Democracy, Extremism, and the Crisis of Truth in Education

Michele S. Moses
University of Colorado Boulder

INTRODUCTION

Whatever your political affiliation, I don't think I need to convince you about the trouble democracy is in—not just in the United States, but all around the world. Societies undergoing democratic decline usually erode gradually.[1] We begin to see things like the proliferation of disinformation; the facile dismissal of facts, evidence, and the free press; and the degradation of civil liberties.[2] For example, women may lose the right to govern their own bodies or finalize a divorce if they are pregnant.[3] Such attacks on rights are bound-up with other worrisome phenomena such as anti-intellectualism, disproportionate focus on identity politics, and election denial. Books are banned. Ideas are repressed. People are silenced. So-called parents' rights groups lobby policymakers to constrain what students can be taught within public education institutions (using euphemisms like prohibiting the teaching of "divisive concepts"). Undemocratic forces begin to stack city halls, state legislatures, and the judiciary.[4] The slide into authoritarianism may be gradual, but a dystopian near-future is not out of the realm of possibility. In education we have seen the rise of Koch-funded groups like "Moms for Liberty" or "Parents Defending Education" working against teaching critically—or even accurately—about race, gender, or sexual diversity in schools and universities. On the extreme left, there is a tendency to suppress dialogue and use authoritarian tactics, degrading the principles of democratic engagement in everyday life.[5]

As scholars we have a special responsibility to use our expertise to counter antidemocratic forces like these.[6] In particular, as philosophers *of education* we can do what we do so well: analyze the debates, clarify key concepts, and offer recommendations towards democracy-sustaining—or perhaps more importantly—democracy-transforming education.[7] This was my aim with my last book. Writing in the early 2010's, I argued for deliberative democratic dialogue

across differences, conflicting beliefs, and moral disagreements. I sent it off to the publisher in 2015 and it came out early in 2016. Then US politics blew up. I had written *Living with Moral Disagreement* during a different time and political context.[8] I believed in the promise of deliberative democracy and dialogue; I still do. But I understand better now that we need to grapple with what to do if people's conflicting beliefs are not only due to their different moral values and worldviews, but also due to untrue, unreasonable, and wrong ideas.

In this article, then, I address the following guiding question: How can universities foster democracy within an extremist, "post-truth" political climate? I argue that contemporary turns toward extremism in politics are symptoms of a crisis of truth that is harming education, harming civic dialogue and deliberation, and consequently, harming democracy. I have selected the term "extremism" here purposefully. The definition I am using focuses on a politics that is anti-democratic and dogmatic, and ultimately repressive, but I say more about that below.[9] The purposes of my paper are threefold. First, I aim to examine how political extremism on the far right and—to a much lesser extent—on the far left, in higher education are harming democratic education and ideals; second, to argue for the importance of inquiry and truth in university education, through the lens of pragmatism; and third, to offer ways that philosophers of education could and should be working on these problems.

Before anything else, I need to clearly state that in examining far-right and far-left extremism, I am not making a "both sides" kind of argument; the concerning anti-democratic politics on the far-right and the far-left are not at all equivalent—neither the intent, nor the impact.[10] Although the consequences of extremist-left claims and activism harm democratic coalitional politics, extremist-right claims and activism endanger people's lives (in addition to damaging democracy). To take one urgent example: the extremist far-right's lies about transgender people quite literally place them in harm's way, not to mention how they exact a toll on the overall health and wellbeing of transgender persons. This goes well beyond a political or ideological dispute. Nevertheless, I do worry that in paying justifiable attention to the powerful extremist-right, progressive-minded scholars have neglected to critique those on the extrem-

ist-left.[11] But I believe that it is important to understand the different kinds of dangers to democratic education that we are facing, as they reveal something about the crisis of truth and the diminishing possibility of developing shared understandings. I want to suggest that there is something happening beneath our feet: competing perspectives on truth, not only the value of truth and how we might search for it, but also whether and how we might adjudicate competing truth claims. In often simplistic and overconfident ways, extremists are claiming that individual experiences can never be questioned regardless of the evidence.[12] This goes against a broadly pragmatist view of truth and knowledge that relies on an explicitly democratic conception of the ends of inquiry. These issues are close to my heart as a scholar of higher education, and now feel even more urgent in my role as a vice provost, where I am regularly confronted by threats to public universities and engaged in real-time debates over academic freedom and repressive politics.

