

MIT and its connections with Jeffrey Epstein

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The fallout from the Jeffrey Epstein saga has been monumental, but one does get the sense that what's happening is akin to one of those social panics that has struck society before. From the Salem Witch trials, to the era of McCarthyism, and to today's Epstein imbroglio, social hysteria appears to have no end.

Countless of these social panics have a Massachusetts connection (such as the Salem Witch trials). Those of a certain age will recall the well-publicized and tragic Fells Acres Day Care Center in Malden, which was destroyed, along with the lives of the members of the Amirault family that owned and operated it. The Amiraults were accused of engaging in bizarre child sexual abuse rituals, such as tying naked children to trees, in broad daylight in downtown Malden. The allegations stemmed from the alleged victims' (aged between two and five years) answers produced by suggestive questions posed by parents, social workers, prosecutors, and police. Despite the shaky evidence, all three members of the Amirault family were convicted and sentenced. (While the members of the family eventually got out of prison, to this day, the late Violet Amirault's son, Gerald, wears an ankle bracelet to alert his probation officer when he has left a designated location.)

And so, Massachusetts, – home to two of the world's leading universities (Harvard and M.I.T.) – has proven itself to be not immune from these kinds of social panics involving, most frequently, sexual activity.

Consider the matter of MIT President L. Rafael Reif, whose impending retirement was announced in early February of this year. Media reports of his tenure at MIT glow with mentions of his substantial accomplishments but with one caveat: several of these reports home in on Reif's connection with the disgraced sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein. In 2019, Reif admitted that he signed a letter, in 2012, thanking Epstein for a donation to the MIT Media Lab. Reif had to prostrate himself at a faculty meeting, apologizing because, as he said, "I have let you down and damaged your trust in me and that our actions have injured both the institute's reputation and the fabric of our community." He deemed the incident "a moment of reckoning." It is difficult to understand how merely accepting a donation from an admittedly egregious person can call forth such debasing acts of confession. A show of appreciation for a financial contribution from Epstein does not classify Reif or MIT as supporters of sex trafficking.

An ex-director of MIT's Media Lab, Joichi Ito, actually resigned in 2019 due to his affiliation with Epstein. In fact, Ito resigned as a board member from three other organizations and his visiting professorship at Harvard. Ito was known for his impeccable ability to raise millions for the Media Lab from wealthy donors, one of them being Epstein. However, MIT considered Epstein as a "disqualified" donor, and Ito accepted his donations secretly. Although being labeled a "disqualified" donor did not ban Epstein from donating to MIT, the secrecy of the transactions was dodgy.

Yet, Ito resigned not due to the hidden nature of the donations but due to Epstein's connections with these donations. In his apology letter, Ito expressed dismay for having accepted financial support from Epstein, apologizing "to the survivors, to the Media Lab, and to the MIT community for bringing such a person into our network." He also made a "vow to raise an amount equivalent to the donations

the Media Lab received from Epstein and will direct those funds to non-profits that focus on supporting survivors of trafficking.” Clearly, the focus lay on the identity of the donor, not on how the donations came to be. If Epstein had illegally obtained the funds for his donations, that would have been a different story. In this situation, overwhelming pressure from hyper-sensitive MIT students and faculty forced Ito to resign.

Another former professor of MIT, Richard Stallman, resigned in 2019 from MIT and from an organization he founded, for merely voicing his opinion about Epstein. Stallman previously had made controversial comments, doubting that some of Epstein’s victims were actually sexually assaulted. Of course, this created a public fury, with Stallman being accused of defending Epstein despite Stallman’s having made comments in support of Epstein’s imprisonment. As a result, Stallman resigned, explaining that “I am doing this due to pressure on MIT and me over a series of misunderstandings and mischaracterizations.” Stallman’s statement revealed that his resignation had been forced onto him as a way of preventing further complications. Had the ideological rigidity of those outraged by Stallman been just a pinch smaller, Stallman’s resignation could have been prevented.

Consider another incident of social hysteria with MIT connections. When President Joseph Biden appointed Dr. Eric Lander as his top science adviser, he praised Lander, an MIT geneticist, as one of the nation’s most brilliant scientists. But Lander soon withdrew from the appointment, obviously under pressure from the White House, because it was revealed that he had been rude to his subordinates, yelling and humiliating them and at times demoting them as a form of retaliation. In an era that suffers still from a devastating world-wide pandemic, a scientist of towering intellect and accomplishment has been cavalierly tossed out because of, well, his rudeness.

Lander’s career as Biden’s top science advisor hit a rocky road from the start, with his nomination having been placed on a pause after Lander’s meetings with Epstein were exposed. It is important to note that Lander met with Epstein twice before cutting off his connection with the infamous billionaire. Yet, despite the brief encounters, Lander’s career ended up on a tight rope for simply having conversations with Epstein. Lander was never accused of being involved in sex trafficking business with Epstein. How can a society possibly advance toward meaningful change if scientists are forced to walk on eggshells, constantly watching everything they say and everyone they connect with?

In short, we are in danger of “cancelling” some of our most talented and productive citizens, whether it be due to groundless accusations or to injuries done to someone’s feelings or moral conscience.

It’s Salem all over again here in Massachusetts.