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Introduction: Palestine, Civility, Injury

This *Against the Day* is concerned with academic freedom as it pertains to the discussion of controversial topics, in particular, Palestinian rights. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is often presented as a special case, born of exceptional historical factors that warrant heightened protocols of sensitivity to the risks of public debate. We suggest, to the contrary, that the challenges to discussing the ethnic exclusivity of the Israeli state—its occupation of the West Bank, Palestinian experience, and the prospects for Palestinian sovereignty—should be taken, in fact, as paradigmatic of the challenges that attend conversations on race, ethnicity, and domination more broadly. We are especially interested in how debate on Israel-Palestine is constrained through practices of repetition rather than persuasion: How does one rebut discursive maneuvers that were never designed to contend for hearts and minds but were meant only to pervade the scenes of public deliberation and crowd out the possibility of speaking otherwise?

To be sure, no one on any side of the debate admits a desire to foreclose robust discussion or to curtail academic freedom, yet as many commentators have observed, concepts of “civility” and “injurious speech” are routinely invoked in ways that shut down both expression (of experience and perspectives) and inquiry (into the historical and structural determinations of that experience or those perspectives) or (what often amounts to the same) render these avenues of expression and inquiry personally and professionally risky for those who would develop them. There has been no shortage of excellent reflection on how categories originally meant to open a space in which to engage the past and present of domination and to legitimize and to protect the self-representation of the dominated are now routinely employed in a way

that yields precisely the inverse outcome. So, for instance, concerns with a “safe” classroom environment can now be invoked to protect white students from exposure to the experience or remonstrance of students of color.

Our aim in this collection of essays is not to retrace this ground but to offer a complementary and, perhaps, constructively defamiliarized window onto this general situation from the vantage of our participation in a research collaborative on “Palestine and the Public Sphere” and our efforts, within this framework, to address the impasses that attend both teaching and wider academic deliberation on the topic of Palestine and Palestinians. We propose both a general analysis of the ways that the presentation of Palestinian perspectives is disciplined in academic contexts and in the public sphere more broadly. We also present a series of case studies specific to our institution, the University of Washington, that explore how these disciplinary protocols unfold on the ground, in the context of list server debates, divestment resolutions, and lectures. By attending not only to the published point-counterpoint between critics of and apologists for Israeli government policy but also to the more mundane, semi-public arenas of campus life, we aim to show how debate has been so effectively curtailed. Our point is precisely that the shut-down strategies work by saturation, impeding debate at every scale. We also share our own experience with alternate strategies for framing debate on Palestine that preempt some of the familiar means by which open debate is stymied, often under the very banner of protecting it.

In the spring of 2014, we applied for and were awarded a modest grant from the Walter J. Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities to support a cross-disciplinary research cluster; our aim was to understand the impasses and aporias that attend seemingly every effort to address Palestinian rights on university campuses and in the broader public sphere. Our cluster included faculty from the departments of English, anthropology, international studies, and public health; some in the group taught on and/or did research related to Palestine, while others came at the question from an interest in discourse analysis and the study of US public culture. Within a few months, our research cluster was embroiled in the very situation it sought to investigate: We found ourselves accused of misusing academic resources to engage in partisan politics. Our work was characterized as advocacy, not scholarship. The focus on Palestinian rights was framed as one-sided because it was not complemented by a discussion of Israeli interests and security. And it was suggested that our bringing a Palestinian human rights activist to campus had created an atmosphere unsafe for Jewish students.¹ Donors threatened to pull funding from the university.²

In the aftermath of the tempest, several faculty responsible for the outcry founded a local chapter of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East (SPME), a pro-Israel advocacy organization; within a few months, the SPME chapter had received funding through the provost's "Race and Equity Initiative" to bring its chosen speakers to campus. Although declining to intervene in the cluster's activities, the administration's response implicitly affirmed the legitimacy of the complaint against us. By supporting an advocacy group created as a counterweight to our cluster, and especially under the auspices of an initiative intended to promote inclusion and "confront bias and racism at the individual, institutional and systemic levels," the administration appears tacitly to concede that our research cluster represents "bias" and imperils a civil and inclusive climate on campus, as alleged (Race and Equity Initiative 2017). It is worth noting that the funding for our cluster was awarded through a competitive, *academic* grant-giving process that includes peer review, while the SPME organizers accessed funding without any commensurate academic review of their project.

