CIVIL PHILOSOPHY FOR EVERYONE AMERICAN

SOPHIA SOCIETY OF PHILOSOPHERS IN AMERICA

Education as a Public Resource for Addressing American Political Polarization

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Part 1: Speaking to the Middle

I

An educated populace is crucial for a well-functioning democracy, and in the U.S. the use of pamphlets, periodicals, opinion pieces, and public letters, stretching back before the revolution, testifies to the importance that Americans place on an educated public. The use of these devices has helped keep American citizens apprised of the problems we face, and in the early Republic especially it was an important method of consensus-building.

This interest found kindred expression in a general concern with education in the United States and the colonies, one that many of the founders shared: Benjamin Franklin was instrumental in the creation of what would become the University of Pennsylvania, Benjamin Rush founded both Dickinson college and what would become Franklin and Marshall College ('Franklin' named after Benjamin), and Thomas Jefferson worked to establish a system of schools in Virginia, from the local level up to the University of Virginia, with the aim of selecting the brightest pupils for further instruction at each stage.

These projects were animated by a sense of education as something like a public resource for the American people. As a public resource education offers individual citizens not only a path to gainful employment but also the possibility of improving our lives by developing the habits of thought and conscience that accrue through a period of prolonged engagement with the thoughts and deeds of those who came before us. And by creating such citizens American education offers, for the public, successive cohorts able to sustain the intelligent collective reflection over the shape of American society that attends our participation in this experiment in self-government.

Thinking of education as a resource for the American people highlights the importance of the principles and institutions that shape its management. For just as

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the principles governing (e.g.) Fish, Wildlife, and Park services for U.S. citizens are enforced by various institutional mechanisms, and these geared toward the end (in part) of allowing us to enjoy the public goods that come with resource use in wilderness areas, so are the institutions of education meant to be run by principles that enable American citizens to enjoy the personal and social benefits that come with education. And just as access to wilderness areas redounds on the health of American society and its citizens, so does access to education. This analogy suggests that if education is a resource for the American people then educators—as stewards of the use of that resource—have a duty to mind the institutional norms and mechanisms that enable the public to enjoy its benefits, just as employees of FWP have a duty to mind resource management in wilderness areas.

Despite its close ties to the founding of the Republic, in practice higher education, as with political representation, would remain for generations the province of the elite, however. When Jefferson speaks of the "best geniuses" that will be "raked from the rubbish annually" by the school system he proposed for Virginia (Ford 2010, 61), his candidate geniuses were white men from families wealthy enough to pay for higher education.

It is a testament to the animating ideals of the American system of government that we have gradually overcome some of the barriers obstructing the universal enjoyment of our rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. If the development of American society is to proceed on the basis of a more thorough realization of the principles of individual liberty and collective self-government that animate our country, and if education in the United States offers both the individual benefit of personal betterment and the public good of intelligent control over the shape of our union, then it will be important that American educational institutions foster the mutual understanding that precedes collective action. For we cannot effectively work together on a common project if we do not understand what our partners want and are trying to accomplish.

II

Unfortunately, we live in a time of increasing political polarization in the United States, and this makes it harder for people to understand one another across political divides (see section III for the details). This polarization has grown sharply in the last twenty-five years. According to the Pew Research Center, in 2016 more than 50% of those identifying either as Democrat or Republican held not only an unfavorable but a *very* unfavorable view of the other party (Pew Research Center 2016b). By contrast, in 2014 43% of Republicans and 38% of Democrats had a very unfavorable view of the other party, and in 1994 these percentages were just 17% and 16%, respectively (Pew Research Center 2014). This growing divide is reflected in different views about what our top priorities should be (Jones 2019). There is also a rising sense that public discourse on political issues has become too divisive (Pew Research Center 2019).

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This situation makes it difficult for people of different political views to talk to one another without the conversation devolving into acrimony. That in turn makes it difficult to share and improve on the ideas we have about what we are facing and what to do about it. It would thus seem that U.S. educators, qua stewards of the public resource that is education, bear a duty to intervene in this situation in ways that foster the collective understanding and self-government that I am suggesting education offers the American people.

