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Orwellian Uses of ‘Free Speech’

By [J. Iorand Matory](#)

“Free speech” is a fine principle, but, as a foundation of the University’s business, it is both insufficient and vague.

In the Faculty meeting on Nov. 13, I moved “that this faculty commits itself to fostering a civil dialogue in which people with a broad range of perspectives feel safe and are encouraged to express their reasoned and evidence-based ideas.” I intended this motion not as a new law but as an ethical pledge to think and talk about how to fulfill the university’s highest ideals in the context of difficult issues in difficult times. My colleagues voted massively (74-27) to “table” the motion—that is, to end discussion of it and to avoid a vote on it—for various reasons, some of which remain unclear because debate was cut off so quickly.

The major reasons vocalized, however, were that Faculty legislation in 1990 has already affirmed our commitment to “free speech” and that voting down such an inherently reasonable motion would generate embarrassing news headlines. The clear premise was that the majority intended to vote down the motion because it had arisen in the context of what many of my colleagues and I regard as the widespread censorship of dissent about Israel-Palestine on campus and in the nearby bookstores that are an essential part of the intellectual life of the University.

This massively lopsided vote demonstrates the truth of then-President Derek C. Bok’s 1984 observation: “Americans give overwhelming support to free speech as an abstract proposition but quickly change their minds when they encounter concrete cases involving the expression of unpopular ideas.” Even as they voted to end a reasoned debate before even half of the professors with raised hands had been allowed to speak, 74 bearers of Ph.D.s and similar degrees failed to notice that they were themselves engaged in an exemplary suppression of free speech. Perhaps they even thought that their vote to shut the minority up was merely an instance of their own free speech.

Moreover, they did so in unambiguous violation of Robert’s Rules of Order, the standard of parliamentary procedure in Faculty meetings. It states, “The motion to Lay on the Table...violates the rights of the minority and individual members if it is for any other purpose” than “to lay the pending question aside temporarily when something else of immediate urgency has arisen,” such as the early flight of a key participant in the assembly or the need to investigate the matter further. No immediate urgency was either present or asserted at the time that the Faculty parliamentarian authorized the motion and the faculty voted to table the motion. The fervor of their conviction also blinded 74 Ph.D.s to the fact that they were proving my point—that the Israel-Palestine debate has been subject to a unique degree of censorship on campus, and this at a time when the entire world most needs for the matter to be discussed with civility, balance, and reason.

Hence the principle of “free speech” is not, in this or any other case, a sufficient ethic for the University. Some expression—such as deliberate threats, lies, and libel—should under most circumstances be forbidden. However, it would be difficult for university scholars to agree on any type of speech that should be forbidden under all circumstances. What is clear is that it is the University’s preeminent mission not to foster every kind of expression but to foster a specific style and range of communication—based upon systematic investigation, scrupulously logical analysis, respect for reasoned and evidence-based dissent, and avoidance of ad hominem attacks in the resolution of disagreements.

Members of the Harvard Faculty have been hired and made to feel safe while propagating ideas about the

allegedly different mental capacities of different sexes and races, about the alleged virtues of torture, about the alleged innocence of white Americans' treatment of Native Americans, about our black students' allegedly being the cause of grade inflation at Harvard, and about the allegedly bestial and masochistic qualities of the Palestinian people. And the exponents of such opinions continue to enjoy free speech and the cooperation of their colleagues. Yet dissenting opinions about Israel-Palestine are confined to back-corridor whispers.

If we do not face the issue of how the conversation about the Israel-Palestine issue in particular has been shut down, the principle of "free speech" will remain an empty, abstract principle. With my motion, I did not ask my colleagues to agree with me about Israel or even about the disadvantages of the dearth of high-ranking minorities on the Faculty Council and in the University administration—another major obstacle to dialogue among a necessary range of perspectives about University policy and practice. I asked them, as my partners in the pursuit of truth and fairness, to add their thoughts and efforts to creating a conversation full of respect and free of intimidation about even the hottest of issues—a conversation in which people with a broad range of reasoned opinions and historical perspectives are actively invited to participate, a conversation in which the majority and the most highly placed people do not assume that, once they have heard from each other, they have heard enough. Their response was a massive and freely spoken vote to shut the conversation down.

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