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Harvard's Crucible

A question of academic freedom, and meritocracy, and sense

STEPHAN THERNSTROM

The battle between Harvard president Larry Summers and the university's Faculty of Arts and Sciences reached a climax on March 15, when 218 members of the faculty voted that they "lacked confidence" in his leadership, with 185 opposed and 18 abstentions. A second resolution expressed "regret" about Summers's "mid-January statements about women in science and the adverse consequences of those statements for individuals and for Harvard," and about "aspects of the President's managerial approach." Only 137 faculty members voted nay on that one, and 253 supported it. In the end, then, almost two out of three condemned Summers for his expressed views, his leadership style, or both.

This is the first such faculty revolt to take place in a major research university in the United States. A majority of the faculty behaved with total disregard for the principle that is the life blood of the university: academic freedom. And the issue of academic freedom, in this instance, was inextricably linked to another principle of critical importance to higher education: meritocracy.

In his nearly four years at Harvard's helm, Summers has made many enemies. His strong public comments attacking anti-Semitism on the nation's campuses, his support of ROTC, and his less-than-reverential treatment of then-Harvard professor Cornel West outraged leftist faculty members. His brusque and abrasive personal style, as well as his determination to concentrate more power in the president's office, have alienated others. But the opportunity to humiliate him was created by remarks about the scarcity of female professors in many branches of science at elite universities. His comments, made at a closed-door conference at the National Bureau of Economic Research in Cambridge in January, ignited the firestorm of criticisms that led to the faculty revolt.

But the story does not begin with Summers's NBER comments. A meeting of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences a month earlier was devoted almost entirely to the topic of "gender equity" within the Harvard faculty. That December discussion was a triumph for the Women's Caucus, which claims to speak for women faculty members and, with few exceptions, apparently does. The caucus is an unofficial body, but there is an official Standing Committee on Women, which is nothing more than the Women's Caucus in an official hat. That committee set the agenda for the meeting and its aim was straightforward: to increase the number of female faculty members. Greater gender diversity is urgently needed, the committee said, because "only" 23 percent of the junior faculty and 18 percent of the senior faculty are female, while women are half of the students enrolled in Harvard College.

With the sole exception of some brief critical comments by Prof. Harvey Mansfield, the most vocal conservative on the faculty, the December discussion entailed about as much of a clash of contending ideas as a typical church service on Sunday morning. No one

asked whether making greater efforts to hire women would conflict with the meritocratic standard of hiring the best individual from a list of candidates. The tension between these two aims would seem obvious, but not to the faculty members assembled that day. One dean opined that diversity and intellectual merit were not “discrete goals” but were rather “intertwined,” and that the university should seek to hire people who would make the greatest intellectual contribution and also contribute to gender diversity. But clearly, if the school selects one candidate over another because the former contributes to “diversity,” then diversity trumps academic merit unless the two candidates are indistinguishable in their intellectual attainments and potential. If Harvard hopes to hire the nation’s most promising demographer, searching for the best female demographer may not yield the best or even the third-best scholar.

The search for gender diversity is at war with merit except in cases in which there is pervasive discrimination against women. Some insinuated that this was the case at Harvard today — that the “old boy” networks were being succeeded by “young boy” networks governed by a new generation who are no less gender-exclusive than their predecessors. (No one made any reference to the “old girl” and “new girl” networks that play a powerful role in some departments today.)

In opening the December meeting, Summers declared his belief that achieving greater gender diversity within the Harvard faculty was of “great importance” and that serious discussion of how the university could improve its “unacceptable” record was essential. At its close, he called the conversation a valuable exercise in “collective consciousness-raising.”

A TALE OF TWO LARRYS

And so Summers’s remarks at the National Bureau of Economic Research a month later came as a shock. The NBER gathering focused on the issue of women in science, and a different Larry Summers appeared on stage. Offering what he termed “provocative” hypotheses, he suggested that the paucity of female scientists teaching in elite universities might not be evidence of discrimination in hiring. Rather, the gender imbalance was perhaps a consequence of socialization, with the result that men and women had different ambitions and preferences. Having children interfered more with the careers of women than those of men. Furthermore, Summers dared to suggest, some research indicates that there could be a biological source for sex differences at the top of the distribution of certain highly specialized scientific talents.

The passion and bitterness of the ensuing attacks upon Summers may be understandable, however misguided. How could a man who had suddenly questioned the assumption that the key problem was discrimination be trusted to insist on the appointment of many more women to the faculty? Summers’s response to the criticism was to apologize, apologize, and apologize again, in ever more abject terms. Exchanges with better-informed faculty members, he said, had convinced him of the error of his ways, though he failed to clarify exactly what he had gotten wrong. He was a “changed man,” he fervently assured those in attendance at a special faculty meeting in late February. And he announced that he was appointing not one but two new committees to examine what could be done to engineer greater gender diversity on the Harvard faculty. He was back to the Larry Summers of

December, who had seemed determined to do whatever it took to get the gender balance on the faculty right.

