

The Limits of Philosophy in an Epoch of Censure

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Time is short — both for what I might say in response to Claudia Ruitenberg’s provocative essay, which traces numerous arguments; and short in an epoch when censure and political violence run rampant even within “democratic” nations. The shortness of time propels me to a few punch lines. First, what does philosophical inquiry afford us in the face of public debates overdetermined by airtime purchased through power and profit? Specifically, do theories of performativity and citationality help us challenge histories systemically made invisible by misleading rhetoric? Second, Ruitenberg’s argument demands that we revisit the difficult question: what are the benefits and risks of censorship in a society that rhetorically values democracy and free speech but does not in fact represent or hear all voices equally?

Ruitenberg’s overriding hope is to revivify philosophy’s clarifying value within a “data-driven culture.” Her essay emphasizes that philosophical inquiry and “a discursive view of language offers a stronger framework for analyzing the problems of censorship of speech and writing in education.” I ask: when and in what circumstances does philosophy provide a lifeline when we are threatened by the undertow of ignored histories and incessant waves of reiterated primetime rhetoric?

Let me give an example of the kinds of situated speech acts that echo the backlash that worries Ruitenberg. A few weeks prior to the invasion of Iraq, I challenged Tim Russert, host of NBC’s “Meet the Press,” when he publicly presented to a Virginia Tech audience of students, faculty, and military corps a misleading argument about objectivity of the press. Russert (like Diane Ravitch) drew on the powerful rhetorical use of “balance and objectivity” and evaluated how, on the basis of his assessment of objective journalistic accounts regarding Iraq, one could conclude that the Bush administration had justifiable reasons to invade that country. First to the microphone in an auditorium of about two thousand, I asked Russert if he had happened to read any international press — since he neglected to mention the myriad respected sources other than those echoing NBC — that documented why invasion of Iraq might be less than reasonable. Russert ended up turning red in the face and shouting at me that I should not call myself a professor, given my version of the facts. When the crowd spontaneously began hissing and booing my rejoinder and applauding Russert’s attack, I retreated from the mob aware quite acutely of how popular opinion gains real force.¹

Like the examples that provoke Ruitenberg’s essay, these forms of attack reveal the anemic state of participatory democracy in North America. She brings to light the deadly effects of public intellectuals like Ravitch, who cleverly disguise backlash and a return to “common culture” through well-researched argument against the sometimes-adopted practices of censorship in textbooks and standardized tests.² Who would not join the Ravitch wagon of ridicule when Stuart Little cannot be mentioned on tests because some students panic at the thought of a mouse?

Who does not become perplexed when fear of mice is equated with the anger of Lakota Sioux at Mt. Rushmore representing a “National monument” on sacred land? By attacking this deceptively “simple” target of Bias and Sensitivity Guidelines, Ravitch gains sympathy. Yet these bias guidelines are a complex target, for while they do permit Ravitch to righteously claim moral highground against censorship, they distract us both from histories of language and representation, and Ravitch’s own use of rhetoric.

What is the trouble with Ravitch, then? Ruitenberg suggests that the trouble is that “Ravitch’s claims are based on a representational conception of language. This view of language as neutral mirror and messenger does not do justice to the complex effects of language use and restrictions thereof.”² However, after listening to on-air interviews; reading reviews that reveal the left and right both swayed by *The Language Police*; and after examining what Ravitch’s book omits³ — after all this, frankly I am troubled more by a public intellectual who leverages massive air-time with “accurate” but misleading arguments than I am by Ravitch’s lack of reflectivity about poststructuralist discourse.⁴

Given these challenges, when and how does philosophical inquiry have political efficacy? Ruitenberg’s central argument is that “the concept of performativity, as elaborated by J. L. Austin, Jacques Derrida, and Judith Butler, offers a nuanced way of understanding the force of linguistic acts, and the problems surrounding censorship.” However, when I listen to Ravitch chumming it up with a conservative AM radio host about how ridiculous those feminists and multiculturalists are; and compare this with an interview on NPR’s “Fresh Air,” in which Ravitch manages to tongue-tie journalist Terry Gross with her deceptive call for “transparency” of the censorship process and use of inflammatory rhetoric about how textbooks are censoring images of violence toward women in Islam, I am not convinced that it will further public understanding of power to invoke performativity or citationality as conceptual comebacks.

