

Civility and Academic Life

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If a man utters a downright lie or commits a daylight robbery or a murder, am I to call this brother of mine, as he most assuredly is, a liar or a thief or a murderer, or am I to use Churchillian language and say "he perambulates round the suburbs of veracity." Or "he helps himself to the goods that do not belong to him without perhaps any intention of stealing," or "he spills innocent blood, though perhaps he does not want to kill"? And if I were to use such circumlocutory speech, is there the slightest guarantee that I shall never hurt the party of whom I may be speaking? Harsh truth may be uttered courteously and gently, but the words would read hard. To be truthful you must call a liar a liar—a harsh word perhaps, but the use is inevitable.

—Mahatma Gandhi (346-47)

The notion of academic freedom captures several distinct claims. It asserts that academic peers are best placed to judge scholarly competence and accordingly that on all such professional matters they should be granted autonomy. This component of academic freedom is designed to preempt extra-scholarly considerations from tainting employment decisions. Beyond the right to professional autonomy, academic freedom also asserts that pursuit of the life of the mind requires complete liberty of thought. Insofar as the academic community is devoted to the discovery of truth, its mission cannot be realized, as every reader of John Stuart Mill knows, if barriers restrict the mind from meandering down paths of inquiry less traveled. The right of an academic to liberty of thought additionally means that outside the professional setting, scholars should enjoy the ordinary rights of a democratic citizen to speak their minds and accordingly that extramural utterances should not bear on the assessment of professional competence. Historically, the great battles over academic freedom in the United States were fought first to free university life from the hold of clerical bias (sponsored by private denominations, American colleges were originally the "ward of religion"), then economic bias (in particular, corporate interference),¹ and then political bias (the periodic Red Scares climaxing in McCarthyism [Schrecker]).

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Even if fully redeemed, academic freedom is not quite so liberating as it might appear *prima facie*. Insofar as your colleagues decide your competence, you won't survive very long the academic vetting process if they are of the decided opinion that your speculations, however copiously documented and compellingly advanced, lack scholarly merit. Ruling the roost, successful academics develop a stake in the intellectual status quo, while in fields that are highly politicized these academics, most of whom have reconciled with the reigning orthodoxy, reflexively if not quash, at any rate look askance at, dissent. In practice, professional autonomy and liberty of thought mean that, until gaining admittance to the community of arbiters, you can express heretical ideas in the academy so long as your advisors approve your dissertation; so long as refereed journals approve your articles for publication; so long as expert readers for university presses recommend your manuscripts for publication; and so long as once entering the marketplace of ideas your publications are well received among authorities in the field (Menand 9). I do not see how a university could function in the absence of such policing, but it would be unworldly naïve to deny that ego and political agendas often, perhaps more often than not, make a mockery of professional arbitration and free inquiry. Anyone familiar with academic life will attest that the content of a scholarly review commands much less interest in conversation than the base motive lurking behind the reviewer's praise or skewering of a book. The ultimate consequence of these police functions, which, I repeat, appear to be essential for the maintenance of a standard of professional competence, is that long before a tenure decision is made, most would-be academics have internalized the permissible limits of academic freedom and, consequently, few candidates are denied tenure on explicitly political grounds. Inferring a high degree of tolerance in the ivory tower from the paucity of politicized tenure cases is an optical illusion born of focusing on the final stage of the socialization process; it fails to take account how many aspirants to the life of the mind inconspicuously and incrementally accommodate themselves to the rules of the academic game many years before they come up for tenure, or even land a tenure-track job, and how many fall away from intellectual frustration. It was one of the exhilarating revelations of my graduate school experience at an elite institution how many colleagues in my entering class fancied themselves Marxists—truly, The Revolution was imminent if even Princeton was replete with radicals—and one of the sobering revelations how many ceased to be Marxists once going on the job market. Of course, those entering most professional environments perforce surrender their youthful ideals and iconoclastic convictions. What makes academia gallingly hypocritical is the pretense that unlike, say, the business world, it is unbounded, and what you publicly avow you actually believe—although it must be acknowledged that, after a while and to preserve self-regard, academics actually do swear by their opportunistic humbug, becoming “subjectively,” if not “objectively,” free.²