I realize I am presenting large and multifaceted problems that philosophers of education cannot just magically solve. It may not even feel obvious that democracy and the civic education that fosters it are worth fighting for.[13] Scholars have long seen democracy as a particularly challenging form of government because it necessarily relies on the wisdom of the people, which may not always exist.[14] Consider Hannah Arendt's view that relying on the wisdom of the masses can be dangerous for pluralist politics and lead to totalitarianism.[15] Although important ideals such as freedom and equality are central to democratic politics, in practice democracy often does not reflect its ideals. John Dewey notes, "[r]egarded as an idea, democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself," but, "democracy . . . is not a fact and never will be."[16] Along with this pragmatist conception of democracy as a living system of government and community reliant on people engaging in informed dialogue, Dewey saw communication as fundamental for free, democratic citizens, and education as key to learning to communicate in democracy-sustaining ways.[17] Numerous philosophers have followed Dewey in making arguments for democratic education and for the democratic aims of higher education, focusing on educating citizens for informed democratic

participation, autonomy and self-determination, and nondiscrimination and nonoppression.[18] However, given the current sociopolitical moment, I attempt to show here that however right-headed these arguments—including my own—have been, they have missed prioritizing and emphasizing a necessary component of democratic education: truth. For, how can we educate democratic citizens if nobody knows what is true? As Kal Alston asked, "can we call it education if we cannot bring ourselves to tell the fucking truth?"[19]

My argument herein flows from two key premises:

> 1. Democracy is in danger and is worth saving.

> 2. Higher education rightly claims a mission that prominently includes inquiry in the pursuit of truth, civic education, and the preparation of informed democratic participants.

Given those, I examine how extremist views are hindering that mission. University leaders need to understand how extremism is related to a crisis of truth and to refocus on their academic and social missions. To make my argument, I show how a phenomenon that Lee McIntyre calls "post-truth" is connected with extremism.[20] Relying on a Deweyan-pragmatist democratic notion of truth as tightly linked with inquiry, I argue that we *can* know truth, though contextual and dynamic, through inquiry. I hope that my examination can contribute to a course-correction that reconnects students, faculty, and staff to the democratic mission of the university, and engages philosophers substantively in the effort.

Before moving to the next section, I should share that these issues have been on my mind and my heart for quite a while, keeping me up at night. This article is my attempt to make sense of what is happening. This article is my invitation to you to think together with me.[21] As someone who has spent my career working on issues of equality and justice in education, particularly on studying higher education policies aiming to mitigate racial inequality, I have gotten used to critiques from the far-right. What I feel especially anxious about is that my challenges to extremist orthodoxies on the far left might be taken out of context and used to erase my scholarly track record.

I suppose my anxiety is indicative of the very problem I am endeav-

oring to tackle.

HOW POLITICAL EXTREMISM HURTS EDUCATION

In using the term "extremism" in the context of higher education, I am referring to antidemocratic, and even authoritarian, political views that lead to unwarranted or unreasonable orthodoxies, fanaticism, or zealotry about contested matters, whether how to teach about climate change or about racism or about what art can be shown in class. Although I use the language of far right and left extremes to help illustrate the different kinds of dangers they pose, I do not mean to imply that there exists some simplistic, linear continuum with monolithic groups on each end.[22] What they have in common is that they advocate antidemocratic practices and rigid dogma, which harm the democratic aims of higher education and distract us from the good work of fostering democracy in meaningful ways. Accordingly, this section demonstrates how the extremes on the far right–and also, although qualitatively different and less-menacing), on the far left–are eroding commitment and actions to fulfill the democratic purposes of education.[23] Let me share two examples that illustrate the challenge we are facing.