III

There are reasons to be optimistic about the possibility of such intervention. Research going back over three decades suggests that Americans share more political commitments than they realize, and that it is the vocal minorities in the wings that are driving the sense of a division. Summarizing a recent study and the associated background literature, Stevens (2019) writes (emphasis in the original):

- Democrats and Republicans significantly overestimate how many people on the 'other side' hold extreme views. Typically, their estimates are roughly double the actual numbers for a given issue.
- Greater partisanship is associated with holding more exaggerated views of one's political opponents.
- The Perception Gap is strongest on both "Wings" (America's more politically partisan groups).
- Consumption of most forms of media, including talk radio, newspapers, social media, and local news, is associated with a wider Perception Gap.
- Education seems to increase, rather than mitigate, the Perception Gap (just as increased education has found to track with increased ideological prejudice). *College* education results in an especially distorted view of Republicans among liberals in particular.
- The wider people's Perception Gap, the more likely they are to attribute negative personal qualities (like 'hateful' or 'brainwashed') to their political opponents.

It is distressing that both college education and consumption of most forms of media today appear correlated with a greater perception gap, and this research reinforces the suspicion that we are facing a period of increasingly difficult collective action on account of a failure to understand one another. But the model mocked up here also suggests we are facing an opportunity as well. For if we share more in common than we realize, while it tends to be the vocal extremist minorities in the wings who dominate public conversation, then once we have a better understanding of where most people are located it may be that collective understanding (if not agreement) will be easier to reach than it appears right now.

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My proposal in this essay is that educators make an effort to speak to the middle on politically-charged issues, and toward that end I gather together some social-scientific data and offer an interpretive gloss about how to proceed. My focus will lie on the situation on college campuses, as I believe that university educators have a particular duty to model the norms of thoughtful conversation that are needed for the development of mutual understanding. Higher education in the U.S. today has seen its own trends of increased political polarization, however, and so it will be important for the academician to address the problem as it appears within the academy as well. But if we educators can build up a bulwark of sensible people in the middle of the debate on university campuses, we might hope to more effectively intervene in the situation with the public at large.

Part 2: Speaking to the Middle on University Campuses

IV

Over the last few years, a growing chorus of concern has been raised about an apparent disregard for principles of free expression that student activists sometimes display on college campuses in the United States. In September of 2015 Greg Lukianoff, president and CEO of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (F.I.R.E) and Jonathan Haidt, social psychologist and professor at the NYU-Stern School of Business, published an article in *The Atlantic* titled "The Coddling of the American Mind" (expanded into Lukianoff and Haidt 2018). Lukianoff and Haidt argue that recent attempts to suppress the expression of various ideas on college campuses, due to feelings of discomfort and offense, stultify students' intellectual and emotional growth. Over the next six months similar articles appeared at *The Atlantic* (Friedersdorf 2016 and Cole 2016), *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (deBoer 2016, Shanahan 2016, and Boyers 2016), *The New Yorker* (Heller 2016), *U.S. News and World Report* (Mulligan 2015), *The Wall Street Journal* (Bloomberg and Koch 2016), and *The Washington Post* (Adler 2016).

A number of high-profile incidents in 2017 exacerbated the sense of a crisis (Bauer-Wolf 2017, F.I.R.E. 2018, Friedersdorf 2017, Helsel 2017, *The Olympian* Editorial Board 2018) and though there is reason to think the wave crested that year (Burnett 2019 and Sachs 2019a), the problem remains with us (Anderson 2020, Bauer-Wolf 2019, Campbell 2018, Mangan 2019, McLaughlin 2017, Stripling 2020, and Zoeller and Majeed 2019).

A number of themes recur over these discussions. Lukianoff and Haidt speak of the 'coddling' of the American mind, and Campbell and Manning (2018) warn of a rise of 'victimhood culture' on college campuses that is supplanting cultures of 'honor' and 'dignity' (they curate a blog – victimhoodculture.com – devoted to the phenomenon). Steven B. Gerrard argues that the American university system has moved through three eras, from the Christian college to the gentleman's college to the consumer

college, and is at the dawn of a fourth: the comfort college (2019a and 2019b). From Gerrard (2019a):

> [C]ontroversies over free speech, safe spaces, trigger warnings, microaggressions and the like are symptoms of this shift. They are currently considered controversies because the colleges are in transition, and many do not realize that the old standards no longer hold. Once the transition is complete, the "correct" side of the controversies will become central to a school's identity — just as faith was to the Christian college, self-confidence was to the gentlemen's college, and alumni devotion and achievement were to the consumer's college.