Having said this, it is nonetheless my impression that academia is a relatively free-wheeling place *so long as* one's opinions and carryings-on are kept within university confines. Right-wing commentators who declaim against liberal bias in many (if politically the most innocuous)

departments of higher education are not far off the mark. If you stick to speaking only at academic conferences, publishing only in academic journals, and being formally deferential to your academic colleagues, pretty much anything goes, at any rate at nonelite academic institutions, where faculty opinions have no public resonance. Just as the number of persons denied tenure each year on political grounds is, in my opinion, greatly exaggerated, so are the allegations of “academic McCarthyism” and assaults on academic freedom. If many choose along the way to forsake the academic track, it is not because they feel intellectually stifled, but because they prudentially decide that the sacrifices are not worth the meager rewards (not least in salary), and because academia is such a petty place rife with cliques and cabals, back-biting and back-stabbing, preening and posturing. Probably the only true thing Henry Kissinger ever said was, “University politics are so vicious precisely because the stakes are so small.” It would surely be more ennobling if it could be said that I fell victim to political persecution throughout my academic career. But candor compels me to acknowledge that, although politics played its part, at places like Hunter College in New York, where I was unceremoniously let go after serving nine years as an adjunct, the professional jealousy of failed academics played the bigger part: it was high time for the uppity adjunct to be cut down to size. (While at Hunter I had published four books and consistently received the highest student evaluations in the department.) In the normal run of academic life, pursuit of knowledge occupies the most trivial of places. During my last six-year stint in the political science department at DePaul University in Chicago, the country passed through two presidential elections, September 11, and two major wars, yet I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of political conversations with my colleagues. Having so little to show (off) after a laborious and often humiliating apprenticeship, senior faculty derive sadistic pleasure and ego gratification from the exercise of puny power such as subtly exerting terror on and exacting revenge from the nontenured. All the same, shouldn’t the fragile souls be pitied who exult over a footnote reference to their publication and writhe over the omission of it? Like war, academia is not healthy for human beings and other living things.³

The most urgent problems regarding liberty of speech arise not from what can and can’t be said within the university, but what can and can’t be said outside it. That is, apart from the constraints that professional autonomy imposes on intellectual inquiry, the social status conferred on academics imposes limits on what they might say. Put otherwise, what you utter in your civilian life might be, or appear to be, so offensive to current sensibilities, so unbecoming your professional stature—so uncivil—that it will jeopardize your right to teach. If such a conflict rarely arises nowadays it is because most self-described dissenting academics inhabit a politically correct cocoon world, one in which they construe publications and conferences on such “subversive” topics as *The Black Body* to be cutting-edge radicalism. In fact, apart from squandering precious material resources, the substantive impact of such indulgences approaches negative infinity while their intellectual value approaches the cognate nutritional value of marshmallow topped with Ready-Whip. But if

an academic steps into the public square and gives vent to genuinely heterodox opinions, it can be at his or her peril. It is highly improbable that the Israel lobby would have waged such a vicious campaign to deny me tenure if I had restricted myself to an academic milieu. In fact, by the current standards of the ivory tower, my opinions on the Israel-Palestine conflict are quite tame: I do not oppose a two-state settlement, I do not extenuate Palestinian terrorism, and I do not define myself as anti-Zionist. What evoked the national hysteria was my political activism. I wanted and was able to reach a fairly wide audience, and, yet worse, appeared reasonable, while the lobby's arsenal of conventional smears—"anti-Semite," "Holocaust denier," "crackpot"—wouldn't adhere: I was Jewish, my parents survived the Nazi holocaust, and my professional credentials withstood scrutiny.⁴ It might also be noticed that one reason I am in such demand among student, religious, and community groups is that most "radical" academics consider it beneath their station to speak under such auspices and, especially if it conflicts with a faculty wine-and-cheese party, a waste of their time. In an earlier epoch but on a truly grand scale, the eminent British philosopher Bertrand Russell too endured the tribulations of a dissident public intellectual.

In 1940, Russell was appointed to the philosophy department at the College of the City of New York. Almost immediately the Catholic Church and right-wing forces orchestrated a public hysteria on account of Russell's heretical opinions on religion and morality expressed in publications geared to a popular audience. A lawsuit was filed against the City of New York to rescind Russell's appointment on the grounds of his being "lecherous, libidinous, lustful, venerous, erotomaniac, aphrodisiac, irreverent, narrow-minded, untruthful and bereft of moral fiber" (Kallen 20). In short, he was a pervert. Despite an outpouring of support from his former students, leading lights of higher education, and the liberal public, the court decided against Russell. "This appointment affects the public health, safety and morals of the community," the judge stated in his opinion, "and it is the duty of the court to act. Academic freedom does not mean academic license. It is the freedom to do good and not to teach evil. Academic freedom cannot authorize a teacher to teach that murder or treason are good [. . .]. The appointment of Dr. Russell is an insult to the people of the city of New York [. . .] in effect establishing a chair of indecency" ("Decision" 222, 225).

