



How 'Social Justice' Stopped the Keystone XL Pipeline

by Richard W. Rahn

It is rather ironic that those most active in trying to repress the freedom of speech and thought of others are most often found in the academy, high-tech information giants, and the press — or precisely those who ought to be the strongest defenders of liberty. Why is this?

From history, we know that periods of great flowering of human knowledge and material advancement were strongly associated with periods where free speech and thought were allowed — e.g., for a few decades in ancient Greece, during the Roman Republic (before the Empire), and the Enlightenment (Scottish, not French).

The most influential figures of the Enlightenment were Scots or Englishmen, and later Americans, notably Ben Franklin, George Mason, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. It is no coincidence that the industrial revolution began during the Enlightenment — which celebrated not only personal liberty but the right of private property and rule of law where everyone was treated equally.

Before the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution was the Reformation, which enabled at least partial free speech, and the decline of heretics being burned at the stake or otherwise being brutalized. John Knox (1514-1572) was the primary leader of the Scottish Reformation and founder of the Presbyterian Church of

Scotland. The Presbyterians believed that everyone (both men and women) should read the word of the Lord (the Bible) directly, which required them to be literate.

By 1700, the Scots had the highest rate of literacy in the world. Once they had read the Bible, they naturally wanted to read other things, which created a demand for books to be translated and printed in English, which enabled the debates of the Enlightenment to be quickly spread among the people.

The American Founders — being children of the Enlightenment — understood the flowering of free expression was critical to the development of a civil and prosperous society.

Unfortunately, this critical underpinning of American Society is increasingly under attack by know-nothings and/or those whose own insecurities or lust for power cause them to try to deny the rights of others.

Last week, I was sent an article by George Leef, writing in the journal of the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal (a North Carolina think tank dedicated to improving education), titled: “The Campaign to Stamp Out Academic Heresy.” The core of the article is a report on a paper written by Glenn Geher, a widely-published professor of psychology at SUNY–New Paltz.

Mr. Geher’s research stemmed out of a Free Speech Task Force that he was asked to head because of campus disruptions. As part of his effort, Mr. Geher invited well-known and highly-regarded professor Jonathan Haidt to give a talk at the school. Mr. Haidt argued “that academia cannot be devoted for the search for truth if it also has a political agenda.” Some found the speech enlightening and persuasive while others were “outraged.”

This led Mr. Geher to study the motivations of faculty members by asking them “how they prioritize five academic values: academic rigor, knowledge advantage, academic freedom, students’ emotional well-being, and social justice.”

The results showed among other things “that women had a stronger commitment to social justice and student emotional well-being than did men, and faculty who regarded themselves as ‘agreeable’ placed more emphasis on student well-being and social justice than did those who didn’t see themselves as especially agreeable — those in the latter group

placed greater emphasis on student learning and academic rigor.”

This helps explain that why those who publish studies showing how minimum-wage laws hurt the young, minorities and small-business people (the truly compassionate) are often subject to ad hominem attacks by opponents rather than methodologically sound studies that attempt to refute the argument.

Those who deal in feelings rather than facts, often justify their calls for censorship and repression by arguing that those who do not “feel” in the same way they do, must be bad people and hence have no rights. Take the term “social justice.” The word “justice” has had a rather specific meaning for several hundred years. Adding the word “social” as a modifier negates the word “justice,” since social justice is totally subjective where every person can have their own definition.

Last week, President Biden cancelled the Keystone XL pipeline which was to primarily carry Canadian crude oil to U.S. refineries. Certain “environmentalists” argued for the cancellation on the basis of “saving the environment” and “social justice.” The Canadians will continue to produce the oil as long as it is profitable — so they will ship it to the U.S. by rail and truck if the pipeline is not available, or ship it to a foreign buyer — most likely the Chinese.

Shipping oil by rail and truck is more damaging, dangerous and expensive to the environment than sending it through an underground pipeline — so how “just” is it to ban the pipeline? What is the “justice” behind firing all of the workers and suppliers who were building the pipeline? Most of the pipe and other supplies for the pipeline have already been produced. Are the social justice warriors going to pick up the costs?

As has oft been said, sloppy language leads to sloppy thinking, and sloppy thinking can lead to doing the unconscionable. Just ask Joan of Arc.

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