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Fear of Contagion and the Rage to Censor

BY JEFFREY AARON SNYDER

contagion, n.

1a. “The communication of disease from body to body by contact direct or mediate”

4a. “Hurtful, defiling or corrupting contact”

— *Oxford English Dictionary*

Confronted by a deadly epidemic—the Black Death, yellow fever, Ebola—certain human universals kick in.¹ Fear. Panic. Suspicion. Contagions whip up an “emotional maelstrom” that leads to “collective disorientation.” Family members, friends and strangers alike are all potential vectors; it is impossible to shake the feeling that *you* might have the disease and pass it along to *me*. Anxiety often spirals into “collective witch-hunts” where those perceived as carriers are shunned, persecuted and quarantined.

I have been thinking about the concept of contagion in trying to wrap my head around the puzzling phenomenon of increasing censorship

on college campuses in recent years. I have also been marveling at the prescience of David Bromwich's conclusion twenty-five years ago that free speech was the *one* issue in campus politics deserving of "a steady alarm." This essay is inspired by the detailed, incisive diagnosis he offered of liberal education's head-scratching maladies. The contagion concept, I would like to suggest, may help us to understand the strange spectacles unfolding across the higher education landscape. As it spreads into classrooms, I believe that fear of contagion poses serious threats to liberal education.

Surveying the state of free expression on campus, we are now seeing the effects of two related trends that Bromwich warned us about: the presumption of an "infinite fragility" in the college student psyche; and the rise of a "hysterical paternalism" among administrators who manage their student charges with a "soft-pedaled authoritarianism." In their tour-de-force *Atlantic* essay, "The Coddling of the American Mind" (September 2015), Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt demonstrate the extent to which higher ed revolves around "emotional wellbeing" and "the goal of protecting students from psychological harm." As they cogently argue, the assumption that students can be easily wounded has never been more widespread or pernicious. Lukianoff and Haidt assert that it is largely students who want to "scrub campuses clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense." But there is a strong case, following Bromwich, that the ever burgeoning army of risk-averse, public relations oriented administrators plays a key role as well. As Fredrick deBoer explains in a *New York Times* article called "Why We Should Fear University, Inc.": "This legion of bureaucrats enables a world of pitiless surveillance; no segment of campus life, no matter how small, does not have some administrator who worries about it."

The perceived psychological frailty of students and the emergence of what Jonathan Zimmerman calls the "administrative university" make for a wicked combination in terms of promoting a culture of campus censorship. Other factors that encourage censorship include widening political polarization; "virtue signaling" (that is, advertising one's progressive credentials by taking a public stand, even if it's only a virtual stand on social media); the increasingly popular position among some social progressives that free speech is nothing more than a weapon of the rich, the powerful and the privileged; and the juvenile rush and temporary catharsis of causing

a ruckus or “shutting shit down.” As happened this past spring with Bret Weinstein at Evergreen State College, what could be better than telling a professor to “get the fuck out of here” while simultaneously striking a blow for social justice?

Below, I include a round-up of campus censorship controversies from the past two academic years. I maintain that the logic of contagion intersects with and amplifies *all of* the factors outlined above. To review, here are the basic features of a deadly contagion: a potent cocktail of fear and suspicion; immense pressure to take immediate and decisive action (patience, in the time of pestilence, is no longer a virtue); the splintering of communities into *us* (the pure) and *them* (the infected); and disproportionate, often irrational, responses. As race is central to my own scholarship and teaching and arguably remains the most volatile topic on college campuses, I have chosen examples that revolve around racial issues.

September 2015: Wesleyan student Bryan Stascavage writes an op-ed in the student newspaper calling into question the effectiveness of the Black Lives Matter movement. While applauding the movement’s success in compelling police forces to “root out racist officers and policies,” he worries that some BLM activists vilify *all* officers as hopelessly bigoted, fueling a dangerous anti-police rhetoric. Many Wesleyan students are deeply offended by the piece — in the midst of a campus uproar about the “frustration, anger, pain and fear that members of the student body feel in response to the op-ed,” stacks of the paper are stuffed into recycling bins, the student government slashes the newspaper budget in half and Stascavage is tarred a “racist.”

November 2015: The *Koala*, a raunchy and irreverent satirical paper at the University of California San Diego, publishes a column called “UCSD Unveils New Dangerous Space on Campus,” which ridicules trigger warnings and safe spaces. In numerous complaints submitted to the UCSD Bias Response Team about the paper’s “sexist and racist comments masked under cruel humor,” students call for “an end” to the *Koala* or, at the very least, a system for “administrative approval of the content.” With tactical support from administrators, the student government at the University cuts funding for *all* student media in an attempt to shut the *Koala* down.

