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Activist Professors at Columbia and Barnard Are Botching Free Speech

One-sided departmental statements are a threat to academic freedom.

THE REVIEW | ESSAY
By Jonathan Rieder | APRIL 2, 2024

In the post-October 7 world, many of the fiercest battles in the campus culture wars have taken a strangely Talmudic form: What is antisemitism? How should we demarcate the boundary between antisemitism and anti-Zionism? What is the meaning of “from the river to the sea”? All of these interpretive skirmishes are playing out on the shifting ground of the debate over free expression: What can be said? What is forbidden to be said? And what must be said?

Nowhere have those ritual collisions been more charged than at my own institutions, Barnard College and Columbia University. And nowhere is the power of those battles to illuminate the limitations of the left’s newfound embrace of free expression more evident than in the fight that emerged after the Barnard administration removed the “Statement of Palestinian Solidarity” from the website of the department of women, gender, and sexuality studies (DWGSS) soon after October 7.

That removal provoked criticism from various Barnard and Columbia faculty members. Janet Jakobsen, a former director of the Barnard Center for Research on Women, opined, “Our concern at root is whether conditions of academic freedom actually prevail at Barnard College.” Before long, the fracas leapt over the campus gates. The New York Civil Liberties Union charged that Barnard’s actions were “incompatible with a sound understanding of ‘academic freedom.’” The DWGSS has since gone rogue, putting up their own renegade website.

A letter, “Academic Freedom Under Attack at Barnard College,” issued by the Columbia University Faculty Action Committee and signed by well-known anti-Zionists, including Rashid Khalidi, Katherine Franke, and Nadia Abu El-Haj, lambasted what it deemed Barnard’s assaults on academic freedom. The committee claimed that cries of antisemitism were being used to shut down criticism of Israel. Conflating off-campus conservative doxxers with the Barnard administration — tarring the latter with the sins of the former — the letter conjured a surveillance-state hellscape: Barnard’s “movement away from ... freedom of speech” on Palestine “subjects all faculty and students critical of the Zionist political project to the increased security, surveillance, and policing currently being implemented by the college.”

The most blistering charge in the letter was that Barnard’s removal of the “Statement of Palestinian Solidarity” from the DWGSS website constituted “censorship.” To grasp what’s wrong with that accusation, we need to take a deeper dive into the granular details of the statement itself and the links to which it guided its readers. They could have been a caricature — or perhaps a confirmation — of the conservative political activist Christopher F. Rufo’s dystopic view of the academy’s capture by far-left social-justice ideologues.

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The DWGSS fashioned Israel as a uniquely demonic entity. Blotting out the tragic intricacies and moral dilemmas of Israel-Arab relations, the department replaced the messy ambiguities of Israel’s history and the plight of the Palestinians with counterfeit clarities like colonialism, apartheid, and genocide. In the process, the Manichean binary of oppressor and oppressed obscured the complexity of the current crisis and its multivariate causes. The links that accompanied the statement also invoked verdicts of “ethnic cleansing” and “settler colonialism” to impugn Israel. The “resources” hailed almost entirely from one vividly intersectional left corner of the ideological universe: decolonial feminists, polemical novelists, self-declared Black radicals, poets and organizers, revolutionary socialists, water and land protectors.

One of the resources, Vijay Prashad, gave over his blog to a speech from Arwa Abu Hashhash, a member of the Palestinian People’s Party (previously named the Palestinian Communist Party), who spoke the paleo-Marxist lingo of “the crisis of the capitalist system,” in which Israel served as “an advanced military base that serves imperialists’ interests.” The PPP’s pro-Soviet genealogy made utter sense, given that contemporary left-wing antisemitism owes much to Soviet antisemitism.

In Hashhash’s telling, what happened on October 7 was not an orgy of barbaric terrorism and sadistic sexual glee by Islamist antisemites live-casting their slaughter of Jews, but “resistance against colonialism and occupation.” In an inversion echoed by Students for Justice in Palestine and some Black Lives Matter affiliates, Hamas’s atrocities — replete with beheadings, the burning alive of innocent babies and peacenik ravers, gang rape, and other gruesome acts — were transfigured into a heroic strike against the “genocidal operation by the fascist Zionist occupation forces.”

The Black Women Radicals, another resource, vaulted the earthbound particulars of the Arab-Israeli conflict into the grand abstractions of critical and postcolonial theory. They fused their fight against Israel — a nation more than half nonwhite with a buoyant queer culture — with the struggle for “freedom from white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, transphobia, queerphobia, ableism, and other oppressions.” And they saw themselves as stranded in exile in the United States, “the belly of the imperial beast.”

The sectarianism of the DWGSS links was reflected in the maximalism of their political goals. They did not focus only or mainly on the horrific suffering in Gaza. As with Jewish Voice for Peace and Students for Justice in Palestine, whose protests feature sentiments like “We don’t want no two states! We want ‘48 ... Palestine is ours alone!” there was no talk of two states side by side. Rather, the diabolical features of Israel were ascribed to its essence, already sealed into the state at its origins.

