

# You can't say that on campus

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The free-speech wars have broken out again. The battlefield this time is the little campus of Acadia University, located in bucolic Wolfville, N.S. The villain of the piece is Rick Mehta, an associate professor of psychology who's been teaching there for 14 years. Critics call him a free-speech absolutist whose outrageous views are endangering the safety and security of his students. He calls himself an independent thinker who offers different perspectives to challenge the prevailing narrative. This week, we learned that the campus administration has launched a formal investigation to determine just how dangerous he is. A letter he received from Heather Hemming, the vice-president of academic, said that the administration had received too many complaints to ignore. "The university has a legal responsibility to provide an environment free from discrimination, sexual harassment and personal harassment," it said.

We've been down this road before. You'd think that universities have learned a thing or two from the Jordan Peterson debacle. The University of Toronto's efforts to stifle Prof. Peterson backfired badly by helping to turn him into the Western world's foremost martyr to free speech. He's a rock star. Sensibly, the university is now leaving him alone.

Prof. Mehta is an unabashed Peterson fan. He, too, likes to whack away at current campus pieties. He has also said that Indigenous policies have fostered a victim mentality, and that he, personally, does not feel guilty for the wrongs done to historic populations before he was alive. (As an immigrant of East Indian descent, he can hardly be accused of white privilege, either.) The bill of indictment also includes statements he has made on social media, and sometimes in the classroom, about men and women and the fact that their career interests tend to differ. He thinks that the pay gap is largely fictional, that immigration policy needs vigorous debate and that introductory psych courses (such as the one he teaches) largely ignore the role of intellectual ability in determining social outcomes. In the real world, none of these views are particularly radical, and some are empirically correct. But in the hothouse world of today's universities, they are automatically racist, sexist and hateful. Probably his worst sin was to defend the speech rights of Conservative Senator Lynn Beyak, who was kicked out of caucus for failing to remove "racist" posts on her government website that supported her position on residential schools.

"He has a position of power at Acadia, and yet chooses to continuously belittle and oppose marginalized groups," one activist told the CBC. The Halifax activist is not a student at Acadia but started a petition against him anyway. The university said it

decided to launch a formal investigation after it received various complaints about him. (The university won't say who complained, or how many.) Prof. Mehta also got a warning letter from his supervisor telling him to stick to the curriculum in class.

Prof. Mehta has also attracted the ire of Matthew Sears, a classics professor at the University of New Brunswick. Prof. Sears maintains that a professor's right to free speech must be weighed against a student's right to be safe and supported. This view, which is widely held on campuses today, would have startled many of the professors who taught me. They delighted in shaking their students out of their comfortable positions. By contrast, today's professors are all too eager to make their students as comfortable as possible.

Sadly, it's the rare left-wing professor indeed who gets into hot water over issues of academic freedom. So long as you support the status quo, you can spout ridiculous nonsense to your heart's content and nobody will peep. For every academic like Prof. Mehta, there's probably 10 like Simon Springer, who plies his trade at the University of Victoria in B.C.

Prof. Springer is an anarchist-geographer, a new discipline to me. With fistfuls of scholarly papers to his credit (such as *The Anarchist Roots Of Geography: Toward Spatial Emancipation*), he is a good example of the inexorable leftward march of much of the academy. "I cultivate a cutting edge approach to human geography through a theoretical edifice that foregrounds emerging thematic concerns within the discipline by incorporating both poststructuralist critique and a radical revival of anarchist philosophy," he explains on his website. Perhaps his most celebrated work is a short paper succinctly titled *Fuck Neoliberalism*. The abstract in its entirety reads: "Yep, fuck it. Neoliberalism sucks. We don't need it." The message is bracingly concise, although what it has to do with geography of any sort is anybody's guess.

In my view, students don't need a safe space to protect them from the likes of Prof. Mehta. They need responsible adults to protect them from the likes of Prof. Springer, whose brand of rubbish is depressingly common at our institutions of higher learning. Nor is the irony hard to miss. The system that sucks so badly is the very system that made us rich and tolerant enough to provide Prof. Springer and his ilk with a very tidy living.

Too bad nobody complains about them. It's about time they did.