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## Civil Discourse in a Time of Genocide



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

Civil discourse is preferable to the alternatives of coerced silence and violence. Coerced silence means that one side has exercised power to end conversation—to say, in effect, there is no point in further discussion; be quiet and accept that our desires will prevail. Violence means that reason has failed and we are reduced to the condition of resolving disputes by means of fang and claw, rock and club, bullet and bomb.

Despite the dismal historical record of our species, as a professor I have held out hope that humans are capable of doing better. Ordinarily this would imply support for any effort, in universities or elsewhere, to promote civil discourse. But the efforts we see now—the selling of civil discourse as the solution to problems of polarization and rancor on our campuses and in society more generally—are a problem, because their main effect is to block change.

In recent years we've seen a proliferation of university-based programs ostensibly intended to promote civil discourse. There is the Civil Discourse Project at Duke; the Dialogue Project at Dartmouth; the Dialogues Initiative at Georgetown; the Civil Discourse Lab at Vanderbilt; ePluribus at Stanford; the Project on Civic Dialogue at American University; and School of Civic Life and Leadership at UNC-Chapel Hill. This is to name but a few.

The claim most often made to justify these programs is that students today don't know how to carry on mutually respectful dialogue or debate, and thus end up yelling at each other or, worse, yelling at administrators and members of university governing boards. An adjacent claim is that faculty—usually meaning leftist or liberal professors—have failed to impart these skills. And so it has been necessary, the argument goes, to create new programs and curricula devoted to teaching the arts of listening and of rationally exchanging views, especially about emotionally fraught topics.

Advocates of these programs have pointed to the campus anti-genocide protests last spring as evidence that special tutelage in civil discourse is needed now more than ever. The problem with those protests, civil discourses allege, is that they were sometimes loud, got in the way of people moving about campus, made Zionist supporters of Israel feel unsafe, and were thus by definition uncivil. If students had only mastered the skills of polite civic engagement, no disruptions would have occurred, fewer feathers would have been ruffled, and more views would have been productively shared.

These appeals to make dialogue civil again are seductive. Of course we should strive to listen to each other carefully and speak to each other calmly and rationally. Of course we should try to hone our abilities to do these things, because these abilities in turn enable us to find the common good, identify what is just and unjust, and pursue change peacefully. Of course higher education should nurture these abilities. And yet, in the context of entrenched inequality, calls for civil discourse—and the university programs that sacralize it—are often conservative ploys to impede the pursuit of justice.

This is evident if we consider who is in a position to demand civility of whom, and who has the power to define what is civil. Historically, it has been those in power who demand civility from those who seek redress of grievances. “Speak politely, in soothing tones,” the subtext goes, “or we won't listen to you at all.” The further message is that an inability to remain calm when trying to be heard, when trying to end an abusive state of affairs, will be taken as a sign of the irrationality of the demand. Today, we would call this gaslighting.

Consider, for example, a request made by student protesters to discuss a university's complicity in genocide. This would seem like an eminently civil first step. What is *uncivil* is

the refusal on the part of administrators and governing bodies to engage in good-faith discussion of such matters. Which is exactly what we saw in last spring's protests against Israel's assault on Gaza. Protesters' requests for dialogue were typically ignored, leading to escalation: louder voices, encampments, rallies, unauthorized postering, spray painting. Administrators defined these actions as disruptive, calling in police to make arrests. That isn't civility; it's a reassertion of domination.

But what we are supposed to believe now, according to those who celebrate civil discourse, is that anti-genocide protesters—those who sought dialogue and a peaceful path to change—are at fault and in need of remedial instruction. Administrators who violently quash the expressive activity of protesters are lauded as voices of reason. Protesters who raise their voices in an attempt to be heard are dismissed as troublemakers undeserving of an audience. This smear tactic works because of differences in power between the groups confronting each other—ordinary people of conscience on one side, agents of the U.S. imperialist state on the other.

Another problem with most current calls for civil discourse is that the goal of discerning the truth is shunted aside. Instead, the goals are said to be a sharing of views, an exchange of stories, a chance to see things from the perspective of the other. Discourse itself, it seems, is sometimes the only goal. All this might be fine if the issues at hand concerned aesthetic judgments or quirks of personal experience. But what if we need to determine and agree upon the facts of the matter in a case of genocide? For this, sharing views is not enough.

I suspect that it is well understood, if seldom admitted by advocates of civil discourse, that sharing stories and views is not enough—that is, not enough to alter the behavior of political elites, the capitalist class, or the U.S. government. A feckless expenditure of energy is perhaps the real goal of the tactic: transform protest into well-contained talk so that business as usual can go on, leaving nothing changed at a larger level. Vent among yourselves if you like, share your views, but don't get disruptive, or else the velvet gloves will come off.

In the case of Israel's assault on Palestinians, the call for civil discourse is cynical and galling, as if mere misunderstanding is what's wrong. Do the many anti-Zionist Jews who belong to Jewish Voice for Peace, If Not Now, and B'Tselem not understand the Zionist view? By now, does any adult who has read the news in the past year not understand the Zionist narrative about Israel? It offends reason to claim that the problems of land dispossession, apartheid, daily humiliation, and genocide will be solved by politely sharing views in university seminar rooms. These problems can be solved only by changing the behavior of the U.S. government and the behavior of the Israeli state in Palestine.

What's required—what Frederick Douglass reminded us is always required when confronting power—are demands that will inevitably be defined as uncivil. That's why protest movements tend to escalate from petitions to marches, from marches to boycotts, and from boycotts to strikes and other forms of civil disobedience. Only when the costs of carrying on business as usual become greater than the costs of making concessions will concessions be made. In the face of vast inequality, that's how change occurs. Only among equals who cannot coerce each other is civil discourse alone likely to be enough.

None of this is to say that civil discourse is not to be strived for. I still hold out hope that we can do better than beat each other over the head as we try to end oppressive social arrangements—in Palestine, in the U.S., and around the planet. But the reality is that those who benefit from inequality will not be rationally argued into relinquishing power and privilege. History leads us to expect no such thing. In the world today, the powerful will first respond rhetorically—calling insistent demands for change uncivil; demanding in turn endless debate about complexities and nuances and impossibilities—as a prelude to responding violently.

If there is to be a peaceful transition to a more just and equal world, it will not come through a polite exchange of views between the powerful and powerless. Nor will it come from sharing views in forums of the powerless, unless those forums are also aimed at discerning the truth, making plans for change, and putting those plans into action. Our best hope then is for collective action that disrupts the status quo not by violently confronting the powerful, but by withholding co-operation until the once powerful are left with no one to wield their guns, drop their bombs, or tell their lies. That is the kind of civility worth fighting for.

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