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Challenging Calls for Civility

Guest Blogger / October 3, 2018

BY RESHMI DUTT-BALLERSTADT

We find ourselves living in a precarious space and time within our institutions where suddenly there has been a resurgence in appeals to civility codes (that perhaps started with Steven Salaita's firing from University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign, in August 2014 as a result of his tweets). Following the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and the rise of the extreme right ideologies that have infiltrated within various institutions, there has been a shift to a different kind of civility code to accommodate the free speech rights. These civility codes require faculty and students to engage in "mutual respect" with vile and discriminatory ideas and ideologies being openly promoted on college campuses. We are being told that all ideas must be debated and any form of protest or disruptions against these vile ideas are seen as "uncivil."

It is undeniable that the free speech as used by the extreme right, as they have forced their ways into various college and university campuses have proved to be downright racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic and Islamophobic among other things. In other words, the extreme right have co-opted free speech to promote hate speech, exclusions, and discriminations of the protected class— at the same time demanding that institutions make legitimate space for such promotions of exclusionary ideas.

Salaita wrote in his article "[Why I Was Fired](#)" that "Incivility is the only civilized response to barbarity." Yet, post the election of Donald Trump as the US president in 2016, we are once again witnessing a rise of barbarity as white supremacy and ethno-nationalism and fascism have unleashed attacks on various minoritized subjects and groups by using college and university campuses as their recruiting grounds. Here faculty members are subjected to rebukes, surveillance and trolling by various right wing organizations like Turning Point USA (which hosts the [Professor Watchlist](#)). The Watchlist targets professors who teach or have protested various forms of white supremacy, white male privilege, intellectual racism, and others. Ted Thornhill, an African American sociologist teaches a course called "[White Racism](#)" at Florida Gulf Coast University and is named as the "Professor of the Month" for September 2018 on the Professor Watchlist. While the Watchlist is one such site rebuking faculty members for their social justice oriented teaching, remarks and research, sadly, many of our neoliberal institutions have caved into the pressures of the extreme right groups and their donors and have taken punitive measures against many faculty members for the

extramural speeches and utterances instead of protecting their academic freedom of these faculty members.

When I wrote the article "[When Free Speech Disrupts Diversity Initiatives: What We Value and What We Do Not](#)," for the *Journal of Academic Freedom*, I was well aware that both free speech and calls for civility have always been deeply embedded in forms of exclusions. What has often counted for civil behavior or who had access to free speech historically have also privileged the ruling class, the colonizers, the bourgeois, and males with a deep heteronormative sense of being in the world. Yet, Tobias Kelly and Sharika Thiranagama have reminded us in their article "[Against Civility](#)" that "being civil when facing gross injustice appears simply hypocritical and inauthentic. Advocating civility can place etiquette and manners above equality and justice, and the call for all of us to "get along" risks glossing over serious and important political divisions." It is precisely these forms of "incivility" as forms of protest (and not physical violence) that various faculty and students across the country have used to object to promotions of exclusionary tactics.

While important political divisions on various institutions have indeed been glossed over, I have been consistently taken aback by the glossing over of weakening of various diversity initiatives (deliberate or not) on college and university campuses by repeated calls to broaden the definition of "diversity and inclusion" to include exclusionary ideologies as masked under "viewpoint diversity." Viewpoint diversity, or what is also been called as "ideological diversity" is also present in the selection process in some academic journals or academic conferences. In September 2017, an article published in *Third World Quarterly* titled as "A Case for Colonialism" by Bruce Gilley received overwhelming condemnation from the global academic community demanding the retraction of the article. [A petition](#) signed by over 10,000 academics made it clear that "We do not call for the curtailing of the writer's freedom of speech ... Our goal is to raise academic publishing standards and integrity. We thereby call on the editorial team to retract the article and also to apologize for further brutalizing those who have suffered under colonialism." Vijay Prasad, who served on the editorial board of the *Third World Quarterly* not only spoke out against the paper on social media but also said how the publication of Gilley's article violated *Third World Quarterly's* postcolonial legacy." On September 13, 2017 Prasad tweeted, "[@thirdworldq](#) was started as an intellectual venue for anti-colonial thought, to build ideas against colonialism." At the heart of the debate was the question of academic freedom and its relationship to free speech. [Joan Scott](#) has reminded us over and over again that "free speech makes no distinction about quality; academic freedom does."

It is this "quality" (or a lack thereof) that is precisely at stake here as this debate on free speech have led to both veiled and serious attacks by the right on various diversity initiatives. Weakening of diversity initiatives are bound to have serious repercussions on not just the rights of the protected class of students and faculty on college and university campuses, but a detrimental impact on curricula expansions and implementations using various social justice frameworks that were borne out of the civil rights and women's rights movements in the 60s and early 70s. At a time when we are witnessing an erosion of rights — immigrant, women, sexual minorities, disabilities, religious — we cannot afford to not see through the smoke screen of how free speech and civility are being used to provoke and promote these erosions.

Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt is a professor of English and co-coordinates the gender studies program at Linfield College and holds the Edith Green Distinguished Professorship for 2018-19. She is the author of a scholarly monograph, The Postcolonial Citizen: An Intellectual Migrant (2010), and her forthcoming co-edited book of essays, Civility, Free Speech, and Academic Freedom in Higher Education: Faculty on the Margins, will be published in 2019.

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