Of course, civility as a supposedly neutral norm of public engagement has always operated on behalf of dominant perspectives by aligning what is established and familiar with what is reasonable and measured. Curiously, even as the standard of civility appears to recede from political life, it has found fresh currency on college campuses as a rhetorical touchstone for administrators charged with managing cultural and political difference. Many of the critical rejoinders to the adoption of civility as a norm of "university culture" have recapitulated the critique of civility in general. In a thoughtful essay for the *Nation* on Steven Salaita's dehiring from the University of Illinois, for example, the historian Joan Scott (2015) sketches how the historical meaning of civility was bound up in the epistemological violence of Europe's "civilizing mission" to the "primitive" peoples of the colonial periphery. This history makes all too apparent how civility operates historically to dissemble practices of domination and expropriation. Closer to the metropolitan center, she notes:

The Ordeal of Civility [the title of a book by John Cuddihy] . . . is a good alternative description of the bourgeois public sphere famously characterized by Jürgen Habermas as democratic, open, and accessible [. . .] [T]he dissident claims of minority groups go unheard in the public sphere when they are tagged as departures from the protocols of style and decorum—dismissed as evidence of irrationality and so placed outside the realm of what is taken to be reasoned deliberation. They are, by definition, uncivil, and thus beneath con-

tempt. Once a certain space or style of argument is identified as civil, the implication is that dissenters from it are uncivilized. “Civility” becomes a synonym for orthodoxy; “incivility” designates unorthodox ideas or behavior. (Scott 2015; my emphasis)

Thus, what passes as a neutral condition of political participation—maintaining a “civil” tone—is a style of debate freighted with the social values of the hegemonic class (historically, propertied European men). This standard of civility delegitimizes rhetorical and performative styles forged in nonelite (and non-European) social milieus, as well as the political substance of the positions that align with these nonelite formations.

While the critique of civility synthesized in Scott’s account of the Salaita case doubtless represents an apt analysis of how the concept of civility has operated, historically, to norm public debate, it is considerably less clear that this analysis remains adequate in our historical present. For one thing, it is conspicuous that civility, as it is used to delimit the discussion of Palestinian rights, does not correspond to a political orthodoxy, that is, to a broad, consensus view on the policy of the Israeli state and the meaning of Palestinian resistance. Quite the contrary: the more the consensus on Israel as a democratic state acting on legitimate security concerns crumbles in the West, broadly speaking, and in the United States, more specifically, the fiercer the insistence that assertions of Palestinian injury and arguments for Palestinian sovereignty are in and of themselves incendiary and uncivil. In other words, when defenders of Israeli policy who seek to norm the debate on Palestinian rights assert that Palestinian calls for self-determination are de facto calls for the destruction of Israel and therefore fundamentally beyond the pale of reasoned and respectful debate, they are *not* invoking a consensus view of the conflict—either a consensus view among the US electorate, or even a consensus view among American Jews. Yet they are routinely permitted to cite this position as though it did represent a normative, commonsense perspective. Oddly enough, this makes it harder, rather than easier, to counter such charges of incivility: there is little point in (yet again) discrediting a common sense, which seems curiously to retain its disciplinary power even as it cedes interpretive authority. In effect, this position is normalized (by force of iteration) despite losing its normative capacity (or, obvious “rightness”).

Thus civility transforms, from a normative rubric (one that reflects transparent because hegemonic values) to what we might call, following Michael Hardt (1995: 36), a “whatever” category, usable for any number of

tactical ends, because largely dereferentialized. In a parallel transformation, as Haivan V. Hoang (2009: 387) suggests, the “rhetoric of injury” increasingly floats free from any recognizably *social* referent beyond the *individual’s* claim to “distress and anxiety.” “We live in a privatized system that scrutinizes so very closely the wounds of individuals that it deflects attention from the material conditions, cultural systems, and histories that produced racial injustice in the first place,” she observes, though one might well press the insight further and speculate that this “deflection” is precisely the point, the sign of our acculturation to a new political (ir)rationality, in which affective warrant substitutes for (rather than supplements) material and historical evidence (3). In any case, the “rhetoric of injury” is routinely paired with the charge of incivility: the presentation of Palestinian perspectives is identified by individual Jewish students as injurious to their identity, causing feelings of personal insecurity and distress. The simple testimony to this sensation stands as proof of the materiality of the injury, in a move that now routinely finds traction with university administrators and other guardians of academic “civility.”