Those advocating on Russell's behalf had pursued two seemingly complementary but really contradictory lines of defense. Some, such as John Dewey, mainly argued that the accusations were false and defamatory, Russell's actual opinions having been grossly distorted by the court (Dewey, "Social Realities" 57-74). On the contrary, it was said that Russell in every respect was of unimpeachable character. Others, such as Russell himself, mainly argued that his opinions on religion and morality were beside the point because he was hired to teach mathematics, logic, and the philosophy of science. In other words, it was of no account even if his opinions were perverted.

It must be said that, however much the judge might have hyperbolized, Russell's opinions on sexual mores did—by the sensibilities of his time—constitute an outrage to much of public opinion.⁵ It must also be noted that, on the Dewey line of defense, if what was alleged

about Russell's opinions were true, it *would be* grounds for stripping him of his academic post.⁶ Russell himself could not have been pleased with this inference because it hit too close to home, which is perhaps why he primarily based his defense not on the court's mangling of his opinions, but on their irrelevance to his academic calling—"I claim two things: 1. that appointments to academic posts should be made by people with some competence to judge a man's technical qualifications; 2. that in extra-professional hours a teacher should be free to express his opinions, whatever they may be" (Russell, *Autobiography* 474). And yet more emphatically in a letter to *The New York Times*, which lent him only tepid support, "In a democracy it is necessary that people should learn to endure having their sentiments outraged" (Russell, *Why I Am Not* 252-55).⁷

How tenable is Russell's position? In my opinion, not very. A collection of articles in defense of Russell included this sober reflection of a school administrator, which merits lengthy quotation:

Should a professor limit himself, or be limited? The strongest advocates of academic freedom are likely to answer No. Such absolutism, however, is theoretical, not realistic. As a *reductio ad absurdum*, think of trying to retain on any faculty teachers who openly advocate homosexuality—or the assassination of the President.¹⁸¹ [. . .] [T]here is always a limit. The teacher who thinks that this limit does not apply to him is not facing reality. The administrator must necessarily take this fact into account in employing and retaining faculty members. He must recognize that neither students nor the public will segregate a man's teachings in one field from his general teachings, his statements in class from his public pronouncements, his philosophy from his life. He must recognize that, whether or not it ought to be so, students and public consider that the appointment of a teacher places a stamp of approval on him as a whole; it invests him with a prestige which seems to justify youth in considering him an example whom it might be well to follow. The teacher must be considered in his entirety. This does not mean that he must be a plaster saint, but it means that his assets must clearly outweigh his liabilities. (Washburne 161-62)

I find it hard to quarrel with this opinion either as a factual statement—for better or worse a professor will not be judged only on his professional competence⁹—or as a normative one—because students often defer to the moral authority of a professor and because the title professor carries unique moral prestige, a professor ought to acquit himself in a morally responsible fashion. It cannot be plausibly maintained that a scholar, however gifted, who advocates "all niggers be lynched" would, or should, be granted an academic post. Indeed, ought not professors to take pride in the social capital invested in them and conduct themselves in a manner commensurate with this honor? Every responsible professor intuitively understands this. It is why we are embarrassed by a faculty member who in word or conduct demeans the stature of the profession—i.e., carries on in public like an ass. It is also why morally serious faculty do feel obliged to justify a public statement or action that appears outrageous rather than wave off

the criticism as “none of your business.” The realistic and responsible question then becomes, What sorts of conduct should be reckoned unacceptable and accordingly liable to censure and sanction?

