

# Moral policing has no place in universities

**MATREYI ISLAM**

LAST month, a professor of gender studies of the Department of Development Studies, Dr Md Reazul Haque, was suspended following allegations of showing "obscene material" in one of his classes. Surely, a good thing, one would think, of suspending someone for immoral behaviour, that too in a place of learning.

But since then, the slides in question were uploaded on social media, and strangely, their content is not what seems amiss, but the decision taken by the university to suspend a teacher for highlighting some important perspectives about gender and sexual violence. That too in a gender studies class! So much for universities being places to question one's biases, unlearn assumptions, and engage in critical thinking.

The slides contain news pictures and illustrations which depict the way that public policy and perspectives are not gender sensitive. True, it shows a picture of an activist of a certain political party making a crude gesture towards women lawyers of the opposite party by trying to show his private parts. But according to definition, pornography is the depiction of activity or organ "intended to stimulate sexual excitement." The picture does not explicitly show any private parts. By definition alone, the claim that the teacher was showing obscene material in class falls flat. Another slide depicts a woman with bruises on her shoulder after she had been domestically abused. Is violence against women a subject not fit to be discussed in a gender studies master's programme? Or for that matter, is it wrong to discuss LGBT issues in a gender studies class?

At this point, one must ask, what exactly the authorities think as being the role of universities? To create new knowledge and critically analyse ideas, even if they may be uncomfortable? Or is intellectual thought subservient to dominant ideologies or pressure? If questioning and engaging in debate about the politics of sexuality is considered taboo or obscene, then why even keep any of the liberal arts subjects in our universities? Any subject of the humanities, and even the



sciences, should foster creative debates and question the norms. If regurgitating known and accepted information is education, why not just teach students enough to make a living, and dispense with these "obscene" subjects altogether?

Sadly, the suppression of everything that is beautiful about education in the name of ideologies is becoming more common. From the encroachment of Hefazat in the public education curriculum, to our history of censoring literature that might "influence" young minds, the examples are countless. We forget that when the text about the love between Kuber and Kopila of *Padma Nodir Majhi* is completely cut out from the textbook taught to students, they are only more titillated. They find a way to learn about what is not taught, except they learn it distorted; in a way which makes everything profane. At this rate,

literature too might come under the radar: no more discussions on *Lady Chatterley's Lover* or *Anna Karenina* or *Madame Bovary*? Actually, literature has come under the radar as the recent omissions of essays and stories from the Bengali textbooks of the school level shows.

More than the actual banning of supposedly sensitive topics is the dread of self-censorship that this trend may encourage. Given the response of the university authorities in dealing with the matter, are teachers now to weigh the potential social outrage a topic might cause every time they discuss something in class? Compare the incident at hand with the number of sexual harassment cases against teachers of different departments. Without naming names, a quick search or conversation with students shows that many of the teachers are still working in

the university without any repercussion or slight reprimands even after having been accused of harassing students.

Who knows how many incidents go unreported? One would think having a free and open conversation about these issues would be a good thing. Sensitising students as well as having safe spaces where issues of gender and harassment can be discussed should be the norm in ideal universities, not punished.

We aren't the only ones promoting self-censorship. India has had recent battles with right-wingers in campuses about what constitutes dissent. Writers like Romila Thapar and Arundhati Roy have been harassed and called seditious recently because of their outspoken criticism against encroachment of certain ideologies. Yet there has been a debate. There have been voices speaking out against extremist Hindutva ideology for trying to redefine

and rework India's history to fit their views. On our part, except a few newspapers which blandly iterated that a teacher has been suspended for showing "obscene material" and the few individuals who have spoken out, the incident has passed almost unnoticed.

