

The Weekend Interview with Heather Mac Donald: The Scourge of 'Diversity'

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FULL TEXT

New York – Heather Mac Donald may be best known for braving angry collegiate mobs, determined to prevent her from speaking last year in defense of law enforcement. But she finds herself oddly in agreement with her would-be suppressors: "To be honest," she tells me, "I would not even invite me to a college campus."

No, she doesn't yearn for a safe space from her own triggering views. "My ideal of the university is a pure ivory tower," she says. "I think that these are four precious years to encounter human creations that you're otherwise – unless you're very diligent and insightful – really never going to encounter again. There is time enough for things of the moment once you graduate."

In her new book, "The Diversity Delusion," Ms. Mac Donald, 61, explores how identity politics has diverted higher education from more elevated subjects. She warns of this ideology's spread to other cultural institutions and industries – Hollywood, Silicon Valley, Wall Street.

Ms. Mac Donald's Manhattan apartment proves that her own focus on current events hasn't distracted her from classical scholarship. Her living room is dominated by a piano, but when asked about it, she gets shy and self-deprecating. So I ask to see her bookshelves, not realizing I'll end up in nearly every room of the apartment. The books, neatly stacked and well-thumbed, span several languages.

It's no surprise that Ms. Mac Donald once aspired to teach. Working toward a master's in English at Cambridge, she became skeptical of the "deconstructionist" approach to literature espoused by the Yale professors she had revered as an undergraduate. Her love of language and problems of interpretation led her to Stanford Law School. She clerked for the liberal Judge Stephen Reinhardt, volunteered for the Natural Resources Defense Council, and took a job at the Environmental Protection Agency. But she pined for the classroom. "I realized," she says, "things in the humanities had gotten worse and worse, that identity politics had taken over. . . . I couldn't go home again." She set down roots at the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank, where she has worked since 1994. Her views are heterodox. She would seem a natural ally of Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff, authors of "The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure." They argue that college "snowflakes" are the products of overprotective childrearing, which creates oversensitive young adults.

Ms. Mac Donald doesn't buy it. Minority students disproportionately come from single-parent homes, so "it's not clear to me that those students are being helicopter-parented." To the contrary, "they are not getting, arguably, as much parenting as they need." If anyone is coddled, it's upper-middle-class whites, but "I don't know yet of a movement to create safe spaces for white males."

The snowflake argument, Ms. Mac Donald says, "misses the ideological component of this." The dominant victim narrative teaches students that "to be female, black, Hispanic, trans, gay on a college campus is to be the target of unrelenting bigotry." Students increasingly believe that studying the Western canon puts "their health, mental safety, and security at risk" and can be "a source of – literally – life threat."

She similarly thinks conservatives miss the point when they focus on the due-process infirmities of campus

sexual-misconduct tribunals. She doesn't believe there's a campus "rape epidemic," only a lot of messy, regrettable and mutually degrading hookups. "To say the solution to all of this is simply more lawyering up is ridiculous because this is really, fundamentally, about sexual norms."

Society once assumed "no" was women's default response to sexual propositions. "That put power in the hands of females," Ms. Mac Donald says. "You didn't have to bargain every time you didn't want to have sex. The male had to bargain you into yes. But you could say no, and you didn't have to exhaust yourself." Sexual liberationists claimed men and women were alike, and chivalry and feminine modesty were oppressive. "Now, the default for premarital sex is yes," Ms. Mac Donald says. "That gives enormous power to the male libido" at the expense of women.

The #MeToo movement is one reflection of this reality, but so is the growing realization that consensual sex isn't always healthy sex. To get back to the "no" default, students are "inviting adults back into the bedroom to write rules that read like a mortgage contract," Ms. Mac Donald says. Young women, meanwhile, are learning "to redefine their experience as a result of the patriarchy, whereas, in fact, it's a result of sexual liberation."

In her book, Ms. Mac Donald writes that "the only upside to the whole sordid situation" is "taking the fun out of college sex." So does she oppose all premarital sex? "Huh," she says. She pauses to think it over before acknowledging it would be unrealistic. Yet she says there is a societal benefit to sexually frustrating young men: "Channeling the male libido into other pursuits, like writing poetry to girls, is a good thing. Channeling it into studying is also a good thing. To becoming an alpha male when you graduate afterwards so that you can then become an even more attractive marital mate – that's a good thing."

When it comes to race, Ms. Mac Donald's views are more conventionally conservative. She argues that minorities could overcome economic and educational disparities by embracing "bourgeois values." She opposes all forms of affirmative action, and believes admissions and hiring should be based solely on aptitude tests and objective measures of performance. She even opposes the University of California's guaranteed-admissions plan, which admits the top 9% of students from every California high school, regardless of the school's overall performance. The mechanism is a covert way to reintroduce race into admissions, she says, in violation of Proposition 209, which prohibits race and sex preferences in California's public institutions.