Before turning to this question I would first want to enter a crucial caveat. In the ensuing remarks I will be addressing legitimate constraints on speech outside the classroom. Inside the classroom I am rather old-fashioned on what is and is not proper. A lectern should not serve as a soapbox, a classroom should not be a venue for indoctrination, a professor should not be the conveyor belt for a party/politically correct line. Plato said, “The object of education is to teach us to love what is beautiful” (*Rep.* III.403). It is not the worst aphorism, although I prefer a slightly amended, less authoritarian version: *The object of education is to teach us to love the mind at play*—while minds fully realized will probably concur on the beauty of many things. On most topics in the social sciences—really, social ideologies—arguments can be made on both sides and it is nearly always a question of weighing and balancing, of preponderances not absolutes. There might be consensus on the evil of violent genocide and the inhumanity of chattel slavery, but no such consensus exists on the evil of capitalism, which arguably causes millions to perish each year from hunger and preventable diseases, and the inhumanity of wage slavery, Chaplin’s *Modern Times* notwithstanding. Although the issue of torture once appeared closed, it has now been reopened. So long as an enduring consensus does not exist on a particular topic, a professor should feel obliged to make the best case for *all* sides and let students find truth after reasoning it through and doing the weighing and balancing *for themselves*. “The university educates the intellect to reason well in all matters,” John Cardinal Newman wrote, “to reach out towards truth, and to grasp it” (qtd. in Said 224). And the discovery of this truth “has to be made by the rough process of a struggle between combatants fighting under hostile banners” (Mill 110-11). A professor must play both combatants—the advocate and the devil’s advocate. Insofar as the human psyche is so contrived that few are capable of playing a full-fledged devil’s advocate, i.e., making the very best case against themselves, it is vital that a student be exposed to those who are willing *from conviction* to argue the, as it were, devil’s case. My primary responsibility in the classroom is to stimulate, not to dictate. As cogent a statement as any can be found in Harvard President Charles W. Eliot’s 1869 inaugural address:

Philosophical subjects should never be taught with authority. They are not established sciences; they are full of disputed matters, and open questions, and bottomless speculations. It is not the function of the teacher to settle philosophical and political controversies for the pupil, or even to recommend to him any one set of opinions as better than any other. Exposition, not imposition, of opinions is the professor’s part. The student should be made acquainted with all sides of these controversies, with the salient points of each system; he should be shown what is still in force of institutions or philosophies mainly outgrown, and what is new in those now in vogue. The very word education is a standing protest against dogmatic teaching. The notion that education consists in the

authoritative inculcation of what the teacher deems true may be logical and appropriate in a convent, or a seminary for priests, but it is intolerable in universities and public schools, from primary to professional. (Hofstadter and Metzger 400 [as corrected on the basis of original Eliot 35-36])

If invited to deliver a public lecture, however, I see my task as mainly to present my viewpoint, the results of my own process of weighing and balancing, just as others are invited to present theirs. The distinction might be analogized to the news pages versus the editorial pages of a newspaper.

I want now to look at varieties of incivility in public life. Consider first statements that might appear uncivil but which are nonetheless factually grounded. Investigative journalist Allan Nairn charged on the *Charlie Rose* television program that the assistant secretary of state for Latin America during the Reagan administration, Elliott Abrams, should be prosecuted as a war criminal under the Nuremberg statutes, while Noam Chomsky has asserted that on the basis of the Nuremberg statutes every U.S. president since World War II would have been hung. In and of themselves such statements are no more objectionable than calling Slobodan Milosevic and Saddam Hussein war criminals. It is an altogether separate matter whether the statements are factually accurate: Nairn and Chomsky might be guilty of misrepresentation, recklessness, or libel, but not of incivility. Likewise, it is not *ad hominem* to accuse Jewish organizations and lawyers of turning the Nazi holocaust into a blackmail weapon or to accuse a professor of being a plagiarist and falsifier of documents; such allegations denote definite crimes and misdemeanors, the veracity of which are subject to proof or disproof. Here, the epigraph for this essay quoting Gandhi is apropos.

Consider next statements that are uncivil but which might nonetheless be warranted by the circumstances. I would want to emphasize that here I refer to incivilities directed against those wielding power and privilege. I see no virtue in holding up to ridicule and contempt the poor and powerless, the humbled, hungry, and homeless. Again, Chomsky dubbed Jeane Kirkpatrick "chief sadist in residence of the Reagan Administration" (8). Kirkpatrick was serving as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, where she whitewashed atrocities being committed in Central America by the U.S. government and its proxies. Such a turn of phrase might be uncivil but under the circumstances hardly objectionable. Young people particularly yearn for a respected moral figure to speak the impolite and impolitic truth, to give vent to the purity of moral indignation that they feel and that the occasion warrants. There are moments that might positively require breaking free of the shackles imposed by polite discourse in order to sound the tocsin that innocent people are being butchered while we speak due to the actions of our government. The problem is not uncivil words but an uncivil reality; and uncivil words might be called for to bring home the uncivil reality. An *ad hominem* attack should not be a substitute for reasoned thought—and no one would accuse Chomsky of failing to argue his case or footnote it—but neither should a *cri de coeur*, however astringent, be ruled beyond the ambit of legitimate public discourse.