ATTACKS ON THE UNIVERSITY

Quoting Richard Nixon, JD Vance, now-Senator from Ohio, said "The professors are the enemy," when speaking to the National Conservatism Conference.[24] Let me repeat that: *The professors are the ENEMY.* This sentiment undergirds everything that Florida Governor Ron DeSantis has been doing to stymie progress toward democratic aims in Florida's public universities.[25] Consider his "Stop WOKE Act" and Florida House Bill 999, which seek to limit public university autonomy and disallow teaching about racial injustice. It violates academic freedom, silences expertise, and chills inquiry.[26] Consider also his call for all public universities to report every expenditure related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and critical race theory. Such surveillance deprofessionalizes university staff and faculty, suppresses equity initiatives and undermines the university's mission.

When mainstream politicians are far-right extremists like Vance and

DeSantis, and they use language that frames professors as the "enemy" or categorize curriculum materials related to racial, LGBTQIA+, and gender history and justice as "divisive," they are perpetuating dangerous untruths. Words matter. What we say to each other has consequences. What we say in public has consequences. In trying to understand and prevent totalitarianism, Arendt argues that speech is a form of action that is not separate from the person saying it; that is, speech is not only inert words, because when we speak, we are in fact acting. Words can have the effect of making things more—or less—permissible than they were before.[27] And more alarmingly, they can have material consequences for people's lives.

What is happening in Florida exemplifies a troubling trend in higher education characterized by far-right extremist (and democratically-elected) state leaders taking actions to control universities and block educators from meaningfully pursuing the university's mission through teaching accurate content about race or using anti-racist pedagogy.[28] These kinds of authoritarian actions contribute to a sense of what Doris Santoro has called "the illusion of schools as democratic places."[29] She builds on Chris LeBron's idea that despite schools' claims to be engaging in democratic education, in practice they are not pursuing democratic aims for many marginalized students.[30] A similar analysis could be applied to universities and state governments. As extremist leaders have risen to power, certain dogmas and beliefs have moved from the fringes of acceptable social and political views into the mainstream. Radical extremists have been emboldened, feeling entitled, for example, to call out or dox scholars who publish and teach about and against racism, misogyny, cis- and hetero-normativity, or white supremacy. Scholars and artists—and the notion of expertise in general—have been attacked and undermined.

In a "post-truth" society, it becomes less likely for citizens to participate in democratic politics in an informed way. When the beliefs over which people disagree are not reasonable or are untrue, it is difficult—if not impossible—to respect them, making it exceedingly challenging to engage in democratic dialogue.[31] As Lana Parker points out, "The new information environment is characterized by high levels of online engagement, rising tides of mis- and disinformation,

intentional technological manipulation, and the imperiling of democracy through strains of post-truthism and radicalization."[32] Parker's points about disinformation and post-truthism echo Arendt's concerns about totalitarian leaders devaluing the difference between fact and fiction: "The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the dedicated communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction, true and false, no longer exists."[33] We know that deep polarization, along with widespread civil distrust and disrespect, racism and white nationalism, and a disregard for facts all contribute to a decline of democratic ideals.[34] Robert Talisse notes that this kind of deep polarization leads to political echo chambers, making it more difficult for people to respect or even just seek to understand opposing views. It also can result in the most extreme on the right and the left pressuring their comrades and allies to become more extreme or else not be considered authentically part of the movement.[35] Successful deliberative democracies value the ability of citizens to disagree with one another and still maintain a mutual respect, which is all the harder when those with whom we disagree are characterized as "enemies."[36]