But don't students who rise to the top of mediocre or failing schools exhibit exactly the bourgeois values Ms. Mac Donald lauds? "Some of these schools – it doesn't take a whole lot to be an honors student; you basically show up," she replies. Even when disadvantaged students truly have shown exceptional work ethic, unless their test scores pass muster, "I think the mismatch is far too powerful a problem."

That refers to the theory that preferences set up their intended beneficiaries for failure. They're suddenly expected to perform beyond their proven capabilities and to compete with peers who earned admission through merit. This helps explain why universities may feel racially hostile despite the best efforts of admissions officers, faculty and administrators. Minority students may be excluded from study groups or chosen last for class projects because of aptitude, not race. "That's heartbreaking," Ms. Mac Donald says, "but if you come to a university with one or two standard deviations below your peers of academic qualifications, the gap doesn't close."

So without affirmative action, how can kids born into poverty and dysfunction ever escape their circumstances? Ms. Mac Donald questions the premise: "What I also find striking about the defenses of racial preferences is the extraordinary snobbery and elitism on the part of the most selective schools – the assumption is that unless you go to Harvard or UC Berkeley, life is over for you," Ms. Mac Donald says. "To escape poverty, you just need to graduate from high school, hold a job – any job, minimum-wage job, full-time – and wait until you get married to have children. Nearly three-fourths of all people who follow those simple rules are not poor."

To accommodate affirmative-action beneficiaries, Ms. Mac Donald says, universities have lowered standards and established majors focused on identity and oppression: "There's even talk of being able to major in social justice, so there's a blurring, in some cases, of the line between disinterested academic scholarship and activism."

Ms. Mac Donald admits she doesn't know how to reverse this trajectory. She entertains the idea that students themselves should know better: "I don't want to engage in my own victimology and absolve people of

responsibility." Then again, she says, independent thinking is "hard to do when you have a critical mass of faculty who are promoting the narrative of ubiquitous discrimination."

What about the idea of actively enforcing viewpoint diversity? "I'm reluctant to have affirmative action for conservatives, just because it always ends up stigmatizing its beneficiaries," Ms. Mac Donald says. Still, she's concerned that as campuses grow increasingly hostile to conservatives, some of the best candidates may decide, as she did, that there's no space left for them.

Some conservatives attempt to match the hyperbole and theatrics of campus progressives. That isn't Ms. Mac Donald's approach. She understands "the thrill of bringing a Milo" – Yiannopoulos, a notorious provocateur – "who is absolutely fearless in using every rhetorical tool of contempt and derision at his fingertips to try and puncture politically correct nostrums. But it does allow the left to say, 'Oh, this is just a problem of these extremists.'" She declines to offer an opinion as to the wisdom of inviting Mr. Yiannopoulos to campus. But "to see me as a 'provocateur' is kind of ridiculous," she adds.

Leftist mobs don't make that distinction. As Ms. Mac Donald recalls the night in April 2017 when she needed a police escort and spoke to an empty hall at Claremont McKenna College, she stiffens, crosses her arms, and speaks softly.

The shades were pulled down at a guest suite-turned-safe house, she recalls, and the crowd outside grew louder and louder, chanting and wailing and drumming. "I don't want to sound melodramatic about this, because I was obviously not at huge risk of any physical danger," Ms. Mac Donald says. "But I did feel somewhat of an understanding of what the victims of the French Revolution felt, in waiting for the guillotine. Because you hear a mob that is, in fact, hysterical. And you don't know what's going to happen next."

What worries Ms. Mac Donald more than the mob is the destructive power of its animating ideas. If the university continues its decline, how will knowledge be passed on to the next generation, or new knowledge created? Ms. Mac Donald also warns of a rising white identity politics – "an absolutely logical next step in the metastasizing of identity politics."

"One of the great achievements of Western European civilization was to move beyond tribalism, to nation-states, to concepts of citizenship that transcend tribal identity," Ms. Mac Donald says. "And we've been playing with fire for the last 40 years in thinking we can keep this ethnic warfare thing at a low simmer rather than a hot boil."

Then there's the tragedy of individual students – those who wallow in victimhood yet enjoy an extraordinary privilege. As Ms. Mac Donald says wistfully: "They have at their fingertips what Faust sold his soul for, which is knowledge."

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Ms. Melchior is an editorial page writer at the Journal.

Credit: By Jillian Kay Melchior

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