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CIVILITY AND LIBERAL PLURALISM

IAN BARNARD

One

Capitalist relations frequently are explained and justified in the language of “free enterprise” and “choice.” In liberal democracies, free enterprise is translated into cultural realms as doctrines of free speech, objectivity, and academic freedom, advertised with the rhetoric of pluralism. Cultural and political activities, often including those that represent themselves as inimical to the many manifestations of social inequity in the US, do the work of increasing capitalism’s moral hegemony by framing themselves within the same discourse. Shopping malls, advertisements of all kinds, television news, candidates in election campaigns, and schools, all seek support by invoking pluralism. Look how many choices we offer, supermarkets announce. We welcome opposing opinions from qualified individuals, news commentators tells us. So many stores to choose from. So many TV channels to turn to. The same stories on each news program. The same layout in every department store.

This conception of pluralism is frequently deployed by anti-censorship feminists, pro-choice campaigners, defenders of lesbian sadomasochism, activists calling for the abolition of anti-sodomy statutes, and “dissident” academics as well. What people do in the privacy of their bedrooms is their own business, liberals are wont to announce. You don’t have to like it or even agree with it, but you have no right to impose your opinion on others. (As long as they don’t shove it in our faces.) I personally might not like the idea of abortion, might never have an abortion myself, but this doesn’t mean that I can deny others the right to choose. (After all, it is the law.) I’m against degrading representations of women, but I won’t support censorship. Everyone has the right to free speech. Just as sadomasochists don’t seek to prohibit your sexual expression, why should you want to outlaw us? We have the right to present our views in the academy alongside a variety of other political viewpoints. It’s important that students be

exposed to a wide spectrum of opinions, so that they can make informed choices regarding their own positions.

The lack of true diversity and choice in the institutionalized liberal pluralism of the U.S. is evidenced by the historically narrowly defined parameters of official political oppositionality. Noam Chomsky's research on U.S. intellectuals has shown, for instance, that the celebrated academic protest of the US's war against Vietnam was founded largely on pragmatic rather than moral grounds (1984, 129), as was the opposition of House Democrats to Contra aid in the 1980s—most did not argue that Contra aid was an imperialistic collaboration with right-wing oligarchs, but rather that it was impractical, since the Contras were unlikely to “win” the war (Chomsky 1988). Similarly, some opponents of the US's war against Iraq in 1991 were motivated more by concerns for the potential of U.S. lives being lost or of exorbitant military spending than distaste for U.S. racism and expansionism. Whenever the U.S. “presence” in the “Persian Gulf” was discussed on commercial television's news programs, questions were framed within the assumption that the U.S. presence in the Gulf was morally warranted: opinion polls asked if the U.S. should instigate war, or whether respondents thought that war was inevitable or not, and not whether U.S. troops were justifiably in Saudi Arabia in the first place. The questions asked predetermined what kinds of answers and discussions of these answers would follow. Innocuously presented television news programs exhorting viewers to write to “the men and women” in the Gulf, advising viewers to send early Christmas parcels to their “loved ones” in the desert, or creating video postcards to and from troops in the Gulf, took for granted the self-evidence of the righteousness of the U.S. presence in the Gulf. Corporate sponsorship of this imperialist saber-rattling supported the war effort of the supposedly liberal media—AT&T, for instance, offered “free” phone-calls “home” on Thanksgiving to troops in the Gulf. Too often, U.S. protestors against the most recent war against Iraq demonstrated a similar collusion with hegemonic mandates of dissidence. In one downtown LA protest in 2003, some demonstrators carried placards bearing the legend, “‘Where there is a WILL there is a way.’ Win without war,” as if “winning” itself in this context isn't intricately in the ideologies of ethnocentrism, nationalism, imperialism, and patriarchy that underpinned the rhetorics and practices of this war.

While the existence of true pluralism is contingent on free choice, a “choice” that is imprisoned within rigidly oppressive parameters is *the* attribute of the American way. In domestic policy, constructs of the U.S. as a melting pot filled with diversity or a land of freedom and opportunity (where anyone can be anything) use pluralist rhetoric to mask the increasingly narrow scope of choice people actually have in matters of import. Those who are economically privileged can choose

from a variety of brand names at the supermarket, but no one can choose an alternative to the relations of consumer capitalism that structure their lives. The two-party political system in the U.S. functions precisely by creating the impression that voters have choice, that they have a momentous decision to make in every election (usually this means choosing between a Republican and Democratic candidate). Of course, any position that challenges the conglomerate of dominant positions is systemically denied access to financial, media, and other resources. This exclusion belies the assurances of choice and diversity insisted upon by those groups who benefit economically from the "pluralistic" status quo. It gives the lie to the claim that this is a truly pluralist society.