COUNTERPRODUCTIVE PRACTICES

For the second example, consider Hamline University, where an art historian was fired after teaching a survey course on ancient art. By all accounts, the instructor was sensitive to calls to diversify the curriculum and include art from many different cultures. She was aware that some of the artworks would be controversial, but she believed that having students think critically about the controversies was key to studying art history. She recognized that her students have diverse perspectives and also represent diverse cultures and religions, so she made sure to let the students know in advance about particularly contested works so that anyone could choose to opt out of viewing them. No one raised any concerns or opted out. One classic Islamic work included an image of the prophet Muhammad, which some Muslims believe should *never* be depicted. After she showed it, a Muslim student complained to the administration, and the university president decided to let the instructor go. Although the Hamline dispute is complex for many reasons including that it is a conservative fundamentalist portion of Muslims who object to using such art even for educational

purposes, in my view this example is still emblematic of counterproductive extremism of the far left, because of campus leaders' over-reaction leading to firing the instructor. This kind of epistemic deference seems to undermine the very diversity and inclusion goals that ostensibly motivated or justified firing her. The left-extremist view here leaves no room for dialogue or learning, instead centering an orthodoxy dictating that instructors should never teach anything that could feel uncomfortable or oppressive to students whose cultures have been historically marginalized, especially at predominantly white universities.[37]

We can understand what happened at Hamline to be an extreme instance of the phenomenon of the "politics of deference" described by Olúfémi O. Táíwò.[38] The idea of the politics of deference is part of his analysis of the concept of "elite capture," that is, how social and political elites have tended to use identity politics and the experiences of people of color for their own benefit rather than for genuine anti-racist aims.[39] The politics of deference specifically refers to "an etiquette that asks people to pass attention, resources, and initiative to those perceived as more marginalized than themselves," and to do so uncritically.[40] Key for my arguments here is that the politics of deference causes elites to "modify interpersonal interaction in compliance with the *perceived* wishes of the marginalized."[41] Such deference often does nothing constructive to change the structures that negatively affect minoritized people's actual circumstances. At its worst, the politics of deference can result in elites patting themselves on the back for how anti-racist they are and even enabling problematic behaviors among minoritized people who are often also part of the larger group of elite intellectuals (for example, tenure-track faculty of color).[42] In universities, more time may end up being spent on things like doling out committee work equitably, than addressing urgent material needs.[43] This is perverse because it ultimately rewards white elites for the so-called wokeness they perform, while continuing to ignore real power differentials.

My concern is that although parts of such deference can be positive within academia when they are a part of changes that result in greater valuing and respect for those marginalized within the academy, as well as materially distributing work and credit more equitably, it can also be destructive, especially when

it serves to poison coalitions and suppress disagreement and connection within communities of scholars working individually and collectively toward justice.[44] I agree with Táíwò that "[t]o opt for deference, rather than interdependence, may soothe short-term psychological wounds. But it does so at a steep cost: it may undermine the goals that motivated the project—and it entrenches a politics that does not serve those fighting for freedom over privilege, for collective liberation over more parochial advantage."[45] Also troubling in the university context is that the politics of deference and the concomitant performativity can result in an increasing reluctance by faculty members to raise questions or discussion topics related to emerging exclusionary orthodoxies around social justice, much less to take a stand that is different from those orthodoxies. There is often fear attendant to this, such as for example, fear of being accused of perpetuating white supremacy or racial violence. This fear can result in silence and an environment where scholars may shy away from even talking about social justice related topics, much less studying them or combating untruths. The fear and silence are indicative of what I see as a flaw in the current far-left strategies to fight racial injustice and other injustices within institutions of higher education: pursuing exclusionary strategies that alienate allies instead of building coalitions to work toward positive change in the service of justice. By taking teaching positions in the academy, university faculty make a decision to become part of the system of higher education and thus to work *within* the system to pursue social justice goals. The infighting on the left is a severe distraction from work in the service of inquiry, truth, and social justice.[46]