February 2016: Williams College President Adam Falk cancels a student-organized speech by the former *National Review* columnist John Derbyshire on the grounds that “many of his expressions clearly constitute hate speech.” Falk explains that while the college respects “students’ exploration of ideas, including ones that are very challenging,” there are occasions when administrators “need to step in and make decisions that are in the best interest of students and our community.” Zach Wood, a self-described “black liberal Democrat from a disadvantaged background” and co-President of the “Uncomfortable Learning” initiative responsible for inviting Derbyshire, laments Falk’s decision, noting that he had been “looking forward to exposing the flaws” in Derbyshire’s arguments.

Also in February 2016: Anthony Scalia dies and Georgetown Law School releases an official statement mourning his loss that praises Scalia as “a brilliant jurist whose opinions and scholarship profoundly transformed the law.” Two days later, Georgetown Law professor Gary Peller sends a campus-wide email saying he is “put off” by the formal press release. “I imagine,” Peller writes, “many other faculty, students and staff, particularly people of color, women and sexual minorities, cringed at the headline and at the unmitigated praise with which the press release described a jurist that many of us believe was a defender of privilege, oppression and bigotry.” Conservative students at Georgetown Law School report being “traumatized, hurt, shaken and angry” by Peller’s email. Demanding “remedies,” two conservative law school professors proclaim that having to endure criticism of Scalia so soon after his passing is “clearly the most grievous imaginable *macro*-aggression against all conservative students and faculty.”

May 2016: Students at Seattle University stage a three-week sit-in, demanding the ouster of a Dean, in part, for recommending African American activist and comedian Dick Gregory’s 1964 autobiography *Nigger* to a black student. Gregory himself writes an open letter to the students in *Inside Higher Ed*, expressing his disappointment that they “seemed to have stopped at the title instead of opening the book and reading its contents.” “I am not offended by [the Dean’s] use of the word ‘nigger,’” he explains, underscoring that the Dean did not name the book. If the students had

read the book, they might have found it contained some useful lessons on activism, Gregory concludes.

September 2016: Echoing the previous example, California State University Long Beach cancels a campus performance of a play because its title alone was considered too incendiary. The production, *N*W*C* (or *N*GGER*, *WETB*CK*, *CH*NK*), was written by and stars three actors of African American, Asian and Latino descent. It tackles the meaning of race in America, especially the power of taboo racial slurs. “If we’ve been called these words,” one of the show’s creators said, “then we have the right to confront them.” Michele Roberge, the director of the University’s Carpenter Performing Arts Center, resigns in protest. The play, incidentally, has run to packed houses across the country for nearly a decade. An avowed white supremacist even said the play “changed his point of view.”

November 2016: Salem State University sequesters a painting of Klan members behind a black curtain after students complain it is too distressing. Part of a larger exhibition called “State of the Union,” artist Garry D. Harley says the painting was intended to draw connections between the Klan and what he regards as the dangers of Trump’s racially charged rhetoric. Harley explains to concerned students that he is portraying, not promoting hatred, asserting that art can be a tool to spread awareness. His message is overwhelmed by “the anger of the students.”

March 2017: Hundreds of Middlebury students shout down invited speaker Charles Murray, author of the infamous book *The Bell Curve*. Murray’s interlocutor, political science professor Allison Stanger, sees “faculty colleagues who had publicly acknowledged that they had not read anything Dr. Murray had written join the effort to shut down the lecture.” After relocating to a locked room, Murray delivers his talk via a live feed. Protesters hit the windows and rock the car spiriting Murray away from campus. Stanger, who was accompanying Murray, says she feared for her life. She ends up in a neck brace after suffering a concussion. In the aftermath, some commentators on the left defend the protesters and make light of Stanger’s injuries, endorsing a kind of by-any-means-necessary view on the wisdom of silencing so-called “hate speech.” (For a representative example, see John Patrick Leary’s *Inside Higher Ed* commentary, “Bodies on the Gears at Middlebury.”)