It is worth remarking that the erosion of political norms that manifests so palpably in the context of campus debates on Palestinian rights or BDS (boycott, divestment, sanctions) resolutions also shapes the new (post-election) round of campus debates about free speech, which have arisen in recent months primarily around the appearance of avowed racists and “Alt Right” agitators in campus venues. Here, the positions would seem to be inverted, with (sections of) the Left citing injury to vulnerable campus populations such as black, brown, queer, or undocumented students, while the Right aligns with the classic all-or-nothing ACLU position: either all speech is “free,” or anyone’s speech is subject to censure. Yet, despite this reversal, the impasses that currently attend both debates are symptomatic of the same situation: the disappearance of a political center, of an arena of consensus politics, which the affirmation of free speech historically requires and presumes.³ After all, the idea of free speech presupposes a domain of regulated speech, a site where hegemonic constructs of right and reason prevail.⁴ It is only in this context that speech can be freeing in the abstract—on the far right and the far left, irrespective of content or context. But on the deregulated, anything-goes terrain of contemporary US political culture, the determination of whether a speech act is freeing or repressive, a check on the power of the state or an extension of it, would have to refer to the content of the speech—what it performs or effects within existing relations of power. Like the “debate” on Israel-Palestine, the current debate on what is or is not

protected “free speech” is not really a debate at all, but a struggle over the limits of the sayable that proceeds as though these limits were already determined and not precisely the point of contention.

As Tom Foster, Michael Perez, and Sandra Silberstein variously remark, the absence of a socially meaningful referent underlies the rhetorical moves that are a staple of the Israel-Palestine debate on Israel and Palestine. Thus the “facts” invoked to demonstrate the unreason of Palestinian political aspirations adhere to no standard of proof beyond the warrant of the writer’s own convictions, as both Foster and Perez variously contend. Similarly, as Silberstein suggests, the complaints about our cluster tended to rebut not the critical agenda we described in our proposal but the writers’ own imaginary of what “advocates” for Palestinian rights claim and do. In this context, we suggest, the challenge for those of us concerned with sustaining critical debate on controversial topics is not so much to denaturalize normative social constructions of civility by demonstrating (for example) the culturally and/or historically singular context from which the supposedly universal norm emerges, but rather to *restore* a socially normative dimension to the discussion, one in which participants are called on to account for and required to recognize their implication in both broader historical formations and, crucially, in a political reality elaborated dialogically with one’s opponents. Amy Hagopian’s and Caitlin Palo’s discussion of divestment resolutions suggests, among other things, how the intensive work of organizing prior to the moment of public deliberation represents one important strategy for such restorative effort. Our cluster’s experiment with reconstructing the scene of discussion along these lines is the subject of Shon Meckfessel’s concluding account.

Notes

- 1 The insistence on marking a transparent distinction between “scholarship” and “advocacy” posits a norm of nonpartisan scholarship that has been roundly challenged, if not largely displaced, in the humanities and many arenas of the qualitative social sciences. It is worth noting, as well, that this positioning of “advocacy” as antithetical to scholarship was tone-deaf to the intellectual culture of the Humanities Center, with its long-standing and innovative emphasis on making scholarship accessible as a resource for public engagement.
- 2 To their credit, the administration refused to bow to these threats and maintained a principled defense of our right to hold the event, even as individual administrators indicated their sympathy for and, indeed, agreement with our detractors’ concerns. The cluster was funded for a second year by the Humanities Center’s executive board. At the same time, however, the Center was discouraged from referencing the cluster in promotional materials that might circulate to prospective donors. To the best of our knowledge, no private support was withdrawn as a result of our work or the protest

around it. To the contrary, at a recent SPME-sponsored talk, the creation of an endowed chair in Israel studies was announced—funded by a donor who had previously threatened withdrawal of support.

- 3 For an interesting discussion of the disappearance of the center and proliferation of the fringe, see Taibbi 2009. I link the phenomena to the contemporary crisis of modern political institutions and the dissolution of normative political culture. See Cherniavsky 2017.
- 4 Indeed, one might argue that historically, the right to “free speech” upholds hegemonic political reason, precisely insofar as the speech in need of “protection” is understood to lack legitimacy.

References

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