It is also pertinent to recall that Chomsky's caustic phrase appeared in a book pitched to a popular audience. It might be the case that in content and form a publication hovers on the juncture between the civility of the ivory tower and the tempestuousness of the town square or that an author wants to reach these two different constituencies at once. There is no necessary contradiction between the stolid scholar who meets the most exigent standards of academic protocol and the scrappy scholar who leaps headlong into the public fray. Karl Marx appraised *Das Kapital* a "triumph of German science" (Seigel 329), while even conservative economists such as Joseph Schumpeter reckoned Marx an "economist of top rank" (44). Nonetheless, as Frederick Engels recalled at his comrade's funeral, Marx wrote not just for "historical science" but also for the "militant proletariat"; he was "the man of science" but "before all else a revolutionary" (Foner 38-40). Indeed, Marx applauded the French publisher's serialization of *Das Kapital*, for "in this form the book will be more accessible to the working class, a consideration which to me outweighs everything else" (104). It scarcely surprises then that Marx's *magnum opus* seamlessly interweaves scholarly detachment and high-brow literary allusion with partisan polemic and lowbrow lampoon—or, in Schumpeter's colorful phrase, "the cold metal of economic theory is in Marx's pages immersed in such a wealth of steaming phrases as to acquire a temperature not naturally its own" (21). For Marx, Bastiat is a "dwarf economist" (175n35), Young "a rambling, uncritical writer whose reputation is inversely related to his merits" (339n13), and MacCulloch "a past master [. . .] of pretentious cretinism" (569n37); Say's standpoint is one of "absurdity and triviality" and Roscher "seldom loses the opportunity of rushing into print with ingenious apologetic fantasies" (314n3), while Ganilh's tome is "cretinous," "miserable," and "twaddle" (575). Even—or especially and, in my opinion, inexcusably—Mill wasn't spared Marx's verbal rapier: "On a level plain, simple mounds look like hills; and the insipid flatness of our present bourgeoisie is to be measured by the altitude of its 'great intellect'" (654). As for the subject of his scientific treatise, "Capital is dead labor which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks," and came into the world "dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt" (926). On the general question of partisanship and passion in scholarship, it merits quoting a top-rank intellect of vastly different temperament whom we have already encountered. "A man without a bias cannot write interesting history," Bertrand Russell observed, "if, indeed, such a man exists. I regard it as mere humbug to pretend to lack of bias [. . .]. Which bias is nearer to the truth must be left to posterity" (*Autobiography* 465-66).

Beyond its being a vehicle to convey moral indignation, incivility might also serve to expose pretense, fatuity, and charlatany. Doesn't the person proclaiming the emperor's nakedness belong to an honorable tradition? When Elie Wiesel, who charges five-figure fees to speak about silence, intones, "Words are a kind of horizontal approach, while silence offers you a vertical approach. You plunge into it," it would seem to beg the rejoinder, "Does Wiesel parachute into his lectures?" When Steven Katz sets out to demonstrate that The Holocaust was "phenomenologically unique" in a "non-Husserlian,

non-Shutzean, non-Schelerian, non-Heideggerian, non-Merleau-Pontyan sense," it would seem fair game for the tag line, "Translation: The Katz enterprise is phenomenal non-sense" (Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry* 44, 45n8).

It is also cause for wonder why the clever, witty, or erudite putdown that is a staple of academic life should be preferred over incivility of language. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., juxtaposes a pair of statements hypothetically addressed to a black freshman at Stanford:

(A) Levon, if you find yourself struggling in your classes here, you should realize it isn't your fault. It's simply that you're the beneficiary of a disruptive policy of affirmative action that places underqualified, underprepared, and often undertalented black students in demanding educational environments like this one. The policy's egalitarian aims may be well-intentioned but given the fact that aptitude tests place African-Americans almost a full standard deviation below the mean, even controlling for socio-economic disparities, they are also profoundly misguided. The truth is, you probably don't belong here, and your college experience will be a long downhill slide.

(B) Out of my face, jungle bunny.

"Surely there is no doubt," Gates concludes, "which is likely to be more 'wounding' and alienating" (146-47). He wants to illustrate the inherent inadequacies of politically correct speech codes, but the point might fairly be broadened to embrace the issue of incivility as well. I see no reason to prefer polished insults that, as Gates shows, might be more vicious and hurtful, to blunt language. Indeed, such stylishness is more often than not testament to a self-indulgent verbal pedantry and lack of a moral center.