Also in March 2017: Feminist journal *Hypatia* publishes an article called “In Defense of Transracialism” by Rebecca Tuvel, an assistant professor of philosophy at Rhodes College. Tuvel, who is clearly in favor of transgender rights, examines the “widespread social perception that it is neither possible nor acceptable to change one’s race in the way it might be to change one’s sex.” She ultimately concludes that arguments that “support transgenderism seem to apply equally to transracialism.” Soon after Tuvel’s article appears, more than 800 academics sign an open letter to *Hypatia*, calling for an immediate retraction of the article, asserting that it is fatally flawed by “white and cisgender privilege.” Tuvel is castigated for the “numerous ways” her essay “enacts violence and perpetuates harm” against transgender individuals and people of color. One of the main charges leveled against Tuvel is that she “deadnames” Caitlyn Jenner by using her birth name Bruce. The associate editorial board of *Hypatia* issues an apology, stating that the article “should not have been published” and that doing so exposed Tuvel “to heated critique that was both *predictable* and *justifiable*” (my italics). Many philosophers and Gender Studies scholars rush to Tuvel’s defense, pointing to the factual “inaccuracies and empty accusations” that riddle the critiques of the paper. After describing the avalanche of vicious, often personal, criticism she received, Tuvel says: “So little of what has been said, however, is based upon people actually reading what I wrote... I have never been under the illusion that this article is immune from critique. But the last place one expects to find such calls for censorship rather than discussion is amongst philosophers.” (Philosophy professor Justin Weinberg provides an excellent round up of the Tuvel affair at his blog Daily Nous.)

In each of the cases described above, the fear of contagion—of “hurtful, defiling or corrupting contact”—short circuited critical thinking skills and stimulated censorship impulses. Significantly, all of us are susceptible to this fear. Right-wing commentators may claim that it’s only women, minorities and “social justice warriors” who embrace censorship. But the anecdotal and empirical evidence shows that the rage to censor does not discriminate on the basis of race, gender, political persuasion or any other identity characteristics. Everybody—including men and women,

conservatives and liberals, whites and blacks, undergraduates and professors with Ph.D.s — has the proven capacity to shutter free expression. (On this point, see the excellent 2016 Gallup Poll, “Free Expression on Campus.”) Censorship, at its core, is a form of quarantine. Material perceived as potentially harmful or damaging must be removed from the public domain as soon as possible. The severity of the “threat” justifies extreme measures such as halting the presses, canceling previously scheduled events or sequestering works of art. The logic of quarantine in the Williams example is impeccable. In canceling a talk organized by students, President Falk cites “extreme circumstances,” stressing that preventing Derbyshire from speaking is in the “best interests” of “our community.” This is a public-health rationale for censorship. “Dangerous” speakers or ideas must be cordoned off from the campus, lest they harm the well-being of students, faculty and staff. Falk’s intervention was the intellectual equivalent of pulling up the drawbridge and bolting the castle gates.

The examples above captured the headlines or at the very least made the news. They are the kinds of controversies that unfold in public spaces and forums — newspapers, academic journals, quads, lecture halls, student centers, museums, social media and the blogosphere. While there is cause to be seriously concerned about the high-profile cases that make the media rounds, we should be even more worried about what happens behind closed doors in thousands of college classrooms across the country. As the contagion concept worms its ways into the classroom, the stakes are very high indeed for teaching and learning in the liberal arts tradition. As an implicit theory of education, contagion is extremely problematic. It assumes that we are intellectually (and emotionally) defenseless when confronted with challenging content. Like it or not, a dangerous pathogen will infect you. The same goes for “dangerous” ideas. The mere exposure to, say, prejudiced, sexist or anti-immigrant ideas will not only be hurtful — it will also be corrupting, as students simply internalize the racism, misogyny and xenophobia of the material at hand. (Of course, one of the problems here is the sliding scale of what constitutes “dangerous” ideas — on one campus, it might be criticism of the state of Israel; on another, the defense of “stop-and-frisk” policing.)

The fear of contagion encourages hyper-vigilance: surveillance becomes a paramount concern. Just as individuals, homes and neigh-

borhoods must be closely watched for signs of infection, so too must classrooms be monitored for signs of contamination. So we approach challenging classroom content with our hazmat suits on, afraid that one false move—a “naïve” comment, an “offensive” term, a “reactionary” idea—will expose everyone in the room to grievous harm. In an atmosphere charged with the potential for contagion, learning proceeds from the position of a defensive crouch. Withdrawal and retreat are more likely outcomes than serious and spirited engagement.

Emphasizing purity and protection, a contagion mindset reinforces the idea that classrooms should be “safe spaces” where students are shielded from unfamiliar or uncomfortable content, ideas and points-of-view. This safety-and-security model of education poses a challenge to teaching *any* discipline or field that includes the study of human behavior. We are contentious animals and conflict, pain and suffering are central—and inescapable—elements of any serious study of the human experience, from evolutionary psychology and political economy to law and English lit. According to scripture, the truth sets you free. But it also “makes one sick.” (That phrase comes from the trailblazing black historian Benjamin Quarles who wrote the first scholarly biography of Frederick Douglass and served as a mentor to scores of students at Dillard and Morgan State.)

