

False Equivalences, Discomfort, and Crossing the Line of Civility: Who is Afraid of Incivility?

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And it is preferable to treat others with respect. But criticism—even angry criticism—is not necessarily a sign of disrespect. To point out that the meanings of words are not self-evident and that they can mask as much as they reveal is to respect language and thought. The real questions are: Who is calling for civility, and to what ends? What are the effects of policing classrooms and political forums in the name of civility? What has been the history of the invocation of that word?¹

The 2018 edition of *Civility in America: A Nationwide Survey* reports that three-quarters of Americans believe that incivility has risen to crisis levels.² Although in the past, academics and the media decried the decline of civility, the cry for more civility has recently received renewed attention. A recent chorus of alarms was sparked when White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders was refused service in a restaurant in protest against the family separation policy on the Mexico-United States border enforced by President Trump. Sanders implied that the restaurant owner's action was uncivil.³ Similarly, when California house representative Maxine Waters exhorted her supporters to make Trump's cabinet members *uncomfortable* as push back for complicity by showing them that “they're not welcome anymore, anywhere,” the *Washington Post* excoriated Waters for the *uncivil* precedent she set.⁴ Even some of Waters' democratic colleagues denounced her as uncivil.⁵

Ascriptions of incivility have also been hurled at student protesters

and faculty activists in higher education. Those who dare to protest loudly or aggressively against injustice are often vilified as violating civility.⁶ Joan Scott joins others who are disturbed by calls for “civil dialogue” that silence dissent.⁷ Scott refers to campus administrators who invoke civility to suppress critical speech as “the new thought police.”

About the same time, President Trump took the stage at a campaign rally firing up his crowd with attacks on his political enemies and the views he opposes. For instance, Trump mockingly referred to Massachusetts Democratic Senator Elizabeth Warren as “Pocahontas” and promised that if he debated her he would toss her a DNA testing kit demanding she prove her Native American heritage.⁸ Unleashing his disdain for the #Me Too movement, President Trump added that the kit would have to be thrown *gently* because “we’re in the #Me Too generation so I have to be very gentle ... hoping it doesn’t hit her and injure her arm even though it only weighs probably two ounces.” Here is a United States president who has openly taunted a journalist with a disability, characterized Mexican immigrants as rapists, banned Muslims from entering our country, and referred to women he does not like as “fat pigs,” “dogs,” “slobs, and “disgusting animals.” Theatrical moments of incivility have characterized much of the current political arena.

Are these incivilities equivalent? Peter Baker and Katie Rogers presume to equate Mr. Trump’s vituperative speech with that of his distractors, such as Robert De Niro.⁹ Keith Bybee defines incivility as a strategic effort to disrupt norms and he describes President Trump as a courageous disruptor-in-chief.¹⁰ He defends Trump’s boorishness as an effort to defend values threatened by the guardians of political correctness. Under Bybee’s definition, the incivilities of the Anti-Federalists, suffragettes, civil rights activists, Trump enthusiasts, and Black Lives Matter protesters are equivalent.¹¹

However, is the incivility that promotes social injustice akin to the incivility that attempts to fight it? Such false equivalences ignore that ascriptions of incivility are deeply embedded in relations of power. In this paper, I expand the case for incivility by suggesting a shift in focus from questions about civility and incivility and toward a more fundamental question about what one is

unwilling to know.

In the first part of this essay, I lay out the case for the significance of incivility as a tool for social transformation drawing on the notions of subversive incivility and Tracy Owen Patton's concept of hegemonic civility.¹² The ways in which dominant group comfort can be maintained by charges of incivility are addressed, followed by a discussion around how willful ignorance is preserved by focusing on the tone of a message instead of engaging with the message itself. Some questions, often raised, about the limits of incivility are briefly discussed but also expanded. Finally, in light of the arguments presented, I suggest that we shift the focus away from asking whether someone is being civil or uncivil and, instead, ask: What are we unwilling to know?

THE CASE FOR SUBVERSIVE INCIVILITY

A body of scholarship has emerged claiming that an *unrestricted* reliance on civility in political life functions as a mechanism for curtailing critical speech. While civility is a concept that has framed expectations about how to debate and how to disagree, it can also serve as a weapon to silence dissent. In other words, incivility has a role to play in resisting the ubiquity of systemic oppression. In reviewing some of this scholarship, I emphasize both how appeals for civility can benefit the systemically privileged and also how they contribute to the oppression of the systemically marginalized.