"Free speech" often is touted as one of the great characteristics of liberal pluralism, as one of the characteristic benefits of liberal democracy. In liberal democracies free speech is advocated on the ground that it gives all subject positions equal opportunity to speak, and an existing variety of voices is pointed to as evidence of free speech in action. But this free speech can never be free in that it always enforces a particular ideology that is predeterminedly prioritized by existing power relations, the economic structures that act in concert with them, and the history that created them. As Arundhati Roy (2003) puts it, free speech is "available only to those who can afford it" (78). Not only is it not free, but its benefits also are never available to everyone. In capitalist "democracies," it is always the ruling classes that benefit from anyone's exercise of free speech. The mythology of free speech enables these groups to justify monopolizing public discourse while marginalized voices are permitted to speak only in order for the ruling classes to more effectively consolidate their own power by displaying their supposed tolerance of diversity.

When marginalized voices disrupt this loaded repetition of free speech, or demand to speak without reference to the discourse of free speech, ruling interests show what they really think of free speech. In the early 1980s, as an undergraduate student in South Africa, I saw some tellingly abusive harnessings of the notion of free speech. On one occasion on my campus, apartheid cabinet minister Piet Koornhof was shouted down by radical students demanding "where's your pass" (a reference to the passes that Koornhof's cabinet department forced black South Africans to carry, and that restricted their movements within South Africa); as a result of the heckling, Koornhof was obliged to cancel his address. The apartheid government and its supporters, as well as liberal students and politicians, denounced the hecklers' actions as a hypocritical violation of Koornhof's "right to free speech" — this in a country where the same government that Koornhof represented systematically had attempted to silence the vast majority of the population for decades, where Koornhof's voice was routinely broadcast

by the state-controlled media across the country, and where the policies he espoused were directly responsible for the racist violence perpetrated against black South Africans every day! After taking up graduate study in the US, in 1991 I witnessed the equally unbelievable spectacles of George Bush Sr. accusing ACT UP of exercising “too much” free speech, and California governor Wilson denouncing as “fascists” hecklers who disrupted his speaking engagements in protest of his veto of AB101, a state bill that would have prohibited discrimination against lesbians and gay men in certain areas of employment. Each of these appeals to free speech constitutes a heavy-handed distortion of the realities of political power. Wilson’s insistence that, in the name of free speech, he be allowed to publicly rationalize his homophobia by a queer constituency that was systematically talked out of existence by state discourse is an indication of the bankruptcy of notions like free speech in the liberal democratic state.

When pluralism is advocated, defended, or claimed with pride by the liberal democratic state, it is invoked as a loyalty to a supposedly already-existing equality, or as a force to create such equality. This rationalization ignores the material fact of power relations as they *are* at any present moment, as this moment is historically constituted. Pluralism as it is enforced in liberal democracies is coercive because it allows for a multiplicity of voices only within an already unequal balance of “viewpoints”; when those with power endorse pluralism, they do so convinced that, as Richard Ohmann (1976) puts it, “you are entitled to your opinion, and it won’t affect my actions one whit” (88). Any contestations of a hegemonic “opinion” merely become incorporated into its periphery. The demand for pluralism by most liberal and some conservative institutions (universities, government, the mass media, and so on), usually in the face of challenges from the Left, if it is sincere, is ahistorical because it ignores the historical legacy of present day power relations that does not guarantee every subject equal access to public speech, and is thus unable to account for the dominance of certain positions in specific contexts (historical, cultural, institutional). If the appeal to pluralism is historically aware, it is duplicitous because it is pre-determined to maintain the power of the state, given the cumulative historical antecedents of this power—the rise of capitalism, the hegemony of liberal pluralism as an ideology, and the entrenchment of this ideology in the culture industry and educational institutions. If it is to legitimate its own claim to be pluralist, this kind of pluralism must remain silent about the particular institutions and positions that it enables to continue to reign unchallenged. Like liberalism, it requires the validation of an ideology (equal opportunity) that it cannot apply accurately if it is to survive.

In order to re-enforce the paradigms of the liberal democratic status quo, liberal pluralism has to be a coercive and intolerant ideology.

Pluralists allow “any” approach as long as it isn’t anti-pluralist. Liberal pluralism only permits liberal pluralism, and only as this pluralism is defined and determined by specific relations of domination. In her essay “Context is All: Feminism and Theories of Citizenship” (1987) Mary Dietz shows, for instance, how liberal ideals are incompatible with feminism because they guarantee the *individual* “a fair start” in a race where the instructions, vehicles, road, and prizes are unremittingly phallo(go)centric. Dietz demonstrates that the liberal concept of rights, and liberalism’s distinction between the public and the private cannot address themselves to the arenas where women have historically been oppressed (marriage, the home, etc.). In liberal society, context is nothing, and individuals are conceived of as independent of social and political conditions; thus the specific forces and values that have shaped women’s socializations, identifications, and material existences have no place in constituting the liberal notion of rights.¹