But, one will reply, to say philosophy does not lend itself to sound-byte culture does not undermine its value. Let us then ask: how can we deploy Ruitenberg’s arguments within public counterspeech? If we accept, as Ruitenberg articulately argues, that discursive theories of language “acknowledge the meaning and force of what is linguistically absent as well as what is present, and allow for an analysis of the workings of power through language,” then given the high-stakes debates regarding whose stories get told in curricula, it seems urgent not only to philosophize but to use the theories Ruitenberg embraces to mobilize what Butler calls “counter speech, “talking back,” forms of “critical response” which are the only possible benefit of reacting to injurious language.⁵ It is worth noting that at a recent plenary on the “State of War,” Judith Butler has shifted her analyses of language away from her classic worries about the “sovereign subject” and interrogates how the agency required to assume the status of sovereign speaking subject is revoked both by the Patriot Act and by threats of being called “traitor, collaborator, terrorist, postmodernist, infantile, leftist, hippy, sympathizer.”⁶ Ruitenberg points to the need to address histories and language toward the end of the essay, where she writes:

Although herself a historian, Ravitch does not address the importance of teaching students linguistic and philosophical history, the history of words, expressions, concepts, and ideas. If students are taught the historical traces that language carries, and its possibilities for change, language can be used more thoughtfully and, if desired, attempts at resignification can be made.

Here I would push philosophy to enter public debate more forcefully. Rather than a passively constructed hope that “If students are taught the historical traces that language carries . . . then if desired, attempts at resignification can be made,” we have an opportunity to “embed” poststructural conceptions of language into public debate.⁷ In this instance, we might assert, “Yes, Dr. Ravitch, democracy requires that the processes of representing histories and cultural truths be made transparent and visible. Your argument draws our attention to how values and images are shaped through sensitivity guidelines, and pushes us to ask, who gets to control these processes of cultural storytelling? But taking your points further, should we not ask: what *other* processes of censorship and cultural hijacking are taking place through curricular control, practices of standardized testing, segregation, and unequal school funding and tracking? Surely you would have to admit that the historical forces that shape the ‘hidden curricula’ of schools and textbooks are at least as influential as the sensitivity guidelines you profit from critiquing?”

If we analyze the performative context of Ravitch’s claims and the historical traces of her words, one can identify that Ravitch’s rhetorical appeal against “statewide textbook adoption” appears to criticize the textbook company stranglehold, but in fact Ravitch’s interest in returning curricula to “local control” promises a slippery slope to creationism. In sum, Ruitenberg’s analysis at least in the context of this paper points us toward an important critique of the dangers of viewing language as a neutral mirror, but does not fully develop a discussion of how poststructural analyses might foster public critiques of misleading rhetoric.

Let me now turn more briefly to the thorny dilemmas of censorship. Ruitenberg writes,

In questions of censorship and the protection of academic freedom, the question of power cannot be ignored. Censorship is a term typically used when those with more power (e.g., the state) restrict the language used by those who are less powerful.

Here Ruitenberg offers the examples of the SAFS email, which she notes exemplifies the neo-conservative accusation that “academic freedom is being threatened by teachers and professors who are silencing powerless students.”⁸ Ruitenberg analyzes the imbalanced rhetorical positioning of state power vs. relatively powerless teachers and students, and draws on Herbert Kohls’ point that “the academic-freedom issue these days is being used to mask the desire of neoconservatives to exert control over ideas at the university.”⁹ Those in power, Ruitenberg aptly argues, use the accusation that the powerless are “practicing censorship” to silence unpopular dissent.

Ruitenberg brings us to the heart of the matter: In democracies that function as oligarchies, free speech and democracy are ideals toward which we strive, but are not realized within the daily reiterations of prevailing political and corporate interests. The dilemma is this: On the one hand, given the fact that democracies not

only do not represent those whom they are designed to serve but actively work to silence many interests, it is understandable that one might wish to give privileged status to views that cannot afford thirty seconds on primetime, views not represented in congressional debates, and views not systematically addressed in compulsory curricula. Silencing of dissent is real, and those with power have policed the public sphere of debate especially since 9/11. Yet ironically, this silencing puts into sharp relief the necessity of upholding principles of “free speech,” even in the face of increased hate speech and violence. Recent events have made me rethink the implications of what I have called “affirmative action pedagogy,” and force me to accept the “damned if you do or don’t” bind of democracy.¹⁰ Despite the fact that democracy is not currently realized in the re-citation of corporate airtime, despite the fact that free speech does not ensure that all are free to speak, I am afraid it is all we have. Censorship is a slippery slope largely because attempts to use it strategically for “affirmative action” purposes backfire and, as Ruitenberg shows, are used to penalize and silence dissent.