In one of the most insightful essays I have read in a good, long while, community leader and activist, Maurice Mitchell, the National Director of the Working Families Party, boldly argues that environments within many progressive and left social movements and non-profit organizations are "toxic" or "problematic" because of tendencies that include the following: cynicism about all leaders and institutions, tests of one another's commitment to justice, lack of nuanced understandings (often perpetuated by social media), power struggles rather than coalition-building, and reactions that are not proportionate to situations.[47] Central to his argument is that a person's identity should not

automatically be seen as "evidence of some intrinsic ideological or strategic legitimacy."[48] Overall, Mitchell is concerned that these tendencies are weakening movements and organizations.

I contend that similar tendencies and orthodoxies are afflicting academia and universities. Students, staff, and faculty alike are suffering due to environments made toxic not only by extremist-right orthodoxies, but also by extremist-left dysfunction. Instead of lifting each other up, developing solidarity across common goals and actions for democracy and justice, we are blaming and shaming each other, calling each other out, and refusing to show each other grace or compassion.[49] When someone dares speak against the orthodoxies or even raise them for discussion, they may be accused of perpetuating injustice. According to Mitchell, it is problematic when "[m]arginalized identity is deployed as a conveyor of a strategic truth that must simply be accepted" because "[p]eople with marginalized identities, as human beings, suffer all the frailties, inconsistencies, and failings of any other human."[50]

To act as if this were otherwise is patronizing at best to students, faculty, and staff who are underrepresented within the academy, and racist at worst. It is worth quoting Mitchell once more: "Genuflecting to individuals solely based on their socialized identities or personal histories deprives them of the conditions that sharpen arguments, develop skills, and win debates. We infantilize members of historically marginalized or oppressed groups by seeking to placate or pander instead of being in a right relationship, which requires struggle, debate, disagreement, and hard work."[51] Such genuflecting flies in the face of the mutual respect that is constitutive of deliberative democracies; it is an insincere approach to truth-seeking. In higher education, the emergent extremism of students, faculty, and staff on the far left thus may serve to create an environment that is counterproductive to the mission of the university. In the most alarming instances, like the Hamline case, historically marginalized individuals' perceptions of harms are taken uncritically as truth, leading to disproportionate demands, reactions, and outcomes. The conundrum here of course is how to balance honoring persons' accounts of harm with inquiry toward truth, and without then taking outsized remedial actions that are dis-

proportionate to the offense.[52]

THE NUANCES IN EXTREMISM

To conclude this section, the Florida and Hamline examples illustrate the damaging politics and actions that result from extremist orthodoxies.[53] While insightful in a number of contexts, the postmodern critiques of truth and inquiry have gone painfully awry in both directions, as any truth claims seem to be open to question from anyone.[54] The first example, highlighting actions that reflect far-right extremist views illustrates an entirely unreasonable use of power to silence inquiry, critique, and the pursuit of truth in universities. Such actions have far-reaching effects that dehumanize minoritized persons and destroy decades of progress toward creating more diverse and inclusive campus environments. The second example, highlighting actions that reflect recent far-left extremist positions illustrates an unreasonable use of power to silence inquiry, trample academic freedom, and prioritize student demands *solely because of* the student's cultural and religious identity with little to no attention to the context or the substantive content of the complaint.

