of Yale University, no doubt in part, due to his amiable personal qualities. In my days as an undergraduate, he was the affable Dean of Yale College, with a face partially obscured by a bushy avuncular mustache. Salovey never fit the profile of the detached, eminent Ivy League administrator reigning down from on high. Instead he was eminently approachable. He was known for playing the banjo in an all-faculty bluegrass band. He published research on emotional intelligence. He gave off sensitive dad vibes.

Salovey shaved his mustache a few months after I graduated. But I am sure his approachable personality remains intact. When members of the Yale Corporation—the governing board of the university—looked for a new president in 2012, they could hardly be blamed if they felt they needed a sensitive man for the job. Being president of Yale these days means presiding over ground zero for our nation’s oversensitivity crisis—centered on racial, political, and sexual identity.

Welcome to twenty-first century Yale: Linguistic twister has replaced the Harvard-Yale game as the most exciting sporting event on campus. The halls reverberate, not with the crooning of the Whiffenpoofs, but with the anguished cries of our national grievance culture. When today’s Yale students complain about violence, they’re not talking about the midnight muggings New Haven used to be known for, they’re talking about uncomfortable words. An unpopular political opinion is liable to launch a campus-wide protest. A profession of orthodox religious belief is liable to provoke mass meltdown.

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Today, Yale is not so much a university as it is a safe space with a \$27 billion endowment.

Am I exaggerating? Maybe. But not by much.

Salovey has carved out a sterling academic career. After doing his undergraduate work at Stanford, he came to Yale for his PhD and he never left. He climbed the ranks steadily: assistant professor to full professor, dean of the graduate school, dean of Yale College, provost, and, finally, president. Along with psychologist John D. Mayer, Salovey helped pioneer and popularize the concept of emotional intelligence. His work helped expand our understanding of the wide range of abilities among people in the areas of emotional control and perception. It also increased our understanding of how emotional skills can play a positive and productive role in society. This is opposed to the classical view of emotion as fundamentally dangerous—the opposite of reason.

Salovey's other notable body of work is in the field of public health—particularly with respect to HIV/AIDS. His work in this area focuses on the psychology behind reducing disease risk, and on achieving better prevention through more effective health messaging. Beyond the psychology department, Salovey holds a secondary appointment at the Yale School of Public Health. He has also held key roles at Yale's Center for Interdisciplinary Research on AIDS, and Yale's Cancer Prevention and Control Research Program. As provost, he is credited with navigating the university through a budget crisis that coincided with last decade's global financial market collapse.

Yale's financial crisis may be in the rearview, but its cultural crisis may just be beginning.

The Sad Case of the Christakis Family

The most notorious recent example of cultural crisis at Yale was the railroading of Professor Nicholas Christakis and his wife Erika. If you pay much attention to higher education news, you probably know something about the story. It started with a simple email Mrs. Christakis sent to the student body in October 2015. Her email was a response to an official email sent to students, warning them to avoid insensitive costumes and to avoid cultural appropriation. (Hand wringing over cultural appropriation has become a new Halloween pastime for university administrators everywhere.)

“What,” she wrote, “does this debate about Halloween costumes say about our view of young adults, of their strength and judgment? Whose business is it to control the forms of costumes of young people? It's not mine, I know that.”

Maybe, Mrs. Christakis seemed to suggest, Yale students are mature enough to play dress up without adult supervision.

How wrong she was! (More on that in a moment.)

Christakis's husband, Nicholas Christakis, had made the following observation about campus hypersensitivity: "If you don't like a costume someone is wearing, look away, or tell them you are offended. Talk to each other. Free speech and the ability to tolerate offense are the hallmarks of a free and open society." Translation: if somebody wants to wear a kimono on Halloween, it's okay. More to the point, even where there is legitimate disagreement over what is right or appropriate, a little tolerance for the differing expressions and opinions of others goes a long way toward establishing a mature, lively, and healthy campus environment.

