

Stop the Generational Moralizing About Free Speech



Katherine Streeeter for The Chronicle Review

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What is happening on the American campus?

One could paint a futuristic image of university life in the United States in which anything resembling academic freedom, civility, and the tolerance of reason and free expression would be absent. I project this nightmare as someone who is responsible for an academic institution in the United States and is worried every day that something terrible might happen on campus.

The debate that rages now over free speech is not constructive. It is frightening. And I sense danger in the way the debate has transpired

because the arguments mounted against the traditional defense of free speech do need to be reckoned with.

The critique of the principle and practice of free speech by often younger faculty and students goes as follows: Free speech is a dated "liberal" conceit espoused by powerful people, mostly white and older faculty, alumni, and trustees, to maintain their power and sustain the university as an instrument of control and domination. These critics see the university as allied with big business and with government, its primary sources of support. Free speech appears little more than a hypocritical, moralistic rhetorical shield, held by those in control of the status quo. It is seen, therefore, as a seemingly neutral ideal that actually supports a playing field that isn't level in terms of race and class.

Why would an intelligent, well-meaning young person believe these arguments? A few reasons come to mind.

Consider the radical inequality of wealth, the astonishing visibility of obscene luxury in this country, the persistence of poverty, underemployment, and racism, and the scandalously high cost of tuition and limited access to university education. Despite all the progress made since the end of World War II, these realities are evident to anyone, particularly the post-Cold War generations. Add to that the vulgar, blatantly dismissive attitude toward women, immigrants, and citizens of color encouraged by our current president. And then add to that the controversy that surrounds the rights of people of differing sexual identities and orientations.

A cognitive dissonance persists between the rhetoric of free expression and the free play of ideas, on the one hand, and the seemingly recalcitrant reality of discrimination, intolerance, and inequity, on the other. Somehow the wrong ideas always win. Consider the tax-reform bill in Congress, which, while widely and deservedly despised, receives serious consideration. Somehow nothing changes; there is little progress despite all the pious claims about the power of ideas to sort themselves out within a condition of freedom on behalf of truth and justice.

The current challenge to free speech can also be traced to the distortion and appropriation of the anti-enlightenment academic discourse that flourished in the 1970s and 1980s. Today's activists who contest the traditions of free speech have absorbed somewhere, out of the ether, a reductive version of the post-positivist epistemological critique of knowledge. They believe there is actually no knowledge in the traditional sense and certainly no truth, and therefore no privileged standpoint that allows conclusions that approach certainty. Truth is subjective, and emanates from the perspective of the viewer, lending legitimacy and authority to subjectivity. Someone told them a distorted fairy tale about Einstein's theory of relativity: that everything is ultimately contingent on perspective, and that there is no priority. Newton may have believed in the validation of hypotheses through proofs and evidence but modern science apparently has debunked that.

The bowdlerizing of modern physics, from Schrödinger's cat and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle to the frame of references in the special theory of relativity, ended up undermining the tools of reason, the principles of argument, and the rules of evidence. Somehow the word got out, in no small measure courtesy of French structural theorists, that all knowledge is a social construct, and that universal objective truths do not exist. The critics of free expression don't believe that there are rational grounds on which to distinguish right from wrong.

For those of us in the social sciences and humanities, this notion that there is no legitimate basis for privileging one point of view over another now holds a good deal of sway. Hence, there is an absence of confidence within the university about the rules of argument or methods of analysis or even in the capacity of speech and language to create a common ground for disciplined argument. The ideal of a free forum for the unfettered exploration of ideas seems no longer a plausible shared goal for many of our contemporaries.

This privileging of subjectivity has taken hold at a time of radical displacement and anomie. Out there a powerful sense of loneliness and isolation prevails.

It is supplanted by and compensated by the solace of membership in groups, frequently sustained in a virtual and abstract universe and not in real space and time. The ideal of the individual is subordinated to membership in standardized notions of coherent communities. I escape the existential terror of individuality by becoming a member of a group defined by essentialist constructs of sexual orientation, race, or religion. Those groups may be reductive in their definition but they function on a campus socially to lessen the anxiety that the solitary experience of learning might deteriorate into isolation.