Of course, Bangladesh has a past which hasn't been too troubled by censorship and cracking down on intellectual thought. Our writers have mostly been able to articulate and question norms and start debates. Except the recent instances of writers being killed for their writing, the intellectual policing that one reads of in the history of many countries have never been the norm. But that is not enough. It would not be amiss to ask ourselves now, what the role of university education and its teachers should be. It might be relevant to remember the words of Drew Gilpin Faust, president of Harvard University, in a speech before the Royal Irish Academy at Trinity College: "When we define higher education's role principally as driving economic development and solving society's most urgent problems, we risk losing sight of broader questions, of the kinds of inquiry that enable the critical stance, that build the humane perspective, that foster the restless scepticism and unbounded curiosity from which our profoundest understandings so often emerge. Too narrow a focus on the present can come at the expense of the past and future, of the long view that has always been higher learning's special concern."

Our access to knowledge, books, and ideas today is unprecedented in human history. This should translate into more critical debates, engendering new ideas and appreciation of the impact these may have on making society a better place. We must not let our small instances of self-policing, weighing every thought before it is uttered, or politically expedient sacrifices of what we teach and allow to be taught, escalate into something that makes institutions of fostering critical thinking into places where one merely receives degrees for economic solvency.

The writer is a freelance contributor.

## PROJECT SYNDICATE

# Are we richer or poorer than our ancestors?



J. BRADFORD DELONG

TODAY, the world's population is, on average, about 20 times richer than it was during the long Agrarian Age. Between 7000 BC and 1500 BC, resources were scarce, technological progress was slow, and Malthusian pressures kept almost all human populations at a near-subsistence level, with *per capita daily* income of less than USD 1.50 in today's terms.

In 2017, only around 7 percent of the world's population is that poor. Consider a scenario in which we took the total monetary value of what we currently produce, and used it to purchase the types of goods and services that people living on USD 1.5 per day consume. The average daily global-output value would be USD 30 per person (at current prices).

That is our roughly USD 80 trillion of annual global income today. And while the fruits of global productivity are not equally distributed by any stretch, our society's overall wealth today would leave our Agrarian Age predecessors dumbstruck.

Moreover, we do not produce and consume the same things that our near-subsistence ancestors did. In 2017, 40,000 kilocalories a day in basic grains wouldn't do anyone much good. Meanwhile, analogues to common goods and services that we now consume would have been absurdly expensive in the Agrarian Age. And in many cases, such analogues couldn't even be considered. Tiberius Claudius Nero could not have dined on strawberries and cream during the first century BC, because nobody thought to put those two items together until the Tudor courtier Cardinal Thomas Wolsey's cooks served it in the sixteenth century.

In 1606, there was only one person who

could sit at home and watch a bloody audiovisual drama about witches. His name was James Stuart, the king of England and Scotland. He had William Shakespeare and the King's Men on retainer. Today, more than four billion people with smartphones, tablets, and televisions enjoy a form of on-demand entertainment that was once reserved for absolute monarchs.

To take one more example, the richest man in the early nineteenth century, Nathan Mayer Rothschild, died in his fifties from an infected abscess. Had he been given the option to hand over all his wealth for one dose of modern antibiotics, he probably would have.

So, it is actually misleading to say that a

*People today enjoy not just abundance, but an unprecedented variety of choices, which constitutes a significant boost to overall wealth. But just how significant is that boost?*

typical person today is 20 times richer than his or her Agrarian Age predecessor, because consumer choices now extend far beyond the goods and services that were broadly available back then. People today enjoy not just abundance, but an unprecedented variety of choices, which constitutes a significant boost to overall wealth.

But just how significant is that boost? Statisticians at the US Department of Commerce's Bureau of Economic Analysis, and at its sister agencies in other countries, have struggled to measure the role of increased "variety" in productivity. According to standard estimates, annual labour productivity growth in

the North Atlantic region averaged 1 percent from 1800 to 1870, 2 percent between 1870 and 1970, and 1.5 percent since then – with a possible slowdown in the past decade. But this is largely an estimate of how we have improved at making bare necessities for the world's poor; it does not measure how much our lives have been enriched by higher productivity.