In this regard the hypocritical use to which the incivility charge is typically put deserves mention. *The New York Times Sunday Book Review* featured a full-page review of my book *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering*. The reviewer, Omer Bartov, let loose this barrage of adjectives: "bizarre," "outrageous," "paranoid," "shrill," "strident," "indecent," "juvenile," "self-righteous," "arrogant," "stupid," "smug," "fanatic." Personally, I do not consider such invective beyond the pale, although, as I already suggested, it does become unserious if, as in the case of Bartov's review, the *ad hominem*s are not supported by and become a substitute for reasoned argument. It is passing strange, however, that this language evokes no reaction when deployed against dissidents, but when dissidents use comparable language against establishment figures allegations of incivility suddenly abound. Many took umbrage at my book's title, but no one seemed to take offense at the popular Israeli quip credited to Abba Eban, "There's no business like Shoah business." The spouse of the former director of the U.S. Holocaust Museum published in 2007 a "satire" of the Holocaust industry that garnered rave reviews (Reich), while a prominent Israeli politician won plaudits for his courage after publishing in 2008 a book deploring exploitation of the Nazi holocaust by the "Shoah industry" (Burg 4-5). It is true that since publication of my book in 2000 ridicule of the

Holocaust industry has entered the mainstream. This suggests, however, that my high crime was not being uncivil but being untimely, and that the charge of incivility had served as a pretext to deflect attention from the book's content. Indeed, the accusation of incivility frequently signals a politically motivated excuse to change the subject. Those sincerely committed to the pursuit of truth can see past a barb here and there. Raul Hilberg was the founder of the field of Holocaust studies and its dean until his recent death. In politics and style Hilberg and I could not have been more different. He was a conservative Republican, I am a person of the left; he eschewed adjectives and adverbs in his scholarship, mine is a more polemical style. Yet, he was able to discover something of value in my writing. He acclaimed *The Holocaust Industry* a "breakthrough" in a blurb for the book and proved one of my staunchest supporters during the tenure battle, saying in part:

I would not, unasked, offer advice to the university in which he now serves. Having been in a university for 35 years myself and engaged in its politics, I know that outside interferences are most unwelcome. I will say, however, that I am impressed by the analytical abilities of Finkelstein. He is, when all is said and done, a highly trained political scientist who was given a PhD degree by a highly prestigious university. This should not be overlooked. Granted, this, by itself, may not establish him as a scholar.

However, leaving aside the question of style—and here, I agree that it's not my style either—the substance of the matter is most important here, particularly because Finkelstein, when he published this book, was alone. It takes an enormous amount of academic courage to speak the truth when no one else is out there to support him. And so, I think that given this acuity of vision and analytical power, demonstrating that the Swiss banks did not owe the money, that even though survivors were beneficiaries of the funds that were distributed, they came, when all is said and done, from places that were not obligated to pay that money. That takes a great amount of courage in and of itself. So I would say that his place in the whole history of writing history is assured, and that those who in the end are proven right triumph, and he will be among those who will have triumphed, albeit, it so seems, at great cost. (Hilberg qtd. in Goodman n. pag.)

Yet, to justify its decision denying me tenure DePaul University adduced the incivility of *The Holocaust Industry*.¹⁰

It is child's play to multiply the examples of a double standard when it comes to the charge of incivility. During my tenure battle, Professor Alan Dershowitz posted on Harvard Law School's official Web site the allegation that my late mother was—or I believed she was—"a kapo" who had been "cooperating with the Nazis during the Holocaust." For the record, my late mother was a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto, Maidanek concentration camp, and two slave-labor camps, lost every member of her family during the war and after the war served as a key witness at a Nazi deportation hearing in the U.S.

and at the trial of Maidanek concentration camp guards in Germany. In a decent world Dershowitz's crude and conscious defamation *would*, I think, be deserving of censure. He not only suffered no sanctions but Harvard Law School Dean Elena Kagan refused to remove his posting from the HLS Web site.¹¹ In a *Haaretz* interview, Benny Morris called the whole of the Palestinian people "sick, psychotic," "serial killers," whom Israel must "imprison" or "execute," and "barbarians" around whom "something like a cage has to be built" (Shavit n. pag.). If directed against any other nationality, it is hard to conceive that Morris would not have suffered professionally. Yet his mainstream reputation as an objective scholar and commentator on the Israel-Palestine conflict survives intact and untarnished. It might be called Holocaust affirmative action whereby Jews wrapped in the mantle of the Nazi holocaust profit from moral immunity and impunity. It was also this affirmative action at work when Alain Finkielkraut—who is regarded in France as a philosopher of equal stature to Bernard-Henri Lévy, rightly so—told *Haaretz* that France's soccer team "arouses ridicule throughout Europe" because it was "composed almost exclusively of black players," and that colonialism sought only to "bring civilization to the savages" (Mishani and Smotriez n. pag.). It cannot but amuse how these spewings forth of venomous hate manage to get cast as profiles in courage. Finkielkraut packaged himself in the interview a martyr "striving to maintain the language of truth."

