



ENQUIRY

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#StressAndExcellence

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#WeCreatedTrump

Stress and Excellence at Hamilton

By PHIL PARKES
GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

As the alarm clock on my iPhone rings, a flood of energy and stress washes over me, and I slowly become conscious of the ambitious deadlines I set for myself the night before. It is a new morning at Hamilton. Although I and probably hundreds of others are eager and willing to embrace this kind of lifestyle, sometimes I cannot help but wonder why.

I think we tell ourselves it is ambition, or maybe even noblesse oblige, that drives us in the challenging moments. This is no doubt partly true, but perhaps it is not totally clear why overachieving Hamilton students work as hard as they do. Given the strange kind of pride I witness in myself and my classmates as we consistently complain about our packed schedules, and given the rise in demand for health/counseling center services, such questions should be asked.

Debates about the meaning of “ambition” and “success” actually go a long way back, perhaps even further than the Enlightenment era to which Hamilton’s curriculum and community owe so much. Thinkers debated whether the meaning of life necessarily involved rising above everyone else. Back then, the lazy jester in Diderot’s *Rameau’s Nephew* spent more time justifying his lack of ambition to rise above the mass than on his chosen trade of foolery and mimicry itself. But if the nephew is right that “there is nothing degrading in doing the same as everybody else,” there is perhaps nothing elevating in it either. It is probably at least a little natural to want to “stand out,” and it goes beyond what our parents, teachers, friends, and coaches told us growing up about working hard, achieving success, and setting ambitious goals. It is engrained, I would suggest, in the very notion of a democratic society.

It is obvious that we are at least partially products of the world around us. But there is

a strangeness to the seeming contradiction between the amazing place I genuinely believe Hamilton to be and the tremendous stress and preoccupation with success here. We should think more intelligently about it. Not because I expect everyone to understand precisely where I am coming from, but because I believe others are at least thinking, if not feeling, a similar way. Thinking about excellence, midterms, and stress in the context of Hamilton and its heritage, then, need not be an individual conundrum to be faced alone, but instead a challenging emotional-intellectual exercise from which all can benefit.

So important is the concept of excellence to Western thought that virtually any prominent philosopher can be found addressing it at one point or

“It is obvious that we are at least partially products of the world around us”

another. There is little question, for example, that when Alexis de Tocqueville sought to understand post-revolution France, he was engaging, if only tangentially, in just such an intellectual exercise. Lover of the old aristocracy or not, he came face to face with the peculiar question of how one could possibly stand out in an increasingly equalized—and thus increasingly homogenized—Western society. In *Democracy in America*, he “surveyed this countless multitude of beings” and concluded that they seemed destined to become more alike, not better than each other. Tocqueville, whose relatives had faced the guillotine a generation earlier, was somewhat cursed to be an aristocrat after the French Revolution. But he was also “blessed,” meaning fortunate, because he had achieved status the easy way, by birth.

There is ample reason to see traces of that same predetermined excellence in today’s growing income inequality. But it would be foolish of us to assume that excellence today can be reduced to privileges alone. Each and every privilege, however they are defined, means for any individual

This Week’s News in 140 Characters

EDITORIAL REPORT



Guy Benson @guybenson · 5m
Just learned that my healthcare premiums (employer-based plan) will rise for the 4th straight year. Someone told me this wouldn't happen.

← ↻ 39 ❤️ 57 ⋮



Dave McGuire @TheDavidMcGuire · 6h
I'd be willing to bet Trump has promised Cruz a SCOTUS nomination.. which would be an excellent decision. #CruzCrew

← ↻ 20 ❤️ 43 ⋮



Peter Beinart @PeterBeinart · 5h
America is 4 days away from potentially electing one of the worst human beings alive as its next president. Others, a great Friday

← ↻ 49 ❤️ 130 ⋮



(((AG))) @AG_Conservative · 15h
"We shouldn't be importing immigrants who prefer bigger gov't" - People supporting a candidate who prefers bigger gov't on every issue.

← ↻ 31 ❤️ 50 ⋮



Charlie Kirk @charliekirk11 · Nov 3
If Obama had an ounce of integrity he would recuse himself from campaigning with Hillary who is under two federal investigations. #FBI

← ↻ 1.1K ❤️ 2.3K ⋮

We Created Donald Trump

By ERICH WOHL
GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

Donald Trump has a realistic chance of becoming president of the United States as a result of the politically correct culture that has disgusted a large share of the population. 59 percent of Americans say “people are too easily offended these days over language others use.” The strong shift toward liberalism, particularly by millennials, has frustrated older, more conservative citizens and elicited the extreme response of nominating Trump. Despite the exposure of his lewd actions in the national media, Mr. Trump still has strong support across the country, polling at 44 percent.

Over the past 20 years, the politically correct culture has arisen with an emphasis on being inclusive towards all groups and being extremely careful to avoid potentially offensive actions. While some words have always been blatantly marginalizing, in the past decade an entire lexicon of language alleged to contain implicit bias has been declared

off-limits by the PC culture.

The Politically Correct culture also focuses on identifying and mitigating institutional barriers, including institutional racism and socioeconomic “social reproduction,” that perpetuate injustices against historically marginalized groups by making it easier for those in power to stay in power. It’s no secret that this culture has been embraced by millennials, especially college students, while Baby Boomers often reject aspects of it as oversensitivity. This culture has positive intentions, but creates negative consequences.