I don’t think we should be afraid to acknowledge the power of academic study to provoke, destabilize and, even, sicken. As generations of black historians and activists have insisted, it is not possible to teach an accurate portrait of U.S. history without covering shocking, heart-breaking and terrifying material. If you pick up any of the best-selling U.S. history textbooks from a century ago, you will find blank spaces where there are now extensive (and sometimes graphic) discussions of racial violence, including the rape of black women by white men, lynchings and race riots. With the exception of the violence unleashed by the Klan, which was often condoned in mainstream history textbooks, white historians did not address the country’s history of antiblack violence. This omission may have reflected a basic blindness to the black experience, a casual indifference to the significance of black lives, or a calculated effort to scrub the past clean of some of its most disturbing stains. Whatever the case, it was pioneering African American scholars such as Benjamin Brawley (1882-1939) and Carter G. Woodson (1875-1950) who wrote the first textbooks that documented and analyzed the history of violence against

African Americans. (See Brawley's *A Social History of the American Negro*, published in 1921 and Woodson's *Negro in Our History*, first published in 1922.) Brawley and Woodson both maintained that racial violence was not an anomaly but rather a concerted, consistent strategy to enforce the boundaries of the color line by any means necessary. Historical narratives that left out racial terrorism were either fairy-tales or propaganda.

When I teach the history of Jim Crow segregation, my students are stunned to learn that lynching postcards were widely available in the U.S. in the early twentieth century. The grainy photographs of mangled bodies hanging from trees and lamp-posts enjoyed enormous popularity. Looking at lynching postcards, many of my students have the same reaction as this early anti-lynching activist in a 1906 issue of *American Magazine*:

It is the faces of the spectators [in photographs of lynchings] that shock our very souls. Leave out the grim wreck in the center and the picture might be taken for an ordinary cheerful gathering at a country fair. Leave it in, and oh, my brothers, it is not the dead but the living that terrifies.

In addition to lynching postcards, we also look at other examples from the tens of thousands of racist images and artifacts that circulated throughout the United States during the Progressive Era, including the ubiquitous Sambo and Mammy images that were used to sell everything from shoe polish to pancake mix. Discussing these images helps students to understand Jim Crow segregation as a multi-tentacled beast, a tangle of laws, politics, popular culture, media representations and racial pseudo-science. If you want to understand racism, you need to try and get inside the head of racists. As Claremont McKenna professor Tamara Venit Shelton puts it in a 2015 *Chronicle Vitae* essay: "To do the work of history, we must understand that real people — with all their virtues and flaws — made history. We need not sympathize with them or absolve them, but we commit to comprehending them on their own terms." This is precisely why I assign primary sources such as *America's Greatest Problem: The Negro*, which was reviewed in the *New York Times* in July 1915, just as D.W. Griffith's racist epic *Birth of a Nation* was completing its record-breaking run in movie theaters across the country. The book's author, R.W. Shufeldt

(a major in the U.S. Army Medical Corps), advocated the “complete and thorough separation” of the two races. His utmost fear was miscegenation and the degradation of civilization that was sure to follow. The “typical black-skinned Negroes in the United States,” Shufeldt declared, had never “contributed a single line to literature worth the printing; a single cog in the machine of invention; an idea to any science; or, in short, advanced civilization a single millimeter since the first Congo pair was placed on this soil.”

Here are some of the questions sources like the Shufeldt text help us to address: What was the nature of the decades-long debate surrounding the so-called “Negro Problem”? How did ideas about “civilization” inform ideas about race and racial hierarchies? Who advocated Jim Crow segregation and why? How is it possible that so many people—including, as Leon Litwack reminds us, “the most educated, the most refined [and] the most respected” people—endorsed views and policies that are so irrational and odious from a twenty-first century perspective? In a campus climate where race is a live wire, searching classroom discussions of questions in this vein can be perilous. As academic discussions of sex, gender and sexual violence increasingly run the risk of being seen as a form of sexual harassment, academic discussions of race, prejudice and discrimination also run the risk of being seen as a form of racism. My philosopher friends tell me the technical term for this issue is the use-mention distinction. Considering the two N-word examples from the campus controversies litany above—Dick Gregory’s autobiography and the N*W*C* theater production—we appear to be losing the capacity to distinguish between articulating an idea and endorsing it. I know of a case where even the simple invocation of the word “Negro” from a primary source derailed an entire conversation in a U.S. history class.