Mrs. Christakis's sensible email set off a frenzy of angry protests. Students protested outside the residential building where the Christakis family lived on campus. A cringe-inducing video of the scene uploaded to YouTube went viral. In the video, Nicholas Christakis is surrounded by students. He listens to their escalating complaints and insults, and tries to reason with them. The students respond with tears, jeers, and nasty insults. It's a demoralizing scene. But the details of the exchange are informative.

One student in the video is wearing a shirt with the words "Yale Latina" printed across the front. "You came in here," she says to Mr. Christakis. "You adapt to me. You understand that? You take care of me. And you haven't been doing that."

A girl with hoop earrings speaks up next. "You strip people of their humanity. You are creating space for violence to happen."

A third girl points her finger at his face. "I am sick, looking at you . . . You are disgusting. I want your job to be taken from you."

By this point in the video, several students are crying and holding each other. Others snap their fingers—a bizarre new trend on the radical Left meant to signal agreement. Purportedly, snapping is considered "less triggering" than clapping.

In another cellphone video of the incident, Mr. Christakis can be heard reasoning with students that "other people have rights too."

"Walk away," a student responds. "He doesn't deserve to be listened to."

And there you have it. In those seven words—"He doesn't deserve to be listened to"—we are given the prevailing attitude toward free speech on campus.

If you recognize the influence of a place like Yale, it's a demoralizing scene. There is enough political grandstanding in that short video clip to make you realize that future Ivy League-trained leaders of this country may bring an end to fair-minded statesmanship. The point is, if you are going to hold the reigns of

power in business or politics, it is important to learn a few simple skills such as: learning to disagree peaceably, granting your colleagues a reasonable presumption of goodwill, and avoiding petty or dishonest behavior.

You have heard it said that elections have consequences. In politics, it's equally true that a Yale education has consequences. When it comes to filling the big chairs in Washington, so often Americans face choices on the ballot that end up coming from just a handful of top schools. (Yale was on a hot streak with four alumni out of five in the White House between Ford and George "Dubya" Bush.) Yale is also pretty good at turning out Supreme Court justices. If this trend continues congress could be full of Christakis protestors in fifteen years. If that doesn't make you reach for your C-SPAN mute button, I don't know what will.

When I watch the video, and see the students shout and curse, I get the feeling that Christakis is almost incidental to the protestors' anguish and ire. He is a prop in their political theater. It's all about the performance of grievance, and the collective feeling of belonging to the company of the politically righteous.

In a 2017 essay entitled "The Primal Scream of Identity Politics," Mary Eberstadt identified the driving force behind today's identity politics. It might be the most important political essay written in the last ten years. "Identity politics," she writes, "cannot be understood apart from the preceding and concomitant social fact of the family implosion."¹ With the rise of single-parent households, and serial coupling and uncoupling, the disintegration of family and community has left a giant void of identity, which this generation is desperate to fill. Fewer than 65 percent of American children live with both biological parents, she points out.

Now, it is true that out-of-wedlock births and divorce rates are generally lower for the students who overwhelmingly populate elite universities. But those statistics mask other forms of relational brokenness, including abortion, and, especially, the long-term serial coupling and uncoupling that defines the lives of so many among the marriage-deferring, career focused, elite class. Divorce is hardly the only measure of family breakdown.

Moreover, if politics is a proxy for family these days, it may function even more so as a proxy for religion. The decline of religious belief Eberstadt doesn't discuss. But Eberstadt has put her finger on the core of the problem: young people are desperately craving identity—a purposeful narrative for their lives—and they often turn to a political tribe to fill the void. The present day obsessive focus on racial, gender, and political identity, Eberstadt suggests, is properly understood as a cry for help.

¹Mary Eberstadt, "The Primal Scream of Identity Politics," *Weekly Standard*, October 30, 2017.