Cris Mayo makes a passionate plea for understanding the significance of incivility in the classroom.¹³ Calls for civility, Mayo argues, can function as a distancing strategy in which the systemically privileged can avoid being positioned as racist or implicated in systemic oppression. Accusations of incivility can serve as a "politically motivated excuse to change the subject."¹⁴ Similarly, Tracy Owens Patton contends that "sexism and racism in higher education have been allowed to continue in the guise of civility."¹⁵ In her analysis of white students' journals, Patton offers the concept of "hegemonic civility" to refer to the utilization of civil-speech to hide racism. Hegemonic civility upholds the hegemonic status quo and conceals the suppression of opposition

to dominant norms under the mask of good intentions.

I want to underscore that the purpose of the case against civility is not to reject civility tout court but rather to expose when an ostensible solution to conflict, a bridge to communication and a catalyst for creating social bonds, functions to do the opposite. Mayo contends that civility requires that discomforting conflict be suppressed and “those whose presence disrupts the bias that presumes their absence” be ignored.¹⁶ In fact, civility only works, according to Mayo, because “it maintains the distance it initially appears to bridge.”¹⁷ Civility can mask rather than engage with conflict and difference, and can create a façade of respect that conceals discrimination and the disregard of those who are deemed “uncivil.”

In her discussion of sexual minority youth, Mayo explains that those who expose homophobia are labeled uncivil because they make, “an issue of something that, in polite society ought to be ignored.”¹⁸ Yet to fail to challenge homophobia invalidates the violence these students experience. Marginalized subjects experience a double bind that can inhibit dissent. Consequently, hegemonic civility can function as a discursive strategy by which those with social power can maintain relations of dominance by concentrating on social interaction and ignoring structural inequities that frame those interactions. Not only is civility not always a virtue, it can also contribute to the oppression of the marginalized.

For the systemically privileged, in contrast, the call for civility can assuage the discomfort that arises when privileged comfort is disturbed. In her discussion of white fragility, Robin DiAngelo explains that for white people, even a minimum amount of stress that results from talking about race becomes intolerable and triggers defensive moves to reduce that stress.¹⁹ The call for civility can be a defensive move that re-establishes comfort. When discomfort is comforted by civility, *active* ignorance is condoned and perpetuated. Audrey Thompson hints at the connection between active ignorance and incivility when she writes that the individual who exposes injustice “is not pointing to something everyone else recognizes but politely pretends not to see. Rather she insists on showing people *what they are refusing to see*.”²⁰ Calls for civility can

protect the comfort of willful ignorance.

Mayo concludes that the practice of incivility can be just as important for achieving justice as civility.²¹ Incivility can make systemic injustice conspicuous by causing a disruption of comfort, making it difficult to avoid engaging in discussions about social injustice. Incivility can create a pause in the comfort that protects ignorance.

Moreover, subversive incivility may be the only avenue available to oppose injustice. Incivility is frequently not the first recourse of action for the marginalized. The “incivility” of the marginalized is often symptomatic of a scarcity of public space in which grievances can be legitimately raised or meaningfully addressed. As Linda Zerilli notes, “If some citizens are more prone to shout, that may well be because those in power are not listening.”²² When calls for civility require those who experience injustice to sacrifice their concerns for the communicative comfort of those who do not experience injustice, according to Zerilli, questions of power disappear.

As an avenue for the marginalized to express the unspoken and as providing an opportunity for the systemically privileged to learn how to listen to perspectives that uncomfortably compel one to confront one’s complicity in the maintenance of systemic injustice, incivility should be welcomed rather than deterred.

WILLFULL IGNORANCE: IT’S NOT THE TONE IT’S THE MESSAGE

Tell me how you feel but don’t say it too harshly or I cannot hear you.²³

Attributions of incivility appear to be about *the way something is said* rather than about *what is said*, but the line between tone and message is often a porous one. The underlying assumption is that if one’s tone is civil then the content of the message can be communicated more effectively. In 1934, Henry Cadbury, professor of biblical literature at Bryn Mawr College and an official of the American Society of Friends, called for Jewish rabbis to speak

civility to Hitler and the Nazis. Discussing issues in a civil tone, Cadbury insisted, would build bridges with persecutors and would be a more effective policy than resistance.²⁴

For those who experience oppression, however, the tone may be a way to vent, to tell the truth, or to loudly proclaim one's humanity. Robin Di-Angelo explains,

It's like if you're standing on my head and I say, "Get off my head," and you respond, "Well, you need to tell me nicely." I'd be like, "No. Fuck you. Get off my fucking head."²⁵

Is the tone or the message the target of calls for civility?