Comparisons to religious fanaticism and Orwellian groupthink are also common. Robert Boyers (2016) speaks of the missionary attitude student activists sometimes display, and quoting Yale English professor David Bromwich he speaks of "a church held together by the hunt for heresies." Trent Eady, a former student activist at McGill University in Canada, identifies four "core features" of today's social justice activism that contribute to its "dark and vaguely cultish" brand of politics: dogmatism, groupthink, a crusader mentality, and anti-intellectualism (Eady 2014). Insofar as college campuses are breeding grounds for these kinds of attitudes, this situation reinforces the impression that higher education is currently compounding the divisiveness we see in the public sphere.

V

While the political right is responsible for its own attacks on the academy (cf. Alterman 2016, Beauchamp 2018, Dutt-Ballerstadt 2018), it is frequently pointed out that this state of affairs follows a period where the political orientations of university educators in the United States moved sharply to the left while the rest of the public did not. From Abrams (2016a; see also Abrams 2016b):

> While the data confirms that university and college faculty have long leaned left, a notable shift began in the middle of the 1990s as the Greatest Generation was leaving the stage and the last Baby Boomers were taking up teaching positions. Between 1995 and 2010, members of the academy went from leaning left to being almost entirely on the left. Moderates declined by nearly a quarter and conservatives decreased by nearly a third.
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> ...
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> [During this period] the professoriate was changing while the electorate as a whole was not. Professors were more liberal than the country in 1990, but only by about 11 percentage points. By 2013, the gap had tripled; it is now more than 30 points. It seems reasonable to conclude that it is academics who shifted, as there is no equivalent movement among the masses whatsoever.

Some disciplines (e.g. economics) tend to slant to the right, but the social sciences and humanities display particularly left-leaning faculties (Bennett 2015, Duarte et al.

2015, Langbert et al. 2016, and Wilson 2019), as do elite liberal arts colleges (Langbert 2018 and Al-Gharbi 2019a).

It is also worth mentioning that college education is positively correlated with left-wing political commitment, a correlation that grows with advance in the university educational system. A 2016 study (Pew Research Center 2016a) found that among those adults without any college experience, 26% have either consistently or mostly liberal values and 26% have either consistently or mostly conservative values, with the remaining 48% displaying a mix of both. This changes to 36% and 28% (liberal and conservative, respectively) among those with some college experience, to 44% and 29% for those who have completed an undergraduate education but have not attended graduate school, and to 54% and 24% for those with some postgraduate experience.

Many explanations might be offered here, including that liberals self-select for college instruction at a higher rate than conservatives, that liberal values are naturally more appealing as one goes through higher education, or that more general institutional and administrative mechanisms within the university are the source of this correlation rather than university instruction itself. But in 2015 72% of the adult public did not have a college degree, and 48% of this group display a mix of values that is not neatly captured by lumping them into either the liberal or the conservative camp. And considering the whole of the American adult population, 36% and 27% fall on either the liberal or the conservative ends respectively, while 38% display a mix of both sorts of values.

Now recall the data from part III showing a correlation between more extreme partisan political commitment and more distorted views of the 'other side,' and showing that this perception gap was increased by college education and consumption of most forms of media. If in the absence of college education the general public tends to divide evenly over conservative and liberal mindsets, with nearly half of that group not clearly identifying with either, while almost 40% of the whole adult population (college educated or not) doesn't neatly identify with either, then an educated liberal elite wielding disproportionate influence in news media, the arts, and public discussion can only accelerate this polarization cycle, and the distortions in understanding brought with it. Add a mix of new media platforms and the ideological echo chambers they allow for, and the situation we face today is not all that surprising.