Dangerous Opinions

Free speech and open inquiry ought to be a given in the university. The university ought to be a place where a broad range of ideas can be heard, studied, and debated. That's the ideal. The reality at Yale, as anyone who has spent much time there recently knows, is something very different. The problem stems from the dominance of identity politics. It is essential to defend your political tribe—it's a matter of existential importance. The tribalism generated by identity politics, when blended with the relativism that predominates on campus, results in a strangely irrational dogma: *You have your truth, and I have mine. But, by the way, if you disagree with me I want your head on a stick.*

Relativism is usually cloaked in the language of tolerance. But as identity politics reaches its fever pitch, tolerance is replaced by a hunger for belonging, sated largely by gathering together to hate political enemies. It is in this context that diverse political views became unbearable.

Intellectual diversity is a threat to the dominant multicultural tribe, and the political uniformity of faculty signals that Yale's leaders have crumbled before the tribe's directives. Administrative offices are safely within the tribe's boundaries as well. A recent poll revealed that twice as many Yale students identify as LGBTQ as identify as politically conservative, a consequence of an admissions office that scans applications for buzzwords indicating easy integration with the tribe.² Smart applicants know the buzzwords that lead to success, and to avoid mentioning their community service at the local evangelical church. (A Yale admissions counselor once confessed to me that the school almost never considered admitting homeschooled students because, she explained, those students had trouble "adjusting.") Conservatives who do get in learn to choose their words wisely, lest their grades suffer. A recent national poll by the William F. Buckley, Jr. program at Yale found that a majority of college students "often" feel intimidated if their ideas are different from those of their professors.³ This scarcity of conservative voices among students is yet another factor in the self-reinforcing political climate.

Campus politics is not about thoughtful ideology, so much as it is about tribal loyalty. Take the #MeToo movement, for example. It's fair to say that

²Eric Duran and Brooke Sopelsa, "More Harvard, Yale freshmen identify as LGBTQ than as conservative, surveys find," *NBCnews.com*, September 14, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/more-harvard-yale-freshmen-identify-lgbtq-conservative-surveys-find-n909781>

³"Survey: 41% of Students Say it is Sometimes Appropriate to Shut Down or Disrupt a Speaker on Campus," The William F. Buckley, Jr. Program, Yale University, <https://www.buckleyprogram.com/blog/survey-41-of-students-say-it-is-sometimes-appropriate-to-shout-down-or-disrupt-a-speaker-on-campus>

the attitude on Yale's campus toward Bill Clinton, for instance, is much more positive than it would be for another Yale Law grad, Clarence Thomas, even though the women lining up to accuse the former are more numerous and their allegations far more serious. Tribe trumps ideology. Bill Clinton's actual relationships with women become less important in this context; what matters more to most students is that Clinton belongs to the acceptable tribe. There are plenty of factions within liberal multiculturalism: black feminists vs. white feminists, environmentalists vs. unions, for example. But political party invariably unites them. It is the tribe of all tribes, and offers the possibility of real power.

In the absence of a strong family identity, young people look for meaning and belonging. It may be a feminist, a socialist, or a Democrat tribe. The only requirement is that the tribe define itself in some way as a victim of the predominantly white, western culture and its institutions. Thus, if you challenge such a person's tribal identity—perhaps by declaring that “there is only one race, the human race” or “I believe the most qualified person should get the job”—it is perceived as a threat to his existence. You threaten his life's meaning. It's much harder to practice tolerance if you think a challenge to your ideas is a challenge to your significance. It's a recipe for endless division. The hunger for identity is what fuels the mob-ready grievance culture that the Christakis video so starkly revealed.

Richard Levin's Legacy

This generational identity crisis is not of Yale's making. But we can question Yale's leaders for offering so little resistance to the spirit of the age. Salovey's predecessor, Richard C. Levin, was the first to preside over a Yale student body raised in the context of social media-fueled-24 hour-per-day Tweeting, posing, and virtue signaling. And while Levin didn't create the grievance culture, he didn't do much to prevent Yale from being swallowed up by the culture's pernicious brand of intolerance.