Being part of a campus can be a lonely experience. That's why there are fraternities and sororities, secret societies and clubs. Students legitimately want to feel comfortable in a strange setting and they wish to be liked by their peers. The residential college is a particularly unnatural situation. It confines people in their teens and early 20s quite randomly in a single institution and expects civility.

But there was never untarnished civility on the American campus. There was campus violence in the 18th and 19th centuries. It is a myth that, once upon a time, everybody was walking around as a kind of incipient scholar who readily replaced violence with speech. We are still more civilized than the Harvard and Yale of the first half of the 19th century, and we are probably ahead of the civility game in comparison to the age of the panty raids of the 1950s.

People seem unsatisfied to be seen merely as individuals, so they identify with groups. These groups happen now to generate their own sources of truth. Their perspective on the world is what seems to reign without question. And there is no appetite for criticism or empathy, revision, or respectful dissent.

The subjective experience has deepened in this generation with the echo chambers created by modern technology. Modern communication through social networks is virtual; friendship has been redefined. Glued to their handheld devices, individuals are engaging at a distance in a world that is actually imaginary, independent of space, materiality, and time, and in which a technological illusion of intimacy, sharing, and connection is fostered. There is no public space they must share with others — an agora or square in which they meet others with whom their ideas and values might be contested. They connect online and form groups that are self-reinforcing. One does not emerge with the experience of how to defend a point of view against someone who differs but occupies the same neutral common ground, in real time and real space. The chance of a retreat into the new communities of like-minded social networks obliterates the context for face-to-face debate, negotiation, and compromise.

There is something ultimately cowardly about blogging, posting updates on Facebook, and "liking" tweets. What I say to someone directly requires a bit more courage than writing and sending an opinion through the vast digital space. I have colleagues who are very civilized in the presence of others and monstrous on email. They emulate road-rage; when they get behind the wheel, rigidity and resistance to empathy prevail. I can always apologize to someone in a conversation and retract a verbal utterance: "Let's forget what I said," "I regret it," or "You misunderstood me, actually; I didn't mean that."

Technology undermines forgetting and forgiving, both indispensable acts in a civilized world. Technology allows the perpetual retrieval of the past enshrined in texts well beyond our natural memory; it functions as a permanent reinforcer of differences. This makes self-criticism, alteration, and agreement very hard for generations that have not actually assumed and experienced traditional public space. You walk down any campus and it is amazing how few people are talking to one another. They are texting or they are listening to devices. That novel isolation is compensated for by deep virtual allegiances to affinity groups. That is the campus echo chamber.

There is also today a growing moralizing intolerance with respect to any sort of exceptionalism. After all, a university, particularly its faculty, is in its own charming way a collection of deviants. There is no academic who has been hired by a university of any quality who is not deviant by some demographic comparative measure. To be interested in classical languages, to be interested in the fine points of poetry, quantum physics, or any subject in the articles and books published by university presses, makes one by definition quite mad. Let's call this reasonable and admirable deviancy as opposed to the unethical and exploitative deviancy of the Harvey Weinstains of the world.

Faculty members are great as individuals because they can be different, original, and resist being pigeonholed. And the university needs to protect them. But to control what exceptional individuals say, or even how they behave, cuts against the virtues of deviance. One cannot segment the range and scope of how one is different. Nadia Boulanger or Marie Curie did not act in all ways in life just as your average person. Deviance that may be cognitive is probably linked (though we do not know enough) to other forms of nonstandard behavior. Eccentricity, even bizarre behavior, is often aligned with talent and genius. Would Oscar Wilde, Ethel Smyth, or Virginia Woolf succeed as tenured professors? Those of us who are administrators at the university understand that part of our job is to protect the freedom of thought and speech of the odd individual who has certain gifts from the rage and envy of others. In my field, music, unconventional, impossible but memorable and inspired personalities are commonplace. The modern university community now expects an increasing conformism as well as standardization of expressed thought. And that finally leads to a powerful but understandable attraction to self-censorship and passivity.