To be clear, I am not claiming that there is anything in particular about leftist thought that is the source of the problem, and here it is worth quoting Al-Gharbi (2020):

> The left is not the problem. Homogeneity is a problem. Parochialism is a problem. Dogmatism is a problem. And these are general problems, not left problems. In a world where most students, faculty and administrators skewed conservative to the same degree they currently skew liberal, we should expect to see roughly the same issues arise with respect to bias, discrimination, censorship, institutional capture, etc. (indeed, we do observe just that in situations where the tables are turned).

VI

When 30 academics, primarily from psychology and the social sciences, formed the Heterodox Academy in September of 2015 a forum was opened for considering the impact of this apparent groupthink on higher education (Rosenkranz 2015). Beginning with a paper published in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, devoted to detailing the lack of ideological diversity in social psychology and its adverse effects on the discipline (Duarte et al. 2015), the members of the Heterodox Academy have been tracing the existence and effects of this tendency in the contemporary academy and suggesting ways to correct it (see the "Library" and "Press" portions of their website).

As with the so-called 'free speech crisis' on college campuses, not everyone agrees that the shift in distribution of political ideology across the academy that we have witnessed in the last three decades is a problem, or that it is having a corrupting influence on the attitudes of college students (see the essays in Katzav and Vaesen 2017, and Sachs 2019b). This is not the essay to address that debate, for the point here is that a number of intelligent men and women have concluded that there is such a problem, and the existence of considered disagreement on the issue militates against treating it as settled one way or the other. And that in turn bears consequences for how the educator ought to behave.

In another essay (forthcoming) I use Kuhn's account of scientific revolutions to frame a view of Normal and Revolutionary periods concerning what Hegel called *Sittlichkeit* (ethical life), the body of norms that bind a people together as a society (roughly). In cases of Revolutionary ethical living, I argue, the educator is obliged to resist the urge to treat his or her favored view as Normal. Instead, what I call *revolutionary pedagogy* is one that fosters sustained and critical engagement with a variety of ethical points of view. A similar duty falls on the public work we do as academics living in a Revolutionary ethical period. For in times of ideological conflict within a society we must give special attention to, by way of engagement with, the perspectives of those with whom we disagree—only then can we hope to come to that mutual understanding which grounds effective collective action. As university educators with public-facing personas, academicians have a role to play in modeling that kind of charitable stance toward views we disagree with. One way of doing that is to try to speak to the middle, on the assumption that most people really are reasonable enough to understand one another.

On that front it is perhaps worth pointing out that in a recent study of undergraduate attitudes at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, researchers found that while on the one hand conservative students were more reticent to share their views than liberals, there was a 'hidden consensus' among both liberals and conservatives in favor of free expression and open debate (Ryan 2020):

> [I]t seems wrong to think of free expression on college campuses as a topic that must pit liberals against conservatives. At UNC, at least, many liberals and conservatives seem to want an environment where they can learn about and engage with views with which they disagree. I, for one, hope that students, faculty,

and administrators alike renew our efforts to make sure that this hidden consensus does not get lost amidst the noise.

Part 3: Looking Ahead

VII

Times of instability are often times of opportunity, opening up possibilities that were not live options in the normal go of things. Just so, the existence of widespread political disagreement presents an opportunity for reshaping some of our framework political commitments, and the division between the broadly 'left' and 'right' sides of the political spectrum in the U.S. may be approaching some kind of shift.

At the end of the 20th century a handful of thinkers articulated a response to the liberalism that had dominated so much of that century. Often discussed under the banner 'communitarianism', the philosophical ground for this point of view was spelled out by philosophers like Alasdair MacIntyre (2007 – first edition 1981) Michael Sandel (1998 – first edition 1982), and Charles Taylor (1989), and in the 1990s it was developed into a political position labelled 'responsive communitarianism' (see section 3 of Bell 2016). Communitarianism is experiencing something of a revival, joined by a number of views variously called 'post-liberal', 'civic republican', or 'hard centrist' (Brooks 2019, Cost 2018, Franklin 2019, Goodhart 2017, Fukuyama 2018, Papazoglou 2019, Polimédio 2019, Steiner 2019). These positions share an interest in balancing a liberal emphasis on individual autonomy with a recognition of the debts to community that provide the affective ground for the exercise of individual autonomy (as I read him, Kaufman in 2006, 2016, and 2017 examines a similar phenomenon occurring in philosophy during the modern period).