There is a mutually reproductive relationship between the manifestations of pluralism in political and cultural realms. However, as Ellen Rooney argues in *Seductive Reasoning: Pluralism as the Problematic of Contemporary Literary Theory* (1989), although pluralistic society is identified with the U.S. as a political entity, celebratory elaborations and critical evaluations of pluralism in its disciplinary manifestations in U.S. academia are notable for their exclusion of the colloquial—for their failure to discuss the connections between political pluralism as it is popularized by politicians and in the media in the US, and academic versions of pluralism (18). In academia in the US, pluralism manifests itself in diverse realms. The discourse of specialization mandates that each intellectual will discreetly manage her own area of expertise without interfering in anyone’s else’s territory, effectively protecting the “specialist” from interventions from “outsiders,” and precluding academics from commenting on matters of political and social import. In many university English departments, the cafeteria style management of critical theory “teaches” a theory a week in critical theory overview courses or generously allows students and faculty to subscribe to the critical school of their taste without any discussion of how a particular theory might challenge, disrupt, or reconfigure the entire department or discipline. Thus, for instance, feminist theory must be satisfied with collegial co-existence alongside theories which might be inimical to or epistemologically and politically irreconcilable with feminism. Multiculturalism becomes a tool to reinvigorate, recenter, and spice up unquestioned whiteness and white-

¹I do not want to suggest that I am completely satisfied with Dietz’s analysis, for while Dietz questions the particular values that are assigned to citizenship, she does not ask whether the concept of citizenship itself might be anti-feminist.

centered methodologies. And civility and collegiality become the desired and coerced mode of interaction among and between faculty and students.

Two

I am attending a presentation by a faculty member in Education at a college in a small town in Northern California. The presenter is saying how important it is that teachers stress civility as an ethos and practice in K-12 classrooms. Another listener and I point out that “civility” is not a neutral ideology, but one that is classed and racialized in its privileging of polite give-and-take, and that it undergirds the political and social status quo in this country by demonizing outrage and outlawing acting out. The presenter is alarmed. If we don’t have civility, we will have rioting, he warns. My colleague shouts, “I feel like rioting right now!” All hell breaks loose. A few days later I am running in this small town’s yearly mini-marathon. At the start line, I, who have never lived in small town before, find myself next to the speaker who had advocated “civility.” I am mortified. We greet each other collegially and exchange pleasantries.

I attend my first department meeting at the college in the small town. I am surprised to find that no-one says anything when the Department Chair opens motions up for discussion. Department veterans look aghast at me and another new faculty member when we raise our hands to comment on a motion. Here everything is passed quickly by unanimous voice vote and without discussion. When the time comes to elect a new department Chair, there is only one candidate, who is elected unanimously. Everyone seems to smile and sigh contentedly. I later discover that the other candidates for Chair withdrew from election when they discovered that someone else was running, so as to avoid conflict. Much later a colleague informs me that the motions and elections that are so swiftly taken care of at the meetings are discussed and arranged by small groups of faculty ahead of time. I feel like I wasn’t given the rules ahead of time. At the previous college where I’d taught—in a large city—the interminable department meetings were always characterized by loud, often vicious, arguments. Faculty members dreaded these meetings.

At the University of Southern California, where I taught for two years, and where students are required to obtain permits for all protests on campus, in early 2003, the President of the University, anticipating the war against Iraq, sent a letter to faculty urging that the “open exchange of ideas” not “degenerate into demagoguery and violence,” and reminding faculty that it “is therefore incumbent upon all of us to

make certain that our discussions are framed by civility and mutual respect" (Sample 2003). A passionate debate immediately erupted on campus and in the student newspaper about whether the President's letter constituted an effort to squelch anti-war outrage and activism in the name of "dialogue," "rationality," and "mutual respect." It becomes more difficult to advocate polite give-and-take when thousands of lives are at risk, and when, as my experience in South Africa amply illustrated, those advocating such civility in fact are using it as a tool to sustain violent power inequities. Once the most recent U.S. war against Iraq was in full swing, all USC faculty received an email from the Vice-President for Student Affairs encouraging us to "take some time in class to acknowledge the state of the world" (Jackson 2003). The email continued, "As faculty, you may be the first to recognize and identify how individuals are responding and coping. Behavior that is inconsistent with your past experience with a student may constitute a 'cry for help.' Your concern and empathy could be helpful in identifying a student in distress. Students needing additional support may contact the following offices." A list of counseling and other non-activist resources followed. The underlying imperative, of course, is that we should get back to business as usual as efficiently as possible, that students should be medicated or otherwise therapized to stifle their distress, that the "cry for help" that might be inconsistent with a student's past behavior is an aberrancy to be corrected, rather than a necessary response to an horrific situation, a response that should be acted upon rather than stifled. Countless websites and television programs offered similar advice to U.S. Americans on how to cope with the multiple conflicting anxieties of war, on how to make yourself feel safe and serene again, so that you can continue on with your everyday routines (assuming, of course, that your routine isn't characterized by homelessness, poverty, angst, or other forms of institutionalized and idiosyncratic violence). In a commentary on Laura Bush's cancellation of her "Poetry and the American Voice" symposium when a number of poets made clear their intentions to protest the war at the symposium, Arturo Nevarez quotes a *Washington Post* (2003) columnist: "In the mind of the poet, bad poetry trumps good manners any day." Nevarez responds,