We owe much of this enrichment to innovations that have fundamentally transformed human civilisation. These include flush toilets, automobiles, electric power, long-distance communications, modern information processing, and so forth.

Again, it would have been ludicrously expensive – or simply impossible – to have achieved similar capabilities in earlier periods of history. In the late Roman Empire, only a wealthy aristocrat could have purchased a *nomenclator* – a slave tasked with memorising names and faces, and reminding the aristocrat of them when social occasions demanded it. Today, having a basic smartphone is better than having an entourage of a dozen, or even thousands, of *nomenclator*-like assistants.

In thinking about the future of growth, and the opportunities that continued growth will open up for all of humanity, we should reflect on how far we have come. I have been stymied in my own attempts to measure the sheer scale of economic growth in the North Atlantic over the past 200 years, but I am confident that output has increased 30-fold or more. How much more growth can we count on, and what will it mean for who we will become? If the past is any guide, we cannot possibly know. Tomorrow's strawberries and cream hasn't been invented yet.

The writer, a former deputy assistant US Treasury secretary, is Professor of Economics at the University of California at Berkeley and a research associate at the National Bureau of Economic Research.

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**BEETLE BAILEY**

IT'S NICE OF YOU TO FILL IN FOR SARGE ON OUR FRIDAY DATE

NO PROBLEM, HE WAS CALLED TO A MEETING

**BY MORT WALKER**

I HEARD YOU ALWAYS START BY ARM WRESTLING

**BABY BLUES**

MOM, ARE YOU IN CHARGE OF DAD?

OF COURSE NOT, WE'RE PARTNERS.

BUT YOU'RE IN CHARGE, RIGHT?

ZOE: YOUR DAD AND I ARE EQUALS!

**BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT**

DARRYL! TELL HER!

WHATEVER YOU SAY, BOSS.

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**PAULO FREIRE**  
BRAZILIAN EDUCATOR AND PHILOSOPHER

*True generosity consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity. False charity constrains the fearful and subdued, the "rejects of life," to extend their trembling hands. True generosity lies in striving so that these hands — whether of individuals or entire peoples — need be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work and, working, transform the world.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

<b>ACROSS</b>	29 Whittle down	7 Parrot
1 "Pygmalion" playwright	31 Swiss peak	8 Appeared gradually on the screen
5 "Can I give you --?"	32 In need of calamine	9 Directions
10 Cerberus guards it	36 In love	11 Clinched
12 Truman's hometown	39 Frothy brew	17 Gene messenger
13 Battery end	40 Salk's study	19 Sailor
14 Digression	41 Draw out	22 Sailor
15 Flatfoot	43 Build	24 TV's "-- Girls"
16 On paper	44 Swift	25 Gets up after a tackle
18 Siamese baby	45 Office sights	27 Got together
20 Say further	46 Pills, in slang	28 Betrayed surprise
21 First person		30 Homer's dad
22 Frank McCourt book	<b>DOWN</b>	33 Graybrown
23 Wise teacher	1 Rough hut	34 Spanish hero
26 Hymn closer	2 Vietnam's capital	35 Requires
28 Fizz ingredient	3 Take on	37 Clock sound
	4 Unite	38 Young ones
	5 Jai --	42 Block up
	6 Endure	

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

O	D	E	S	S	A	A	C	I	D
D	A	S	H	E	D	P	A	R	E
E	M	C	E	E	D	P	L	A	N
A					S				
H	U	F	F	L	A	B	L	E	
A	V	A	B	A	D	N	A	M	E
Y	U	L	A	G	E	C	A	N	
E	L	L	I	S	O	N	K	I	T
S	A	B	L	E	O	S	L	O	
A					L				
D	O	C	S	I	B	I	S	E	S
A	N	K	A	D	E	C	E	N	T
N	O	S	Y	S	T	E	A	D	Y

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