The recent discussion of "tone policing" provides a way to problematize the focus on tone. Tone policing occurs when a person criticizes the delivery of a message and is thereby able to ignore the content of the message. Consider a person of color who is upset when being "complimented" by a white person for his/her articulate speech. The white person might urge the person of color to "just calm down, there is no need to be upset, it was just a well-meaning compliment." While the assumption is that the white person would engage with the message if only the person of color would speak in a civil tone, such embraces of civility function as a silencing tactic that the systemically privileged can employ to derail uncomfortable conversations.²⁶ A focus on tone, thus, might obscure a desire to avoid engaging with the content of the communication.

When peaceful protests are labelled uncivil, the message is often dismissed—not because of the tone, but, rather, because the message is one some people do not want to consider. During the 1960s sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina, for instance, the protestors took pride in conducting themselves in a respectful manner. Nevertheless, as historian William Chafe contends, they were charged with incivility.²⁷

A more contemporary case underscores how the message rather than the tone prompts the charge of incivility. In 2015, George Yancy published a letter to white America with the hopes of making visible the painful reality

of racism.²⁸ Yancy took pains to write a letter of love, a gift, an invitation to inspire white people, especially those who are well-intentioned, to be vulnerable enough to learn about the ways in which they benefit from racism and are complicit in racism in ways they may not want to understand. His calmly and very civilly written letter was not met with civil engagement, but instead with a barrage of hate mail and threats of violence. Yancy wrote within the protocols of style and decorum yet the tone did not guarantee the uptake of the content of his message.

What is it about the message that provokes accusations of incivility? Audre Lorde provocatively inquires, “is it my manner that keeps you from hearing, or the threat of a message that (your) life may change?”²⁹ If civility re-establishes the comfort of the systemically privileged, incivility disturbs that comfort because it exposes injustice and complicity in injustice. Incivility, thus, tells us there is a problem that cannot be ignored and brings unequal power into focus and into question.

Furthermore, if learning opportunities arise at the boundaries of our comfort zone, the discomfort resulting from incivility can be an educative moment. Megan Boler insists that the aim of discomfort is “to explore beliefs and values; to examine when visual ‘habits’ and emotional selectivity have become rigid and immune to flexibility; and to identify when and how our habits harm ourselves and others”³⁰ Discomfort can help students to recognize “*what it is that one doesn’t want to know, and how one has developed emotional investments to protect oneself from that knowing.*”³¹ David Shih articulates this well when he writes that “Discomfort is the canary in a coal mine. It is what keeps us awake.”³²

To experience discomfort especially when confronted with views that not only compete with one’s own but also implicate one in the maintenance of injustice is unsettling, to say the least. If ignorance, as Charles Mills claims, is not merely a passive lack of knowledge but an active distancing from what one does not want to know, then to protect comfort is to shield ignorance from challenge.³³ Demands for civility can function, as Vann R. Newkirk, II, contends, “as the sleep-aid of a majority inclined to ignore the violence done in its name.”³⁴ Incivility has the potential to disrupt the comfort of ignorance.

Martin Luther King, Jr., understood the link between crossing the line of civility and challenging willful ignorance. In his “The Other America” speech, King insists that “A riot is the language of the unheard.” But what he said next is also important:

And what is it American has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice and humanity.³⁵

Subversive incivility, discomfort and willful ignorance must be jointly understood. The limits of incivility, however, have also been a source of debate. I briefly turn to two issues regarding the limits of incivility not in order to offer solutions but rather to suggest an expansion concerning how those issues are addressed.

LIMITS OF INCIVILITY: DISCOMFORT AND VIOLENCE

How much discomfort results in change and can too much discomfort backfire in ways that reinforce ignorance rather than disrupt it? Is creating too much discomfort for students unethical? Shoshana Felman who insists that crisis plays an indispensable role in the ability to learn difficult knowledge advocates that teachers create the “highest state of crisis” students can withstand but without “driving the students crazy.”³⁶ In his discussion of the ethics of a pedagogy of discomfort, Michalinos Zembylas debates what constructive discomfort can mean when conditions of power and privilege are always operative in the classroom.³⁷ Reviewing this debate is beyond the scope of this paper. My aim in raising this issue, however, is to highlight an important point that often gets lost in these discussions.