In this essay I acknowledged that the extramural life of an academic is bound to be, and should be, subject to some constraints. There are forms of incivility that might degrade a position on which society has conferred prestige and on which its principal constituency—students—rightly have higher than normal expectations. However, in nearly all the examples represented in these pages, which, be it noted, draw from politics, not the more problematic domain of social mores, I either exculpate or extenuate an alleged incivility. Indeed, it is my opinion that the supposed incivilities of political dissidents pale beside what normally passes for civility in academic life. When you consider that our best universities eagerly recruit indubitable war criminals—Henry Kissinger, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Donald Rumsfeld; when you consider that many professors—as Edward Said put it referring to the Vietnam War era—"were discovered to be working, sometimes secretly and sometimes openly, on such topics as counterinsurgency and 'lethal research' for the State Department, the CIA, or the Pentagon" (Said 224); when you consider that a professor at one of our best universities advocates torture and the automatic destruction of villages after a terrorist attack: when you consider all this, it becomes clear that, however real, the question of civility—whether a dissident academic abides by Emily Post's rules of etiquette—is by comparison a meaningless sideshow or just a transparent pretext for denying a person the right to teach on account of his or her political beliefs.

Notes

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¹ The classic account is Hofstadter and Metzger's *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States* ("ward" at 114). The landmark battles to emancipate American higher education from clerical authority unfolded during the Darwinian revolution in the late nineteenth century, and from corporate authority as labor mobilized at the turn of the century. Broadly speaking, the scientific revolution brought home the desiderata of professional autonomy and freedom of inquiry (*ibid.*, chap. vii), while the juggernaut of "big business" brought into sharp relief the precariousness of an academic's extramural rights as a citizen (*ibid.*, chap. ix, esp. 434).

² On this distinction, see Hofstadter and Metzger 16. For the congenital nexus between self-regard and self-deception among denizens of the ivory tower, I can do no better than quote the great evolutionary biologist Robert Trivers: "for extreme examples of self-deception you can hardly beat academics: 94 [percent] of them in one survey place themselves in the top half of their profession." See Trivers.

³ It would be remiss and overly sour if I didn't also affirmatively cite this mitigating passage from Edward Said:

When I first began teaching about thirty years ago, an older colleague took me aside and informed me that the academic life was odd indeed; it was sometimes deathly boring, it was generally polite and in its own way quite impotently genteel, but whatever the case, he added, it was certainly better than working! None of us can deny the sense of luxury carried inside the academic sanctum, as it were, the real sense that as most people go to their jobs and suffer their daily anxiety, we read books and talk and write of great ideas, experiences, epochs. In my opinion, there is no higher privilege. (224)

To be sure, Said omitted the greatest reward of academic life: the privilege and pleasure of attending youth on the formative leg of their life's journey.

⁴ A supplementary factor was the vendetta of Harvard Professor Alan Dershowitz, whom I had earlier exposed to be a hoaxer and plagiarist; see Finkelstein, *Beyond Chutzpah*, updated edition with a new preface. He calculated that if I were denied tenure, it would delegitimize my exposé of him: how could a "failed academic" (his phrase) be taken seriously? Dershowitz's intervention probably did not decide the outcome, although it did raise the stakes. In his absence, my tenure case would have been a local story which might have been picked up by some Chicago media outlets, whereas he elevated it to a national circus. However, the countercurrents whipped up by his high-profile intrusion canceled each other: DePaul felt pressured by major Jewish and right-wing constituencies to deny me tenure, but it also felt pressured not to cave in to a brazen assault on academic freedom. If the administration ultimately yielded, it was because, having to decide between the short-term disaster of being branded spineless and the long-term disaster of being relentlessly pursued so long as I was on the faculty and speaking my mind, the rational choice was to cut loose this albatross. The administration also knew that it was only a matter of time before the tempest passed: memories are short and the school's academic reputation was anyhow modest, my own students would soon graduate while faculty and administration would "heal the wounds and move on for the sake of the school and

especially the students . . ." For the record, I did not begrudge DePaul's decision to deny me tenure. It has always been my belief that no one except me should have to bear the costs of my political convictions. The sustained pressures exerted on a middle-tier Catholic institution vulnerable to charges of anti-Semitism would probably have proven intolerable. It was also an institution that performed a creditable public service, attracting a morally impressive student body from which I greatly benefited during my last days there and to whom I will be eternally grateful. If I fault DePaul it is because it had the option of taking the high or low road when the inevitable came to pass. It could have frankly acknowledged that I deserved tenure but also that it was in an untenable position, and then worked with me towards an amicable settlement. I would probably have been open to such a resolution—albeit I can't say for certain, and the administration couldn't have known for certain. Instead, however, DePaul viciously impugned my character in an attempt to prove my unfitness for academic office.