Two regular meetings of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, in February and March, as well as an additional special meeting in between, were devoted exclusively to the controversy. Conspicuously absent from the six hours of discussion was any consideration of the substance of the issues Summers had addressed at the NBER. Were there both gender differences in socialization and deeper biological differences that accounted for male domination in certain scientific fields? Perhaps the faculty included competent scientists who believed that the research upon which Summers relied was so profoundly flawed as to be worthless. But no one took the floor to say so. Truth was apparently no defense in this libel trial. Steven Pinker, a professor of psychology, made the most penetrating observation of the day: A university, he said, “is supposed to be a place where ideas are evaluated by reasoned debate informed by the relevant literature, not by a show of hands of the faculty who happen to show up to a meeting on a Tuesday afternoon.” He went on to ask, “Is it really appropriate for the Harvard faculty to *vote* on whether the statistical distributions of visuospatial abilities in men and women have the same variance? How many of those voting have done a literature search to examine the studies that President Summers was alluding to in making those claims? What’s next — a vote on whether an asteroid led to the extinction of the dinosaurs?” No one rose to challenge this undeniable truth, but a majority of those voting paid it no heed.

Both Ruth Wisse, a professor of Yiddish literature, and I also spoke at length about the implications for academic freedom of a vote of no confidence or censure. Are there ideas about controversial issues that must remain unspoken, or research to which one cannot refer? Vigorous criticism of Summers was entirely appropriate, but his critics were not arguing with him. They were trying to silence him, and they’ve clearly succeeded in doing so.

POLICING THE ‘COMMUNITY’

What triggered this controversy is instructive. Nancy Hopkins, a professor of biology at MIT, attended the NBER conference, an academic meeting closed to the public and the press. Professor Hopkins was so offended by the suggestions made by Summers, she said, that she felt she would vomit unless she rushed from the room. So she did rush out, and proceeded to inform the *Boston Globe* of her travail. If hearing ideas that she deeply disagreed with made her physically ill, Professor Hopkins’s temperament would seem poorly suited for academic life, which is all about free inquiry and unfettered debate.

A similar emotional response came from one of Summers’s critics at the March meeting, who claimed that his NBER remarks had set the cause of women at Harvard back by 40 years. This critic was particularly concerned about the comments’ “highly discouraging” impact on female undergraduates and graduate students, whom she called “the most vulnerable group in our community.” Women at Harvard were “already under great social and institutional pressure,” and now Summers had made their difficult lot even harder. These remarks, astonishingly, seemed to imply that full equality for women in the university of the 21st century will entail a reversion to Victorian notions of what is proper

to say in the company of a lady. Women are apparently the equals of men in every possible way except their special “vulnerability” to ideas they don’t like.

Closely linked in the debate to the idea of women as “vulnerable” was the notion that Harvard is a “community,” and that Summers had advanced ideas that violated the norms of that community. A classicist even spoke lovingly of Harvard as a polis, and others echoed his usage. (Of course, no one mentioned how Socrates met his death.) One colleague suggested that academic freedom was ever so important, but that our academic freedom was somehow “premised on” our membership in a community that assumed all people are equal. Summers’s NBER comments were heretical because they were inconsistent with the dogma of equality.

Is Harvard University really a “community” that requires ideological conformity? The First Baptist Church of Peoria is such a community, with a common conception of God and how best to worship Him. Possibly Bob Jones University is such a community. But no great university can retain its greatness if it attempts to enforce the equivalent of a religious creed on its members. What really holds the members of the Harvard “community” together is much more limited: It is — or at least it used to be — a common commitment to pursue the truth through disciplined scholarship, and a faith that freedom of inquiry is the best means to arrive at the truth. The “provocative” remarks made by Summers are entirely consistent with that older community norm — but not, of course, with the new creed now ascendant among the faculty.

EATING THEIR CAKE AND HAVING IT TOO

An unintentionally ironic postscript to this whole sorry affair was provided by the reliably liberal *Boston Globe*, which had broken the initial story and done its best to keep it alive. Three days after the March 15 meeting, the paper published an op-ed by a female “management consultant” who argued that American business was “too blue” — i.e., too masculine — and needed more “pink,” with feminine perspectives at the top. The author referred to the research of a Cambridge University scientist who had distinguished “systematizing skills (that is analytical skills and the ability to manipulate abstractions and models mentally)” from “empathizing skills (the ability to understand and relate to other people’s emotions).” The former was a trait of “the male brain” and the latter of the female brain. This, of course, sounds like a cruder version of the hypothesis that got Larry Summers in trouble. If you believe it, you might logically conclude that departments of physics are correct in placing a heavy premium on the former and zero on the latter. If this argument had any merit, we might expect to find more female professors of English than of physics, just as Summers suggested.

But the piece was framed as an argument for hiring *more* female executives, and thus illustrates one of the most remarkable traits of contemporary feminism: its breath-taking ability to work both sides of the street, insisting that males and females are identical in every important way when the assertion serves their immediate end, and then switching without pause to the opposite view that women are fundamentally different from men when that serves the same end better.

Larry Summers will very likely keep his job, bloodied and very much bowed. He was not elected by the faculty but by the Harvard Corporation, which has shown no sign that it thinks his ability to lead the massive development of an enlarged campus and to raise the required money has been damaged beyond repair. But the university's ability to raise megabucks from its alumni may indeed suffer, if the feminists conduct a successful campaign to persuade donors to boycott the school until Summers is replaced. Some might hold out until Harvard picks its first female president. Certainly Summers's ability to insist that female candidates recommended for permanent appointments at Harvard meet the same high standards applied to men has been diminished. And if he was named president because he was thought to be a tough guy who could push through some ambitious plans, one wonders whether the kinder, gentler Larry can play that role.

In any event, this episode is sad news for defenders of academic freedom and meritocracy at Harvard and elsewhere in the land. It is astonishing that it could have happened at a great university whose motto is Veritas.

Mr. Thernstrom is the Winthrop professor of history at Harvard. His books include two with his wife, Abigail, the more recent of which is *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*.