An old friend of mine told me yesterday they had recently ‘unfriended’ a mutual acquaintance on Facebook. An acquaintance whom I’ve known for a quarter of a century and first met at anti-fascist demonstrations attended over many years. Those chance meetings lead to drinks in the pub afterwards and from there to other social events in public places and at home. A quarter of a century grounded in our mutual concern for vulnerable minorities. Or so I thought.

My friend had ‘unfriended’ the acquaintance due to a ‘large number of offensive posts’ on that person’s personal Facebook page. Out of curiosity I looked at the Facebook page and quickly found what offended my friend. There were multiple ‘gender critical feminist’ posts stretching back over considerably more than a year. So many posts that they probably outnumbered all the others combined by about 4:1 and with a majority ‘liked’ by others in Newcastle’s left wing political circles including many whom I have also known for many years. I checked if I was a ‘friend’ – I wasn’t but most probably as I rarely post on Facebook rather than any active decision by me not to be. If I had been I would have ‘unfriended’ the acquaintance and all those applauding her ‘gender critical’ posts.

‘Gender critical feminist’ is a label adopted recently by transphobic people keen to make their bigotry and hatred towards transgender folk appear palatable. The gender critical feminist movement in England has come to the fore on social media, politics and in the traditional media since September 2017. The UK popular press has published at least one transphobic article every day since October 2017 (Serrano, 2017. There has been no let-up in this transphobic tide since Serrano’s article was published late November, 2017. Despite all of this transphobic media attention gender critical feminists complain they are silenced and ‘no platformed’ – an issue I will return to later). Where once those aligned with leftist politics would have opposed such bigoted views there now exists an apparent confluence that brings them together with conservative journalists, politicians, ultraorthodox religious groups and the far right. Perreau (2016) and Villa (2017) have written of the connections between anti LGBT gender critical feminists, extreme religious groups and the far right in Europe that Villa terms anti-genderismus.

I am a non-binary transsexual and consequently someone whom my acquaintance and those posters clearly despise. I no longer feel welcome in left wing circles in my city.

A gender critical feminist group was recently invited to speak at the House of Commons by a Conservative MP notorious for his homophobia and misogynistic views (Glass, 2018). That ticket only meeting welcomed and warmly applauded the MP as a panel member along with several individuals currently under investigation by the police for transphobic hate crimes including doxing transgender children. Other panel speakers included a transphobic academic at a UK University and an Australian Emeritus Professor who flew to England to voice her hatred. These academics not only opposed the legal rights of transgender folk but expressed their desire to erase us from history. A desire that has
obvious parallels in recent world history. The only people refused tickets to attend were transgender folk.

Another gender critical group tours cities in the UK repeating their transphobic rhetoric and distorted lies under the guise of feminism and free speech. They come to my home city in May 2018 – my old acquaintance helpfully publicises the event and their intention to attend this ticket only event on their Facebook page. I no longer feel welcome in left wing groups in my city and come May may no longer feel welcome in my city.

So what has this to do with management academia? Wrapped up in this daily onslaught is a continued professed concern with ‘freedom of speech’ and ‘no-platforming’. Jo Johnson, when Conservative Government Minister, told UK Universities and student groups that ‘no-platforming’ would not be tolerated at UK universities (Fae, 2017). He stated that hate speech aimed at certain protected identities was not acceptable but carefully excluded transgender folk from that protection. UK Universities must allow gender critical speakers and meetings space to repeat their particular brand of hate speech. That Universities include vulnerable gender non-confirming students and staff seemed lost on Johnson as was the simple fact that those gender critical feminists already have their views lauded daily in the mainstream UK press, host regular meetings in public venues including the Houses of Parliament and circulate their propaganda on social media. Despite all the cries of being silenced and no-platformed from gender critical feminists, they are not.

And for all the cries of silence it would seem to exclude the most vulnerable – gender non-conforming students. Universities must host transphobic events under the guise of free speech but transgender folk are not allowed a right to protest.

I was told recently by the former head of a UK University Business School in the city where I live, ‘We have no LGBT students. I don’t need your sort and your research here.’ If I was at his School would I feel safe to come out? Would I feel supported? Would I feel welcome? Would I dare to come out?

Transphobic academics openly and repeatedly express hatred and desire our erasure yet no concern is shown over the impact on vulnerable students in a society that violently stigmatises them and denies their rights.

Some 20 years ago I attended the first 3 Critical Management Conferences in the UK. I was hopeful then that there was space in management academia to argue for understanding and tolerance. Does that space exist anymore? I’m no longer sure. It seems ignorance, hate and bigotry now pollutes University space.

But must it? Do you stand with the vulnerable who are routinely denied rights and are stigmatised or with those parading their ignorance and bigotry?

A better world is possible if we make it happen.

Where do you stand?

References
Fae, J. (2017), The threat to stop universities from no-platforming speakers shows how little people really understand about free speech, The Independent, December 27th, 2017. Available at


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I stop using scare quotes only because to continue would result in an essay thicketed by them.