

“I Should be Able to Say This”: Hollow Disagreement as Not-So-Covert Fascism

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What am I doing here? Almost every day I am thinking about the ways I can teach this critical stuff to my students. Most of them don't even want to be here. It's a "general studies" class that students from most if not all majors need to take at some point, so the majority never truly chooses to sit with Gender and Communication in the ways I would like them to sit with. It is always a struggle to broaden students' minds about the ways in which there is so much more to gender outside the binary. How there are different ways of doing gender, doing sexuality, and doing masculinity and femininity. One of my goals of having 50-something mostly young folks in one room at the same time is to provide opportunities to them to listen to each other and to begin taking on the perspective of another. It's about instilling a sense of questioning "why are things the way they are?" and "how could they be otherwise?" in them, allowing them to see how even mundane statements or practices uphold and promote fascist systems in so many ways. You can teach an entire semester against fascism, against cissexism and cisbeteronormativity, against transmisogyny and white supremacy, and still have students use the very last assignment to uphold fascism.

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“I disagree.”

What a powerful statement. A mundane, seemingly simple statement that the great orators of public discourse would herald as an exemplary practice of public, rational discourse in the so-called and often-cited free marketplace of ideas. The epitome as rhetorical expression.

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“I *disagree*.”

A simple but powerful expression of a difference in opinion. *I think otherwise. What you are saying is not what I believe in.* A dis-solution of coherence in opinion, a plea for doing and thinking otherwise.

“I disagree.”

An assertion of the individual’s affinity for rational thought, argument, and logic. A centering of the knowing subject whose duty it is to actively participate in the ongoing, never-ending conversation of public discourse in the service of oh-so-fabulous democracy. You versus me, your dissent standing against my expressed statement. An expression of your identity as it is pitched against mine, a statement encapsulated in an identity and vice versa.

“I *disagree*.”

A clear statement that expresses a difference in opinion. An exertion of an individual’s so-called freedom of speech that grants them the so-called right to publicly disagree with someone else’s statement, be it politics, and opinions, or—someone’s *existence*, their very sense of being. “I disagree” as a powerful expression of a fascist politics disguised under the claim toward disagreement in the service of the rational exchange of arguments for the greater good of the public sphere. “I disagree” as the emblematic formulation of public dissent, oftentimes described as a crucial incision in supposedly oppressive regimes that dare to fight toward such “evil,” liberatory goals as exterminating cisheterosexism and transmisogyny, or that use “foul” language of critical race theory or abolition.

Expressions that go against existing institutional norms can be so easily disagreed with precisely because they go against established and institutionalized fascist politics. *This is a colorblind institution; anyone who actively names race as a means toward liberatory, intersectional organizing is violating our underlying system of belief that cannot—does not—account for such alternative doing and being.* Cloaked in the cultural fascist refrain of freedom of speech, the *disagree* functions as a cultural expression that is simultaneously baseless yet legitimated. Baseless on the grounds of anti-fascist political organizing as a self-referential, hollow rhetorical tactic that diverts

from the material issue at hand for the sake of arguing. Legitimated because it is part of the self-referential politics of fascism that maneuvers through rhetorical fallacies into a fragile argumentative structure lending support to individualized disagreement.

Oftentimes seeming as a “healthy” response in an ongoing conversation—you know, to advance the discussion toward a more rational outcome—expressions of disagreement are positioned as necessary conversational moves toward a larger sense of dialogue—dialogue in a traditional, romanticized conceptualization of fully understanding the other. However, the hollow, fascist statement of disagreement indicates a profound lack of care and interest in genuinely understanding the other; rather, it indicates a distinct turning away from another, ultimately rendering them unattainable, unintelligible, illegible, and ultimately *otherized*. In contrast to legitimate forms of disagreement that are more so focused on advancing the conversation in ways that lead to mutual understanding—or at least toward creating the foundation for mutual understanding to come into being—hollow disagreement serves to create a diversion that rhetorically positions someone’s existence as purportedly up for debate.

For others, disagreement is emblematic of an increasingly polarized, dichotomized, and violent discursive culture in which conversation is no longer possible nor even desirable—if it ever was—and each side is yelling at each other with the goal of out-shouting the others. Here, then, disagreement as the impossibility of conversation or the refusal thereof is no longer about the issue at hand but very much about the speaker themselves. And it is this very fascism that creeps in as the transmisogynist, white supremacist underbelly that compels some to disagree with the very existence of others.

In a sense, fascism works quite intricately here as on a surface level, material erasure does not happen solely through language. However, the ways in which a supposed expression of a disagreement in opinion blends together with language that strips humanity from people marks the more insidious facet of fascism. As Ahmed (2016) writes in her dense piece on the connections between so-called free speech and attacks on trans people’s existence, the “distinction between critical speech and incitement to violence breaks down, which is how an incitement to violence is justified *as* freedom of speech” (p. 25). As Lore/tta LeMaster writes in her introduction to this forum, pointing merely to the recent rise of post-truth

discourse drastically ignores the whiteness inherent in this critique, failing to recognize the more rooted historical workings of fascism.

“I just don’t think that trans people [insert empty transmisogynist phrase here].”

“Why is it that non-citizens should [insert hollow xenophobic statement here].”

“How is it that Black folks [insert anti-Black racist claim here].”

“Why would disabled folks [insert ableist assertion here].”

And many more.

The question is thus when opinions are no longer opinions but turn into attacks at someone’s existence, a very real questioning that unsettles that which is illegible and unintelligible to fascism: otherness and difference. Recognizing this is less about needing to protect those on the margins from such existential disagreement and more so about understanding the ways in which language and the call for so-called freedom of speech are legitimized as seemingly mundane ways of upholding fascism. Trans, disabled, Indigenous, and other otherized folks have always been there and will not disappear merely because of fascist statements of disagreement denying their existence. Of course.

However, cultivating resistance against fascism entails asking, where are the limits of opinions, and how do we clearly express those limits and shut down violent communicative and material moves that go beyond these boundaries. How can we foster a relational understanding that recognizes the harm and violence of fascist statements camouflaged as opinions? How can we carve out space so that we can easily recognize and address the hollow, empty, and shallow tactics of fascist disagreement?

Cultivating resistance against fascism from a pedagogical stance entails marking clearly that the exchange of ideas in conversation does not—cannot—mean the expression of so-called opinions that deny the existence of those on the margins. This also means recognizing that pedagogy extends beyond the classroom that is so often the limited focus of instructional communication emphases. Pedagogy falls differently on different bodies as they consistently need to navigate

and educate those they encounter on the difference between opinion and fascism, the difference between expressions of dissent and those that deny people's existence. The aim should be to foster communities of collaborative learning and growth that aim to be listeners to each other's experiences. To be critical of fascist logics and structures rather than critical of each other's statements and existence. This aim invokes the *need to respond* to statements of hollow disagreement or violent speech (Pollock, 2020). Responding both as an educator and as a fostered community response allows to grapple with the hollowness of disagreement that promotes fascism rather than contributing to active learning and understanding of other perspectives (see also Chen & Lawless, 2018).

The idea that one "should be able to say this" encapsulates a deep-seeded entitlement toward the modernist ideal of so-called free speech where statements of hollow disagreement—or hollow statements in general—perform merely subtly cloaked upholding of fascism. Cultivating resistance to this rhetoric of disagreement is a primary aim of at least my pedagogical efforts in the classroom. I hope it serves as an invitation for coalitional pedagogical efforts against fascism to you, too.

References

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