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The one-sidedness of the “Statement of Palestinian Solidarity” was equally evident in what it did not say. I addressed the most troubling omission in a letter to my Barnard colleagues: “What do we make of the silence, tepid and obligatory disapproval (killing civilians is not good), or justification and celebration (‘resistance to oppression’) of certain ‘progressives’ in the wake of the worst genocidal slaughter of Jews since the Holocaust? The simple answer: If not by intent, then by effect, it functions to discount, exculpate, and enable antisemitism.”

That discounting was clear from the DWGSS’ silence about Hamas: its identity as an antisemitic terror state; and its origins as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, with its fateful fusion of Nazism and Islamism in the 1930s and 1940s; and its incorporation of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion into its founding document. October 7, as the indispensable historian Jeffrey Herf writes, is the “logical outcome of the Jew-hatred that Hamas has openly expressed since 1988, and it rests on a strand of Islamic antisemitism that emerged in the early 20th century and fueled the Arab war of rejection in 1948.”

All of this underscores the problem with departmental political side-taking in the name of academic freedom: The newfound progressive embrace of free expression coincides with the desire to foist an orthodoxy on Barnard students, one which politicizes academic study and makes hash of the liberal-arts ideal of competing viewpoints. That is why academic freedom requires institutional neutrality to flourish.

I absolutely support my colleagues’ right to hold, and to express as individuals, the views contained in the DWGSS statement, misguided though I think they are. But I do not support their right to impose those views on Barnard and Columbia students. Despite the sinister image of jackbooted administrators tearing down a website, the view of the statement’s removal as “censorship” reflects a confusion about the varying speech rules and rights that should attach to speakers in different zones of the academic workplace. Properly understood, the prohibition on doctrinaire departmental statements doesn’t quash academic freedom — it protects it.

The fearful vision of Stasi-like surveillance in “Academic Freedom Under Attack at Barnard” cannot vanquish this elemental truth: Nothing in the removal infringed on the academic freedom of any individual member of the DWGSS. No one ordered a single professor to suppress their anti-Zionist views. No one said they could not say whatever they wanted, and to their hearer’s content — at conferences, while teaching, in their writing, on social media.

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All the removal did was insist that that no department, no matter how animated by righteous zeal, should turn its website into an instrument of propaganda and indoctrination. Whatever the beliefs of the individual members of a department — even if every single member shares the same orthodoxy — the institution, and its various departmental subunits, should not endorse the dogma of a “correct” viewpoint on a contemporary political matter.

Such an officially consecrated viewpoint would have countless adverse effects. Two cry out.

First, the departmental “Statement of Palestinian Solidarity” would send exclusionary signals to potential job hires: No Zionists need apply. That constitutes viewpoint and identity discrimination. And it would put on notice vulnerable assistant professors who dissented from the department’s official line — if any had ever managed to make it through the gauntlet of groupthink and get hired in the first place.

Second, officially consecrating anti-Zionism would send exclusionary signals to our students, including progressive Zionists, many of whom are proud feminists and fierce critics of the settlements and the occupation, as well as conservative Zionists, whose viewpoint is also valid. It would declare, in effect: You are not welcome in this space. And it would abandon the ideal of respect for multiple viewpoints to which the college should always be committed.

That is why Harry Kalven, in the famous Kalven Committee Report at the University of Chicago, underscored the importance of institutional neutrality. “The instrument of dissent and criticism is the individual faculty member or the individual student. The university is the home and sponsor of critics; it is not itself the critic ... A university must sustain an extraordinary environment of freedom of inquiry and maintain an independence from political fashions, passions, and pressures.” The department website is a unique speech forum, and institutional neutrality at the level of academic departments is a critical mechanism for ensuring respect for diverse viewpoints.

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In early February, the Columbia Faculty Senate endorsed the Kalven principles. Ominously, in a recent faculty meeting considering an interim set of policies on free expression, my colleagues at Barnard voted not to adopt the Kalven standard of neutrality. They should reconsider.

Institutional neutrality would help encourage a more vibrant speech regime on campus, not least by inviting colleges to rethink their approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion. All too often, the current DEI approach has promoted a narrow spectrum of opinion about gender, antiracism, identity, language, policing, and more; punished and discouraged what it deems unacceptable viewpoints; and treated students as fragile beings who need to be shielded from an array of harmful words and confusing ideas. A rival model would imagine the campus as open to all viewpoints, even those that might offend or unsettle some students or even “trigger” them. Examples of such permissible messages include “globalize the Intifada,” but also “the BDS movement is driven by Jew-haters,” “to say there are only two sexes is transphobic,” and also “there are only two sexes.”

The elite academy has forsaken many of its ideals in recent decades. The problem is not that it has surrendered to diversity, a claim that represents the right’s weaponization of these debates as it works to replace the existing monoculture with its own. The problem is with enforcing one version of diversity to the exclusion of competing views.

In recent years, the social-justice left has been the driver of the attack on expression on countless campuses. And yet perhaps the current moment provides an opening to press forward a more vigorous conception of academic freedom. That will only happen if progressives affirm liberal-arts ideals and institutional neutrality along with free expression — and if by free expression they mean more than “freedom for my side to speak but not for yours.”

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