Ruitenberg concludes that the “purpose of students and teachers coming together...is not to vent opinions, but rather to examine them. Freedom of inquiry is not the same as freedom of expression, and education is not a soap box.” Her call for inquiry pushes us towards what Wendy Brown sees as a polis based in the “hard work of undertaking the pleasures of public argument...to assume responsibility for our situations.”¹¹ Perhaps optimistically we can recognize that the performative iterations that so trouble Ruitenberg provide, in our re-citation, an opportunity to examine the historical exclusions that give these words their force. “Checking my language,” I think I mean: public discussion of the misleading rhetoric of those who control the airwaves, may enable us to examine how these purchased repetitions cause harm.

But to conclude with a related spin on the matter, I worry about the valuable time and energy colleagues and I spend reacting to neo-conservative agendas. Perhaps the most urgent question regarding representation is: how might we ourselves, as philosophers of education, adopt proactive rather than reactive stances, and move the conversation beyond backlash to instead set the terms of public debate?¹²

1. This instance of censure exemplifies worries Judith Butler expressed at a recent plenary session on the “State of War” at the American Studies Association in October 2003. Analyzing Patriot Act 3, Butler described the catch-22 in which a contemporary sovereign subject of the state necessarily finds herself. To be a subject with agency — to embody the meanings of what it would mean to be responsible — requires that one be able to speak. In a climate of backlash to academic freedom, citizenship is being revoked on the basis of new state legislation and penalization for speaking. As Butler argues, multiple appellations such as “traitor, collaborator, terrorist, postmodernist, infantile, leftist, hippy, sympathizer” are names used to threaten those who might dissent with revocation of their agency as a subject.

2. This type of argument might be termed what Wendy Brown calls “reactionary foundationalism” that uses a form of “moral utilitarianism” to uphold particular cultural values, Wendy Brown, *States of Injury* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

3. Ravitch’s book, it is worth noting, neglects to mention James Loewen’s far more useful text, *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1996) in which he examines twelve U.S. history textbooks and analyzes the nationalist representations of history; Loewen’s text provides a much deeper understanding of how cultural truths are constructed than does Ravitch’s narrow focus on bias and sensitivity guidelines

4. This backlash is part of the larger cultural myth that schooling can and should be neutral. This myth of neutrality serves dominant forces well: those who explicitly discuss political inequality and injustice are accused of indoctrination. Meanwhile, curricula that aligns with familiar thought and values is permitted the status of neutrality—a neutrality which relies on being naturalized and hence invisible.

5. See pp. 15 ff. in Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

6. Judith Butler, “Plenary Session: The State of War,” American Studies Association Annual Meeting, 18 October 2003.

7. Ravitch and the email from the Canadian Society for Academic Freedom represent the thorny dilemma of attacks on censorship that scapegoat unpopular groups. Such attacks mislead debate to focus on how relatively powerless groups have sought to redress inequality, perpetuate the myth that “common cultural values” are neutral, and neglect the larger issues of who has the power and funds to capture airtime, speech, and popular opinion

8. The email she cites is of course but one minor example of the kinds of penalization, silencing, and harassment of teachers and professors following September 11.

9. Kohl, “Uncommon Differences,” 105.

10. Despite my remarks on the limits of philosophy, I can confess that part of what has swayed me on this point was a talk by a philosopher Professor Wayne Sumner here at University of Toronto in the fall of 2003, “Can Hate Speech be Free Speech?” in which Sumner offered a point by point utilitarian analysis which concludes — contrary to a position he held 10 years prior — that the benefits of censoring hate speech do not outweigh the costs.

11. Brown, *States of Injury*, 59.

12. Special thanks to Trevor Norris and Jennifer Logue who read my response and offered valuable comments.