Lynching postcards, grotesque racial caricatures and vicious anti-black polemics—this material makes up a small fraction of what Malcolm X called the “American nightmare” in his scorching 1964 speech “The Ballot or the Bullet.” I would be surprised if students themselves did not have nightmares after studying the history of Jim Crow. Indeed, if you leave my classroom after we discuss the highwater mark of popular and “scientific” racism in the U.S. and are not unsettled, then I have failed

as a teacher. We should all be disturbed by this history. It is suffused, as Howard University professor Rayford Logan wrote in *The Betrayal of the Negro*, with the following grim themes: “Exploitation, Disenfranchisement, Segregation, Discrimination, Lynching [and] Contempt.” (I am accentuating the terrors of Jim Crow for black Americans here. This historical era was likewise characterized by hope, solidarity and resistance.)

Looking at the time period bracketed by *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), my goal as an instructor is twofold: First, to present an accurate unvarnished account of Jim Crow. Second, to help equip students with the analytical skills, patience and fortitude to reckon with exceptionally disturbing historical realities. If current trends continue, though, I wonder about the viability of learning that is discomfiting by design. Controversial, sensitive or distressing material is already becoming too hot-to-handle in too many classrooms. If this sounds alarmist, consider the following data points: In 2014, sociologist Patricia Adler nearly lost her job at the University of Colorado Boulder after a complaint that a class session on prostitution may have made some students “uncomfortable.” That same year, Harvard Law Professor Jeannie Suk Gersen reported in the *New Yorker* that a dozen of her colleagues at multiple institutions stopped teaching rape law because it was not worth the risk of student complaints about “its potential to cause distress.” In the spring of 2015, Northwestern professor Laura Kipnis described how her “inbox became a clearinghouse for reports about student accusations and sensitivities, and the collective terror of sparking them” after she became the target of, in her own words, a “Title IX Inquisition.” Citing the disappearance of topics such as abortion and incest from syllabi, Kipnis concluded that professors “now routinely avoid discussing subjects in classes that might raise hackles.”

There are many more published accounts documenting the experiences of faculty members who felt compelled to change their teaching practices as a result of the current campus climate.² As is clear from these public declarations as well as my private conversations with colleagues in the humanities and social sciences across the country, professors are increasingly shying away from including material and activities that might be perceived as too “controversial.” Books, articles and films are quietly being dropped, along with lectures, discussion activities and assignments.

Fear begets fear. When students or administrators tell professors that the mere exposure to “problematic” course content may offend, hurt or overwhelm them, professors will do a cost-benefit analysis and many of us will conclude that teaching X, Y or Z is too risky. With censorship of all kinds on the march, we should not be surprised by how quickly self-censorship follows.

In *The Plague*, Albert Camus describes what happens to the fictional North African coastal town of Oran when an epidemic descends on the city. There is “delirium,” “suspicion” and “widespread panic.” The gates of the town are shuttered and martial law is imposed. The need to resist the fear of contagion in higher education has never been so urgent. A community gripped by contagion is moved more by “wild rumors” than by informed debate. With everyone losing their heads, evidence and argumentation are abandoned. To preserve critical thinking, we need to keep our wits about us and practice some of the old fashioned virtues like kindness, patience and humility. The plague, Camus writes, “cancels journeys [and] silences the exchange of views.” “No one,” he says, “will ever be free so long as there are pestilences.”

NOTES

1. So say sociologists of medicine, historians of science and public health experts. See, for example, Philip Strong, “Epidemic psychology: a model,” *Sociology of Health & Illness* 12, no.3 (1990): 249-259; Charles E. Rosenberg, “What is an Epidemic? AIDS in Historical Perspective,” *Daedalus* 118, no.2 (Spring 1989): 1-17; and Robert Dingwall, Lily M. Hoffman and Karen Staniland, “Introduction: why a *Sociology of Pandemics*?” *Sociology of Health and Illness* 35, no.2 (2012): 167-173. The quotations that appear in this paragraph are from Strong’s “Epidemic psychology” essay.

2. See, for example, Edward Schlosser, “I’m a liberal professor and my liberal students terrify me,” *Vox*, June 3, 2015; Rani Neutill, “My trigger-warning disaster,” *Salon*, October 28, 2015; Erika Christakis, “My Halloween email led to a campus firestorm — and a troubling lesson about self-censorship,” *Washington Post*, October 28, 2016; Douglas Belkin, “College Faculty’s New Focus: Don’t Offend,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 17, 2017; and Laura Kipnis, *Unwanted Advances* (New York: Harper, 2017).