

RIDLEY

Blazing Saddles a dim memory as society enters a new dark age

WORLD COMMENTARY

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Mel Brooks said last week that comedy was becoming impossible in this censorious age and he never could have made his 1974 film *Blazing Saddles* today. A recent poll found 38 per cent of Britons and 70 per cent of Germans think the government should be able to prevent speech that is offensive to minorities. If you give a commencement speech at a US university these days and don't attract a shouty mob, you're clearly a nobody.

3 "There's an almost religious quality to many of the protests," says Jonathan Haidt of New York University, citing the denunciations.

2 Bret Weinstein tweeted last week: "We are witnessing the sabotage of the core principle of a free society — rationalised as self-defence." He is a left-wing former biology professor at Evergreen College in Washington state, who objected to white students and professors being asked to stay away from the university for a day on the grounds that this was a form of racism. For this he was confronted by a mob, and the university authorities told the campus police to stand down rather than protect him.

4 The statue-toppling mob has now turned its wrath on Francis Crick, co-discoverer of the structure of DNA. In a display of "virtue signalling... written with the sanctimonious purity of a Red Guard during China's Cultural Revolution", as the biologist Jerry Coyne puts it, a Harvard academic has written in *The Guardian* that Crick's name should be removed from the Francis Crick Institute because of some things he once said about eugenics.

it was Watson not Crick - see para 1046 FREEDOM
signalling how virtuous you are

5 The no-platforming, safe-space, trigger-warning culture is no longer confined to academia, or to America, but lies behind the judgmentalism of many social media campaigns. Every writer I know feels he or she is one remark away from disgrace. A de facto blasphemy prohibition has re-emerged in Western society and is being enforced not just by the Islamists who murder cartoonists, but, as Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the black, feminist victim of female genital mutilation has experienced, by the Southern Poverty Law Centre, which called her an anti-Muslim extremist.

Countries where in my youth women wore miniskirts in public now enforce hijabs or burkas. Sharia law, homophobia and explicit antisemitism are spreading in Britain, where in some state-funded schools four-year-olds are made to wear hijabs. Turkey's government has joined US Christian evangelicals in trying to expunge evolution from the school curriculum.

1 This is not just about Islam, though it is curious how silent feminists are on Islamic sexism. The enforcement of dogma is happening everywhere. Members of a transgender campaign group have refused to condemn an activist for punching a feminist. Anybody questioning the idea that climate change is an imminent catastrophe, however gently, is quickly labelled a "denier" (ie a blasphemer). How bad is this spasm of intolerance going to get? Perhaps it is a brief hiatus in rationalism, a dimming of the hard-won secular enlightenment, which will soon rebrighthen after doing little harm. Or perhaps it is like China's Cultural Revolution: a shortlived but vicious phenomenon confined to one part of the world that will do terrible harm then cease.

6 Or maybe the entire world is heading into a great endarkenment, in which an atmosphere of illiberal orthodoxy threatens the achievement of recent centuries.

"The world simply cannot afford an American descent into illiberal tyranny," says Weinstein.

My optimism has been shaken by an eloquent new book, *The Darkening Age*, by Catherine Nixey. Her topic is the Christian takeover of the Roman empire, and her argument is it was more violent, intolerant and destructive than we have been led to believe. Edward Gibbon argued in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* that Christianity was more damaging than barbarian invasions to classical civilisation. But Nixey tells the tale with fresh passion and horrifying detail.

As she recounts, in the fourth and fifth centuries, in Alexandria, Athens, Rome and elsewhere, "the Christian church demolished, vandalised and melted down a simply staggering quantity of art. Classical statues were knocked from their plinths, defaced, defiled and torn limb from limb. Temples were razed to their foundations and burned to the ground... many of the Parthenon sculptures were attacked... monasteries start to erase the works of Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca and Archimedes. 'Heretical' — and brilliant — ideas crumble into dust. Pliny is scraped from the page. Cicero and Seneca are overwritten. Archimedes is covered over. Every single work of Democritus and his heretical 'atomism' vanishes. Ninety per cent of all classical literature fades away."

In 415AD, Hypatia of Alexandria, the finest mathematician and philosopher of her day, was seized by a Christian mob, urged on by "Saint" Cyril, who objected to her symbols and astrolabes, which seemed to prove she was an emissary of Satan. They dragged her to a church, stripped her naked, flayed her alive, gouged out her eyes and burnt her body. In 529AD the philosopher Damascius was forced by Christians to close the Academy in Athens, more than

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900 years after it began its history of rich intellectual inquiry. In the words of the Princeton historian Brent Shaw, the Christians brought "a hectoring moralising of the individual, and a ceaseless management of the minutiae of everyday life. Above all, it was a form of speech marked by an absence of humour. It was a morose and a deadly serious world. The joke, the humorous kick, the hilarious satires, the funny cut-them-down-to-size gibe, have vanished." If this reminds you of Mel Brooks's remark, or Evergreen College, or sounds a bit like ISIS today, note that the Christians also desecrated Palmyra.

The struggle to shake off this censorious culture was long and difficult. Although Christianity became less nasty, as late as the 18th century Voltaire, Rousseau, Hume and Smith had to watch what they said for fear of persecution. Bit by bit, however, they won the right to question everything, mock anything and challenge everybody.

I am fairly certain that the Enlightenment is not over, that discovery and reason will overwhelm dogma and superstition. Seven years ago my book *The Rational Optimist* set out a positive vision of the world. But the spread of fundamentalist Islam, the growth of Hindu nationalism and Russian autocracy, the intolerance of dissent in Western universities and the puritanical hectoring of social media give grounds for concern that the flowering of freedom in the past several centuries may come under threat. We have a fight on our hands.

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Alt-right figure Milo Yiannopoulos is shielded by security before a speech at the University of California, Berkeley

AFP