

Scottish NYU Student: U.S. Universities ‘Stifling’ and ‘Dangerously Insular’

In a recent article for [The Spectator](#), New York University journalism major Madeleine Kearns wrote about her first year at a U.S. university. The experience she describes does not sound very positive.

Kearns, who was born in Glasgow, Scotland describes an environment that would have looked like a parody of a university setting a generation ago: safe spaces that include massage circles and Play-Doh; a student body obsessed with microaggressions and gender pronouns; pervasive groupthink that targets non-conformists. (Kearns writes that she was promptly nicknamed “the cultural fascist” for saying she believed in objective standards of art.)

Fortunately, Kearns writes, she was able to spot fellow free thinkers, with whom she formed a book club. Meeting in an abandoned convent in Hell’s Kitchen, members discussed forbidden ideas and literature (Douglas Murray’s [The Strange Death of Europe](#), Laura Kipnis’s [Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus](#), and Walter Benn Michaels’s [The Trouble With Diversity](#)).

One senses in Kearns’ writing perhaps a touch of literary license. (If the image of her and her fellow students discussing censored ideas and verboten literature in a secret place sounds familiar, [there is a reason for that](#).) Regardless, she strikes at a troubling truth at that afflicts the modern university:

“It is riddled with paradox: safe spaces which are dangerously insular; the idea of ‘no absolutes’ (as an absolute); aggressive intolerance for anything perceived as

intolerant; and censorship of ideas deemed too offensive for expression. It's a form of totalitarianism and it's beginning to infect British universities, too."

Note that Kearns writes this emphasis on ideological conformity is "beginning" to infect the United Kingdom, too, implying that the sickness has already infected America. It's an interesting statement considering that few ideas in the American tradition are more repellant.

Conformity is perhaps the greatest sin one finds in America's literary works, and the source of much conflict. In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck is forced to choose between conforming to the laws of society, which would require turning Jim over to authorities, and his own sense of justice and morality. Huck does the right thing, choosing not to betray the runaway slave, but floats away on their raft "feeling bad and low, because I knowed very well I had done wrong." His ability to resist conforming to society's perverse laws and systems of thought is the source of his heroism.

Similar anti-conformity themes can be found in many of the great works, including *The Scarlett Letter*, *Catcher in the Rye*, *Lord of the Flies*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In film, the anti-conformity also looms large; think films such as *Dead Poet's Society*, *Footloose*, *Fight Club*, and the X-Men movies.

Despite this emphasis on individuality in the American tradition, the pressure to conform seems engrained in the human experience.

"The individual has always had to struggle to keep from being overwhelmed by the tribe," Kipling once wrote. "To be your own man is a hard business. If you try it, you'll be lonely often, and sometimes frightened. But no price is too high to pay for the privilege of owning yourself."

The great irony, of course, is that many of the people who today are demanding conformity are often the very same ones preaching diversity. Americans would do well to remember that a conformist society would be dreadfully dull, and undynamic.

As Robert Frost once said, “I’m against a homogenized society because I want the cream to rise.”

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