This much is undeniable: Richard Levin did almost nothing to promote ideological diversity. Certainly he supported the typical gender and race-based diversity hiring initiatives. But over Levin's twenty year presidency the ideological makeup of the faculty remained exceedingly one-sided. A survey of public records in the 2012 election year found that 97 percent of all donations by Yale faculty to the presidential election went to Democrats.⁴ That's in a year

⁴Christopher Peak, “Yale faculty give big to Democrats,” *Yale News*, November 16, 2012, <https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2012/11/16/89811/2>

in which the moderate Mitt Romney—a former blue state governor—carried the banner for Republicans.

Levin also failed to uphold academic standards. He presided over the rise of the infamous sleaze fest known as “Sex Week at Yale.” Started in 2002, the biannual event brought to campus an endless array of peddlers from the sex industry. Copycat events spread to dozens of colleges around the country. The commercialization of Sex Week was always its most notable feature. There were hard core porn producers and actresses promoting their films. Sex toy manufacturers selling their wares. For more than a week the university yielded its classrooms and lecture halls over to these commercial interests, giving them a free platform to promote their products. It grew more and more extreme each go round—until Levin allowed one live nude sadomasochistic demonstration too many. A wave of negative media coverage led to lots of calls from disgruntled donors, and lots of unflattering press. (Full disclosure: As a writer, I did more than my fair share to produce that unflattering press coverage.) The university had no choice but to clamp down and ban the more crass elements of the event. Sex Week lives on but in a tamer form.

Levin’s tenure also coincided with controversy around issues of sexual harassment and sexual assault on campus. In the midst of the Sex Week backlash, Yale was presented with a Title IX complaint brought by a group of female students and alumni, alleging that the university had fostered a demeaning and hostile sexual environment. It was more bad press for an institution that prides itself on women’s rights and boasts a large monument designed by Maya Lin called “The Women’s Table” on the central quad. One can stand and look at that monument all day, but it’s hard to believe in an institution’s commitment to women’s equality when they are screening violent porn in the classroom upstairs (showing a nude woman being beaten with a two-by-four—true story.)

In 2012, I published *Sex & God at Yale*, a book explaining how the abandonment of intellectual rigor and academic freedom helped fuel Yale’s conspicuous moral decline. A few days after reviews of the book came out, Richard Levin announced his retirement. Salovey was named as his replacement a few months after that.

Levin had some positive achievements. He raised a lot of money. He refurbished much of the physical campus. He brought stability to the administration. He ran the place like a capable CEO. But a university is more than a business. And a president’s work has to be measured by more than the size of the endowment. A university has to equip its students to think critically, consider diverse viewpoints, and understand the great books and ideas that make

up our intellectual history. No one looking at the Christakis video could seriously contend that Yale students are getting that kind of education today. And when a university fails to hire an intellectually diverse faculty, it sends a clear message to students that they should not have to engage with opposing views.

By treating ideological diversity as a non-issue, and by reinforcing the tide of relativism with low standards in the classroom, Levin helped create a climate on campus where students are less likely to have their prejudices challenged, and more likely to feel that there is no actual truth to be found. All that's left is my team vs. your team. That's the zero-sum, and zero-critical-thought game that leads us to the sad scene captured on the Christakis YouTube video. Too many students are stuck in a bottomless pit of social media posturing, where there is nothing more meaningful to do than to find the "bad guy" who thinks differently, line up for a cellphone video, and chant your way to a feeling of righteousness.

Peter's Problems

Peter Salovey has a mess on his hands. And, as nice as Salovey is, I worry that he may not be prepared to address the problem of groupthink, or to curtail the mob-mentality that grips students and even many professors. They speak the word diversity like a magic charm, as if it could wash away injustice with its mere utterance. All the while the word is used, in reality, to justify the sort of race discrimination the Left sanctions.