Many studies around a pedagogy of discomfort have primarily focused on white students whose discomfort arises when they are compelled to consider their complicity in systemic racial injustice. This re-centers whiteness once again. In considering the ethics of a pedagogy of discomfort, it is im-

portant to not let a concern with the discomfort of the dominant overshadow the pain of injustice suffered by the marginalized. A question to consider may be: How can the focus on white discomfort avoid eclipsing the violence marginalized students experience in the classroom, especially when the incivility that results in discomfort for the systemically privileged might be the only way to push back?

This leads to a related issue involving the limits of incivility. In a 1964 speech to the Organization of Afro-American Unity, Malcolm X insisted:

We declare our right on this earth to be a man, to be a human being, to be respected as a human being, to be given the rights of a human being in this society, on this earth, in this day, which we intend to bring into existence *by any means necessary*.³⁸

If “by any means necessary,” does this includes turning to violence? *How much* “incivility” is justified?

Frantz Fanon, who clearly recognizes the costs of turning to violence, famously argued that violence was justified and even necessary to resist colonialism.³⁹ Fanon argues that under colonial rule, violence can be a cathartic experience for the colonized, allowing them to reclaim their humanity. Yet as Zeus Leonardo and Ronald Porter explain, Fanon advocated forms of violence that are humanizing and educative, a violence that is revolutionary and not repressive.⁴⁰ They remind us that we must consider who decides what is considered violence. Leonardo and Porter point to Martin Luther King, Jr., whose call for non-violence was perceived as violence to white people because it provoked contradiction and disrupted white unwillingness to know Black experience.

My concern here is not whether incivility can lead to violence—a question that itself can be called upon to shut down subversive incivility. Rather my point is that we must ask: What counts as violence? Who decides the legitimacy of violent resistance? These complex issues must not be considered from the perspective of the systemically privileged alone. For those for whom

civility is comfortable, it is too tempting to focus on the violence of protestors and ignore the effects of structural violence that the protests are a response to. The centrality of people of color for whom navigating a racist society comes with great risks must not be sacrificed.

Under conditions of systemic oppression, it is important not to divert attention from the reasons that violence is believed to be necessary. What if before questions are raised about the justification of violence we consider the claims that protestors advance and why we might want to disregard those claims? What don't we want to know and why? Such a shift could have enormous educational implications.

CONCLUSION: WHO IS AFRAID OF INCIVILITY?

Calls for civility can constrain dissent. Subversive incivility has a role to play in social justice education. Yet how should students, educators and educational administrators respond to subversive incivility? Clues to help answer this question can be gleaned from the educational scholarship that addresses the moral anger of the marginalized.⁴¹

Critically examining whiteness and white privilege can "feel" like uncivil violence to white students. This discomfort can arise even when one has strong commitments to social justice. Gillian Eagle acknowledges the fear she felt when she saw a t-shirt that said "F*ck white people."⁴² She asks: How can white people move from shock, fear, retreat, avoidance and withdrawal towards hearing the message behind the anger? Rather than claim a form of white victimization, she acknowledges that rage can unsettle us, and she exhorts us to recognize that rage and, even hatred, has the potential to teach us about others as well as learn something about ourselves. As Eagle explains, "In the face of the rage or hatred of those I/we have directly or indirectly oppressed, it remains important to take the risk of seeing, experiencing, and attempting to respond to what is being communicated."⁴³

When white students are made aware of their complicity in racism, it is often heard as an accusation. It is discomforting for white people to be

called out for our complicity in racial injustice, especially when one believes one has good intentions. When I teach white pre-service teachers how to respond to a student or parent who calls them racist, I try to shift my students' attention away from interpreting the term as an accusation and towards a fact to be grappled with. I might do so by explaining how re-centering white emotions can re-establish white comfort and also forfeit opportunities for growth. If one is called out for racism and interprets this as "bashing white people," for example, the possibility of all of us working together to challenge systemic racial oppression is lost. These suggestions are summed up well when Elizabeth Denevi asks: "What if being called "racist" is the beginning, not the end, of the conversation?"⁴⁴

Applied to the topic of this paper, this implies moving away from a concern with civility or incivility and towards practices that actively promote challenging systemic and willful ignorance. The prior questions should be: What don't you know? What don't you want to know? And why?

From the outrage around athletes who refused to sing the national anthem to the calls by Representative Waters to protest Trump supporters, we cannot let the cries of a crisis in civility conceal the violence that is the target of these protests. We must keep in mind that systemic injustice is sustained by active ignorance and that the path to social justice will seldom be comfortably civil.

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