This emphasis on community relations and *civic duty* offers a complementary lens to lay alongside the one of individual freedom and *civil rights* that dominated our view of things in the last century, so as to see the autonomous person in proper depth against the background of her community. And in the last few years a number of organizations directed at fostering community dialogue and understanding have appeared in the United States (e.g. Weave at the Aspen Institute, Better Angels, BridgeUSA, Free Intelligent Conversation, Letter, and Thread). One might hope these institutions could be leveraged to help give voice to the middle ground of American political sentiment.

There are avenues for collective action among academics as well, and a number of proposals have been put forward in response to what has been happening on college campuses in the last few years. DeBoer (2016) urges the academic community to be more engaged in the support and critique of student movements and their ideologies. Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) offer the tools of cognitive behavioral therapy as a partial remedy for the pathos of the social justice mindset run amok. In his discussion of the fallout from the 2017 protests and violence directed at Charles Murray at Middlebury

college (Jaschik 2017), Friedersdorf (2017) lays out areas of agreement and disagreement between those who advocate stifling the speech of others and those who prioritize freedom of expression. Eady, the reformed student activist who grew disgusted with the movement's tactics (2014), suggests four courses of action for leftists on college campuses: embrace humility, treat people as individuals, learn to be diplomatic, and take a systems approach to political problems, conceiving of them as engineering problems. Ripley (2018) discusses a dialogical method aimed at clarifying the complications that lie at the back of ideologically divisive social issues, and she summarizes social science work that suggests this method is ameliorative. The "Moral Technology" section of Chapter 8 of Campbell and Manning (2018) outlines sociological interventions, compatible with both liberal and conservative values, that may improve the atmosphere on college campuses. And at the Heterodox Academy Al-Gharbi (2019b) argues that university educators should 1) teach students to move beyond criticism, 2) prioritize civic education and engagement, and 3) teach students about biases, cognitive distortions, and methods to mitigate them. One might also consider work in the sociology of morality suggesting that the 'big three' moral points of view concern autonomy, community, and divinity (cf. Shweder et al. 1997), or on the research surrounding moral foundations theory (e.g. Haidt 2012).

These and related positions might be used to frame more constructive exchanges among the partisans of different factions. Imagine a series of conferences and workshops modelled on Jefferson's system of higher education: individual campuses would convene over the issues that concern them specifically, with regional, statewide, and national meetings to follow. Similar programs could be run concurrently within individual disciplines, and public outreach and education might follow. This would require concerted effort on the part of academics and their institutions, but it would seem within the realm of possibility.

VIII

Since before the Revolution the public space of debate and conversation has been a testing ground for the ideas around which consensus has coalesced. The existence of an educated public depends upon the existence of people willing to help with that education, however, and so by striving to create and use public spaces for constructive conversation we help the public see the problems we face and the possible solutions on offer. That in turn requires being careful in reconstructing the views of those we disagree with, particularly when talking to our own tribe about those we consider the Others.

There are encouraging signs on this front as well. Organizations like the Aspen Institute, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, the Heterodox Academy, the Institute of Art and Ideas, and the Society of Philosophers in America – as well as new media platforms like Aeon, Medium, Quillette, Salon, Slate, and UnHerd – are playing a role in disseminating ideas and conversations that allow those of us paying attention to get a better view of what's going on.

There is a long tradition in the U.S. of public engagement by the members of the academy, especially on the part of philosophers. Contributions to public discourse from people like Richard Bernstein, Angela Davis, John Dewey, Jackie Kegley, John McDermott, Martha Nussbaum, Richard Rorty, and Cornell West embody the value we invest in a self-aware public. And as philosophers in the pragmatist tradition have long emphasized, the living organism is a thing that is constantly adapting and equilibrating itself to the ordered flux of experience. Only in so doing does it maintain its own vitality, and to do that intelligently the organism must be unified in its affective and responsive behaviors to the difficulties and opportunities it faces.

One role for the educator, I am suggesting, is to see that the body politic is similarly unified by equipping students with the intelligence and sensibilities needed to participate in this process. To do so is to help fulfill our function as stewards of the public resource that is education in the United States.

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