I believe the antiwar poets, even the most published, would also agree with this statement. A display of good manners would have come off as a sign of complacency with the constricting conventions that the poets are protesting. In the climate of the war, where thousands of people's lives are at stake and powerful statements needs to be made, taking the time for politeness and etiquette seems all the more inappropriate. Did the U.S. military take manners into

consideration when ordering massive bombing assaults on Baghdad while citizens carried on their everyday lives? In effect, the antiwar poets were only acting in line with the social responsibilities they feel they have as artists.

Here Nevarez unpacks the ideological implications of calls for civility, showing how they are, in fact, used to legitimate gross incivility.

Now it's one thing to talk about crimes against humanity, but isn't academia a special case? Isn't the relatively comfortable arena where knowledge is pursued precisely the place where words, ideas, and debate should not be silenced through being branded "dangerous"? Isn't it ludicrously disproportionate to do so, given the real material dangers outside of academia? Or does academia's collaboration with those extra-academic forces (the military, for instance) make such distinctions naive?² Contrarily, when the widely taught speech-communications text book, *Arguments and Arguing* (1994),³ can matter-of-factly advocate conventional rhetorical appeals to one's adversaries on the misogynistic grounds that the persuader can function as rapist, seducer, or lover, and that the lover is the most desired of the three (Hollihan 10-11), are we not obliged to defend rage and irrationality as moral rhetorical modes? This is a particularly pointed challenge to those of us engaged in the teaching of writing. While the rapist/seducer/lover trope sounds especially outrageous, I think it is actually symptomatic of common understandings in the composition classroom that a) a pleasant demeanor is preferable to a more confrontational argument and tone, and b) all readers are potentially persuadable by a good argument—the highest goal of writers (especially student writers) should be to convince hypothetical hostile readers of the soundness of the writers' arguments. What the rapist/seducer/lover trope unwittingly reveals, of course, is the fallacy of the assumption that a more genteel rhetoric is *not* based on coercion, violence, and institutionalized power relations, and the already gendered inscription of pedagogy and writing within these power relations.

In Rooney's discussion of literary theory, any attempt at persuasion is an appeal to pluralism: since pluralism is based "on the theoretical possibility of universal or general persuasion" (2), "the pluralist's

²In 2002, the U.S. Department of Defense funded USC projects to the tune of \$77.2 million. USC faculty member Tania Modleski wrote of this funding in the context of the 2003 U.S. war against Iraq, "If we, as members of the university community, are engaged in barter with the war makers, we ought to have a say in how our research is put to use. Otherwise we are selling our minds and selling out the university's principles for economic gain. Far from being neutral, we are in fact taking a stand in favor of occupation, not through our words, but even more frighteningly through our actions and the application of our knowledge" (Gelt 2003, 11).

³I thank Laura McDermott for drawing my attention to this book.

invitation to critics and theorists of all kinds to join him in 'dialogue' is a seductive gesture that constitutes every interpreter—*no matter what her conscious critical affiliation*—as an effect of the desire to persuade" (1). Persuasion-centered rhetorics of composition have loaded and far-reaching ramifications. The appeal to a mythical "man in the street" denies the particular interests and stakes that specific individuals and communities might have in certain critical positions and practices, and thus posits the existing political machinery of liberalism as adequate to fulfill the needs and desires of all, and its subjects as universal and uniform liberals. The denial of difference is always a denial of an Other. If one believes that one's "theory" or claim can and will (after argument and analysis) appeal to "everyone" (a little of something for everyone), one assumes that no conflict is significant enough to create irreconcilable differences. Only those already in positions of privilege can afford to entertain such a bland sense of opposition: conflict must be "resolved" without upsetting existing order. This means that conflicting viewpoints have to be accommodated by and contained within liberalism, even including those viewpoints that challenge liberalism. This is an important point to make beyond the many other arguments for not imagining writing as an attempt to persuade a hostile reader: the imperative to students to avoid appearances of anger or bitterness in writing is an attempt to socialize them into the same kinds of ideologies of collegiality that order the relations of their professors, and that are cultural translations of the political dictates of the liberal pluralist state.

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

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