

Bruce Gilley's Orwellian Campus Nightmare

The Portland State University professor has faced a secret campus investigation for the last four months. He says it's because of an article he published.

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One should be careful about using the sobriquet Orwellian. But Portland State University (PSU) has earned it.

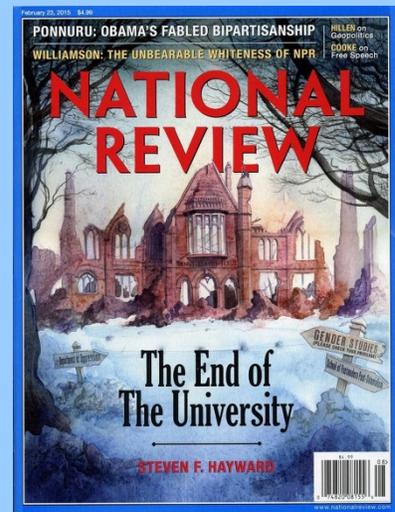
Speech codes and mob rule aren't the only threats to academic freedom on campus. Out-of-control educational bureaucracies are a problem, too. The latest example is Oregon's Portland State, where last fall, political-science professor Bruce Gilley published a scholarly article arguing that colonialism had certain social benefits. Apparently, Gilley has spent the last four months under secretive investigation by PSU's diversity office.

The incident offers a frightening window into how anti-bias bureaucracy is working on campus today. In September, Gilley, a tenured professor at PSU, provoked an uproar when *Third World Quarterly*, a peer-reviewed journal of international studies, published his article "The Case for Colonialism." In response to the article's publication, 15 members of the journal's editorial board resigned and online petitions urging its retraction garnered over 17,000 signatures — including those of a number of professors. Eventually, after the journal's editor received death threats, Gilley agreed to withdraw the article.

Gilley is no crank, provocateur, or fringe member of the PSU faculty. He earned his Ph.D. at Princeton and has been a tenured professor at PSU, which is a public university, since 2011. He has authored four books published by university presses, his research has appeared in peer-reviewed journals like *African Affairs*, *Policy Sciences*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *Politics and Policy*, and the *European Journal of Political Research*, and his scholarship has been cited more than 3,200 times since 2011. In other words, Gilley is a scholar who has, by the standards of the profession, earned the right to speak his mind when it comes to his field of study.

Last week, Gilley told the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that he's been subjected to a university investigation that began after the article was published:

Some students then filed a harassment claim against me, claiming that I'm engaging in prohibited harassment and discrimination. So for the last four months I've been subject to a wide-ranging investigation by our diversity office. I have an attorney now, and have been engaging in a lot of back and forth. This is a gross abuse of process. . . . And it's entirely motivated by my article.



Portland State confirmed the investigation to the *Chronicle*, but “declined to discuss details” beyond insisting that it “is not politically motivated, nor is it an investigation of the article.” A university representative blandly offered that, “The university is obligated to investigate any claims of discrimination and harassment made by students, faculty, and staff.” It remains to be seen whether the charge against Gilley was instigated by his article, as he avers. (That Gilley has spent the year on sabbatical and not in the classroom does raise questions about what else might have triggered the complaint.)

What is clear, though, is just how troubling things have gotten on campus. Portland State’s complaint apparatus, like that of many contemporary universities, invites students to anonymously report faculty, staff, and peers to campus bureaucrats and diversity officials for “bias” infractions along with actual prohibited behavior like discrimination or harassment. PSU’s Office of Equity & Compliance proudly hosts a Bias Response Team “committed to addressing bias incidents on campus” and advises students to “file a formal complaint of discrimination against anyone participating in a bias incident.”

What exactly is a “bias incident,” you ask? “Bias,” the PSU website explains, “is a state of mind, tendency, or inclination that impacts our behaviors and perceptions of others (either positively or negatively) based upon preconceived notions.” Bias can occur “intentionally or unintentionally,” and “can be directed toward an attitude, an individual, or group”. The university says a bias incident is “an offense against a person or property motivated in whole or in part by the offender’s bias against a protected class BUT [sic] may not rise to the level of a crime” and explains that “law enforcement investigates hate crimes” while university bureaucrats handle everything else.

In other words, university diversity officials have accorded themselves a right to investigate and sanction anyone accused of “intentionally or unintentionally” exhibiting an inappropriate “state of mind” with regards to “an attitude, an individual, or group.” What could go wrong?

Discrimination and harassment do happen on campus, of course, and it’s appropriate that institutions have policies and procedures for such circumstances. It’s equally imperative, however, that these measures not be used to persecute those with heterodox ideas. Otherwise, “academic freedom” becomes a phantasm. And when students are allowed, or even encouraged, to report views they dislike as “traumatic” harassment, anti-harassment policies turn into tools of thought suppression.

Gilley’s affair brings to mind a host of similar recent incidents. At Boise State University, a tenured political science professor was investigated by his faculty senate last fall after publishing a scholarly article critical of radical feminism. Last May, Northwestern University launched a Title IX investigation into tenured film-studies professor Laura Kipnis after her new book recounted her inquisitorial experiences during two prior Title IX investigations that were, themselves, triggered by an article she had published. The same month, a professor of Catholic theology at Duke Divinity School resigned after facing backlash and formal punishment for criticizing university-sponsored racial-sensitivity training.

Promises of academic freedom ring hollow when faculty who challenge prevailing campus orthodoxy must fear star-chamber inquisitions precipitated by nothing more than their unpopular scholarship. Anonymous complaints, secret investigations, obdurate bureaucracies — it's all less suited to an institution of higher learning than to the world of Orwell's dystopian imaginings.