⁵ The claim of Russell's defenders that the court lifted all his opinions out of context was disingenuous. "Exhibit A" for the prosecution and the judge was Russell's book *Marriage and Morals*. Alongside many lyrical passages on love and sex quoted by his defenders, one could also read, "this law [barring homosexuality] is the effect of a barbarous and ignorant superstition, in favor of which no rational argument of any sort or kind can be advanced" (110-11); "there ought to be no law whatsoever on the subject of obscene publications" (116); "it is good for children to see each other and their parents naked whenever it so happens naturally" (116); "uninhibited civilized people, whether men or women, are generally polygamous in their instincts" (139); "where a marriage is fruitful and both parties to it are reasonable and decent the expectation ought to be that it will be lifelong, but not that it will exclude other sex relations" (142); "I do not think that prostitution can be abolished wholly" (148); "I think that all sex relations which do not involve children should be regarded as a purely private affair, and that if a man and a woman choose to live together without having children, that should be no one's business but their own" (165-66); "I should not hold it desirable that either a man or a woman should enter upon the serious business of marriage [. . .] without having had previous sexual experience" (166); "No doubt the ideal father is better than none, but many fathers are so far from ideal that their non-existence might be a positive advantage to children" (196-97); "Adultery in itself should not, to my mind, be a ground for divorce. Unless people are restrained by inhibitions or strong moral scruples, it is very unlikely that they will go through life without occasionally having strong impulses to adultery" (230). In addition to these politically incorrect opinions for his time, Russell also expressed many politically incorrect opinions for our time, such as "during [the nineteenth century] the British stock was peopling large parts of the world previously inhabited by a few savages" (245); "one can generally tell whether a man is a clever man or a fool by the shape of his head" (256); "The objections to [sterilization] which one naturally feels are, I believe, not justified. Feeble-minded women, as everyone knows, are apt to have enormous numbers of illegitimate children, all, as a rule, wholly worthless to the community [. . .] it is quite clear that the number of idiots, imbeciles, and feeble-minded could, by such measures, be enormously diminished" (258-59); "In extreme cases there can be little doubt of the superiority of one race to another. North America, Australia and New Zealand certainly contribute more to the civilization of the world than they would do if they were still peopled by aborigines. It seems on the whole fair to regard negroes as on the average inferior to white men, although for work in the tropics they are indispensable, so that their extermination (apart from questions of humanity) would be highly undesirable" (266).

⁶ Dewey seems to concede this by indirection; see his "Social Realities," in Dewey and Kallen, esp. 66-67.

⁷ *Why I Am Not a Christian* includes an appendix on the “Bertrand Russell Case” by Paul Edwards. *The New York Times* editorialized that Russell “should have had the wisdom to retire from the appointment as soon as its harmful effects became evident.”

⁸ To be sure, the challenge today would more likely be to retain on the faculty those who did *not* advocate these causes. (As I am writing, George W. Bush is president.)

⁹ In part this stems from a peculiarity of American higher education where boards of laymen ultimately govern the university. See Hofstadter and Metzger 120ff.

¹⁰ “DePaul Dean Slams Finkelstein”; cf. Holtschneider (A copy of the Holtschneider letter is posted on the official Web site of Norman G. Finkelstein at [http://www.normanfinkelstein.com/pdf/tenure denial/Finkelstein,Norman 06.08.2007.pdf](http://www.normanfinkelstein.com/pdf/tenure%20denial/Finkelstein,Norman%2006.08.2007.pdf)).

¹¹ For details and references, see Finkelstein, *Beyond Chutzpah* xlv.

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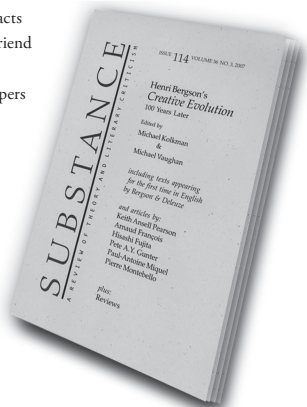
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