In September the U.S. Department of Justice opened an investigation into whether Yale discriminates against Asian Americans in its admissions decisions. Harvard is facing a lawsuit on a similar charge, which will, in all likelihood, end up at the Supreme Court. Salovey sent an email to university alumni in response to the investigation. "By bringing people of different backgrounds, talents, and perspectives together, we prepare our students for a complex and dynamic world," he wrote.

Yale wants "different backgrounds," just not too many Asians. And if they have to harm a few thousand of them every year to get the right look, they are willing to do it.

Yale also has a huge problem with administrative bloat. From 1996 to 2016, non-teaching management and professional staff grew by more than 77 percent, while the student population increased by only about 13 percent.⁵ At the same time, total cost of tuition, room, and board nearly doubled to just shy of \$70,000 per year. Jamie Kirchick, a journalist and occasional activist, attempted in

⁵Jamie Kirchick, "Skyrocketing Tuition at Yale," Facebook post, September 22, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/jamiefortrustee/photos/pcb.2067085986634830/2067081156635313/?type=3&theater>

2018 to get himself elected to the Yale Corporation—the university’s governing board. Kirchick ran on a dual platform. He wanted to cut back on the administrative bloat, and he wanted to provoke a renewed commitment to “classically liberal, Enlightenment” values of free expression and open academic inquiry. In a defeat that bodes ill for Yale’s future, Kirchick failed to garner enough signatures even to get his name on the ballot.

Peter’s Opportunities

Salovey has his work cut out for him. He is five years into his presidency, and the culture remains inhospitable to open academic inquiry. There have, nevertheless, been at least a couple of encouraging signs. Salovey published an op-ed last year in the *New York Times*, describing Yale as a place where every individual has “the right to think the unthinkable, discuss the unmentionable, and challenge the unchallengeable.”⁶ It was a description he borrowed from the Woodward Report—an official Yale document that endorsed freedom of expression in 1975.

Also, encouragingly, in 2018 Nicolas Christakis was named a Sterling Professor, the university’s most prestigious endowed chair. Nominations for the Sterling Professorship come from the university president himself. Some observers interpreted the promotion as Salovey’s show of support for Christakis, and, more broadly, for the principle of free academic expression. But this late-hour honor bestowed on Christakis (bestowed quietly over the summer break, I might add), after the university stood by and let him and his wife become the target of threats, demagoguery and harassment, suggests—at best—a clumsy and tentative commitment to academic freedom. Ultimately, the threat to free speech and intellectual freedom at Yale will require much bolder and more courageous resolve. Salovey must be willing to calmly face down the angry mob. He must offer more than op-eds in support of open inquiry. He must take action to back up those words. Does Salovey care enough about the free inquiry problem at Yale to do more than talk about it?

Salovey inherited a financially robust institution. Yale has a rehabilitated physical campus and \$27 billion in the bank. But Salovey also inherited an institution that is infected with a culture of malignant intolerance. That is a problem he must actively combat if he wishes to realize his vision of Yale as a place where one has “the right to think the unthinkable.” Salovey is less CEO in temperament than Levin was, and more of a pure academic at heart. In that

⁶Peter Salovey, “Free Speech, Personified,” *New York Times*, November 26, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/26/opinion/free-speech-yale-civil-rights.html?module=inline>

sense, he is better positioned than his predecessor to stay focused on Yale's most pressing problems—its lack of intellectual diversity, and its eroding climate for free speech.

For Salovey, the job of fixing what is broken at Yale will not be easy. But the opportunity for change is real. A serious commitment to free academic expression would be the first step. A serious commitment to intellectual diversity on the faculty would be the second. Of course, both of these commitments would face terrible opposition among the students and professors who have grown used to an environment where they almost never have to face opposing viewpoints, and almost never have to be made uncomfortable. Can Salovey stand up to the jeers of the student mob? Does he have the guts to hire some Republicans? That may be where Salovey's affable disposition becomes a disadvantage. He is, ultimately, perhaps too nice of a man for that job.