When certain terms are off-limits, people become hesitant to discuss sensitive topics. Even if someone has politically correct

“but when every negative in one’s life is attributed to an implicit cause, focus is diverted from tangible problems”

thoughts, they may become discouraged from expressing them because they fear being accused of bigotry due to imperfect word choice. Additionally, the PC culture can be so encompassing in declaring injustices that it can

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an opportunity that others may not have. But if we think about excellence in the context of a society of free individuals, we see that it is personal before it is social. Receiving social privileges based on one's family background does nothing to produce excellence in the individual.

Consider students who were educated at Phillips Exeter and went on to an elite college, yet never really applied themselves at either level, doing the bare minimum necessary to get through. They would receive the institutional privileges that come with attending those schools, which can be substantial, but they would not receive the benefits that come with *excelling* at them. There is a difference between being privileged and being excellent. And today, the difference between privilege and excellence is the degree to which we apply ourselves to making the most out of the privileges—whether few or many—we have been given in life.

This is all well and good, one might ask, but how does “making the most of things” relieve the stresses of competition and the pressure from our peers and family? Indeed, doesn't making the “most” of things imply the impossibility of a balanced middle ground, thus adding fuel to a dangerous fire? Are we to be

“It must be ourselves, not others, who take on difficult projects and pack just too much into a day”

forever chained, as Jose Ortega y Gasset put it, “to a maximum or a minimum of demands upon ourselves”?—to be either the best or completely undistinguished?

If we choose to see excellence as an individual struggle towards betterment, and not as a competition with the world, the only thing we are “chained” to is ourselves. It seems like a tautology at first, like $2+2=4$, because of course everything comes down to the decisions we make in life. But in that case it must be ourselves, and not others, who are responsible for how much credence we give to outside pressure to “succeed.” It must be ourselves, not others, who take on difficult projects and pack just too much into a day. This is not freedom from responsibility, but freedom in how we approach responsibility. It cannot take away difficulties, but it can change where they are coming from.

Understanding modern excellence as an individual

enterprise cannot get rid of stress, struggle, or sleepless nights, nor does it necessarily recommend them. It cannot erase the difficulty of difficult goals when we feel called inexplicably, against all “rational advice,” to take them on. But it can help us understand how we ought to go about doing them, and that, I think, is a step worth taking.

WE CREATED DONALD TRUMP cont.

cause people to dismiss legitimate social justice issues. When the average American hears about microaggressions—acts that can often be hard to see without an analytic social science scope—they extrapolate their distaste for the imperceptible problem to a distaste for tangible social justice concerns. Discussing implicit institutional discrimination is important, but when every negative in one's life is attributed to an implicit cause, focus is diverted from tangible problems. In many ways, the current politically correct culture has turned people away from its original purpose, which was getting individuals to embrace equality and justice.

Donald Trump has said and done numerous things that any other presidential candidate in recent years would never have gotten away with, but he remains in decent shape in the polls because he “tells it like it is.” Trump is as much of a contradiction to politically correct culture as you can possibly find. He has mockingly imitated a reporter's cerebral palsy, made blatantly xenophobic comments, and even bragged about sexually assaulting women, but none of these actions have dramatically changed his poll numbers. When Trump was heard suggesting that he “grab[s] [women] by the pussy,” his poll numbers fell by a negligible one percentage point.

According to Trump, political correctness is “the cancer that eats away at America.” Many Americans seem to agree, preferring his boisterous bloviating to the perceived malicious mendacity of Hillary Clinton, who will “say anything and do nothing.” The acceptance of Trump's crude behavior represents a grand resistance to the politically correct culture.

Trump is the Republican nominee largely because many people prefer his behavior during the campaign to the excessive caution displayed by some of his primary opponents. Conservatives across the country are fed up with the coddling, especially that which often occurs on college campuses. Last year's e-mail from a Yale professor on the issue of appropriate Halloween costumes sparked outrage on college

campuses across the country: “Is there no room anymore for a child or young person to be a little bit obnoxious ... a little bit inappropriate or provocative or, yes, offensive?” While costumes can perpetuate stereotypes of marginalized groups, it is hard

“Even President Barack Obama said that he felt students were being ‘coddled and protected from different points of view”

to perceive negative intent when a child dresses up as Sacagawea or decides to don a sombrero.

Many felt it was also extremely distasteful to hear privileged Yale students cry out about being discriminated against while they attend one of the most prestigious and accepting universities on the planet. How exactly do they expect to function outside a school where the majority of people are well educated and actively trying to be politically correct? Yale students are censoring relatively innocent actions to protect their own fragile emotional state. While this is an extreme example of political correctness, it was a highly publicized incident and undoubtedly turned off a good portion of the country.

Even President Barack Obama said that he felt students were being “coddled and protected from different points of view.” People voting for Trump are effectively saying they would prefer a culture where people are dramatically less sensitive, and a candidate who

bloviates about anything and everything that comes to mind irrespective of who is offended.

While the Trump campaign looks likely to lose, it is still quite troubling that a man with no political background and a porous campaign platform has managed to become a major party nominee and still has a chance to win. There are certainly many positives to political correctness, but it is clear that a large portion of the nation is dismayed at how far it has been taken. I would suggest that we shift more of our focus to dismantling institutional barriers that hurt marginalized groups, instead of worrying so much about implicit, and often very unclear, discriminatory action by individuals.

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

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Stress and Excellence at Hamilton

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