Allison Stanger, the Middlebury political scientist who was injured during a protest of a lecture by Charles Murray in March, has said that the faculty and staff who signed on to a defense of academic freedom in the wake of the incident were by and large older. This suggests people with more of a historical memory of the period of the Vietnam War and World War II, or at least a consciousness of those events. They are themselves probably more frightened of the consequences of intolerance. It is absolutely clear to them that what we face is a new version of old, doctrinal far-left and fascist views about free speech and the free press. (And we must not overlook the inherent conflict between commerce and the free press and the corruption that comes from needing to make a profit with the 24/7 news cycle — facts that damage the ideal of the role of the free press in democracy.)

We need to strengthen the belief that is still out there in the notion of truths, freedom, and rational judgment and the links that connect democracy, liberty, and social justice. The barriers to spreading those convictions include liberal inadequacies, liberal conceits, and hypocrisy. I had to debate a respected scholar this past year. He believed that the whole enterprise of the university is a mirror image of an oppressive society designed to prevent those who are disadvantaged from reaching a status of dignity and equality. In that view the ideologies of free expression in research and learning are in conflict with social justice. There is indeed some truth there. And this is not a new idea.

Now what should we do about it?

My own view is that one has to have a sympathetic ear to why the younger generation, both faculty and students, don't see what we see.

We — proponents of academic freedom and free speech — need to break out of our own echo chamber and be quite clear that free expression and the habits of critique, skepticism, and rational self-examination are absolutely indispensable. I happen to believe in that deeply, in part because I have an Eastern European Jewish background and am an immigrant. It seems second nature to me.

But I also think one has to hear very carefully that cloaked in the periodic craziness in which the American universities are now embroiled, there is a severe reaction to a lot of undelivered claims in the American space. The disaffections go back to the election of Ronald Reagan and beyond. They concern claims about economic opportunity, about social justice, freedom, the right to vote, and about confronting racism. We are taking down statues of Confederate generals, but will we erect memorials for all the black Americans and Native Americans who were lynched and killed after the Civil War?

A disturbing hypocritical piety persists sometimes in the rhetoric of the defense of free speech; that hypocrisy is what Trump exploits. There are burning questions surrounding medical care, education, employment, and social services in the United States. The university is viewed as in some way papering over or even implicitly defending inequities and injustices. We have to find a way to counter that claim and separate the idea of freedom of speech and academic freedom from any tacit alliance with those injustices.

We also need to defend the importance of language. One of the terrifying things about the American campus now is the intent to identify what you stand for by the jargon you use. Hannah Arendt argued that real thinking starts when you find a way to use words differently. We need to resist identifying others using a reductive ideology marked by the use of certain vocabulary. A person on a university campus ought not be called to task for the use of vocabulary without any understanding of personal usage, context, meaning or intent, let alone humor or irony. There is no way to be humorous or satirical, even at the expense of oneself. This must be fought.

But to fight it there must be more than generational moralizing. We are in a situation that reminds me of the late '60s, when the radicals of the '30s could not understand why the radicals of '60s wouldn't listen to them. All the veteran radicals did was to moralize on the basis of "we were there" too. Pontification is not going to work. Take safe spaces: Critics ridicule the idea, even though the university in the past provided them — Cardinal Newman Society chapters for Catholics and Hillel for Jews. Why object now to doing the same for others?

With empathy, there may be a way around the crisis, but finding that way takes a lot of patience. I am quite optimistic. But the university must be self-critical about the manner in which it cuts a path to defend what we need to defend: academic freedom and freedom of speech. Critical discourse cannot be compromised. But we must make the case with appropriate sensitivity to the perspective of the critics. We need to find the means to assemble allies on behalf of academic freedom and freedom of expression and realize a real commitment to address the issues of equity and justice that seem to have fallen off the agenda, even for the liberals since the Clinton era. This is why the politics of Trump's presidency is a moment of dialectical opportunity. It forces us to put an end to complacency.

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