Although there is wrongheaded extremism on the far right and left, let me underscore once more that these extremes are not equivalent. In fact, commentators who say breezily that "both sides are wrong" gloss over the crucial nuance that the extreme right is much worse for democracy. Let me elaborate on what I mean by "worse." The views and actions of extremists on the right often deny people's humanity, erase people's very existence, erode civil rights, threaten lives, and aim to destabilize democratic politics in the service of authoritarian aims. The views of extremists on the left, on the other hand are of a different scope and scale. By and large, those on the extreme left are critiquing an unjust system that harms minoritized and marginalized people. They are not the ones trying to withhold medical procedures or education from anyone, nor trying to keep anyone from getting married or from voting. It is not the far-left's general aims with which I am taking issue, it is the *methods*, because they can be counterproductive to those crucial aims. Far-left extremists are sabotaging the social and political coalitions that are needed to make lasting, positive social change. Consider that in their study of extremist radicals,

Herbert McClosky and Dennis Chong found that far left-extremists "possess an inflexible psychological and political style characterized by the tendency to view social and political affairs in crude, unambiguous and stereotypical terms . . . where compromise amounts to capitulation."[55] Here I follow Scott Fletcher, who pointed out counterproductive infighting on the left and Elizabeth Suhay et al., who maintain that the "growing extremity on the political left . . . may be more benign or even beneficial in some cases, but it is still a phenomenon worth study."[56]

In this section I have argued that extremist, exclusionary views and actions in universities contribute to the erosion of the democratic purposes of higher education. In the next section, I demonstrate how this argument is connected with the rise of "truth decay" in recent times.[57] As if the attack from the far-right were not challenging enough, students, faculty, and staff increasingly are basing truth claims on their experiences and feelings in such a way that they are somehow beyond question, rather than *also* relying on scientific and ethical claims to truth based on evidence and discussion *in conjunction with* experience, leading to important intersubjective understandings. University leaders and educators need to understand these problems to be able to refocus on the mission of knowledge production, inquiry, and the pursuit of truth, which foster the education and development of a democratic citizenry able to engage in deliberation and dialogue across inevitable difference and disagreement, and to understand the fallibility and revisability of evidence and decisions. This deeper understanding would emerge from pragmatist notions of truth and inquiry.[58]

TRUTH MATTERS: PRAGMATISM AND INQUIRY

In the US, the crisis of truth is related to a deep disdain for collective inquiry and evidence-based truth claims. This is indicative of a radical, individualistic rejection of an intersubjective understanding of truth that can emerge from community inquiry. The crisis goes well beyond merely dealing with opposing worldviews. Outright lies are widespread, calling into question what we know, fueling ridiculous debates, sowing epistemic chaos. What is true? Can we even know? If so, how? Who gets to say? What if we just cry fake news? For instance, a significant portion of the US electorate believes the lies

about election fraud after the 2020 presidential election despite no evidence. Although there are many causes of and reasons for such beliefs, I cannot help but ask what happened—or what did not happen—in their educations that made it possible for citizens to dismiss evidence and facts and fall for the lies? It seems to me that for tens of millions of people, civic education failed. One reaction to this could be to just give up on civic education. But my reaction is to want to double-down on purposeful, meaningful, and inclusive democratic education in the pragmatist tradition, because we need it more than ever. Indeed, without the civic education that *is* offered, things would likely be worse. We need to recommit to it not only in primary and secondary schooling, but also in university education. To do that, we have to both understand and resist the corrosive political extremes that are getting in the way of the dialogue and deliberation necessary for practicing democracy in the ways that Dewey and other pragmatist scholars call for.[59]

The tenets of deliberative democratic theory are key here, as revisability is an epistemic virtue. Thomas Kuhn's idea of "normal science" is relevant here as well: it is part of the way scientific inquiry works that it is impossible to know whether a given scientific theory will be eclipsed or overtaken by new discoveries and knowledge, but that does not mean it isn't right or true.[60] Relatedly, Dewey invokes the idea that democracy itself is dynamic, and it now needs to evolve in a "post-truth" context. McIntyre writes about the phenomenon of "post-truth" as being strongly linked with authoritarian threats to democracy. He hearkens back to Orwell's dystopian *1984*, noting the "worry that we are well on our way to fulfilling . . . [Orwell's] dark vision, where truth is the first casualty in the establishment of the authoritarian state."[61] Yet, I do not want to accept passively that we can somehow be "post"-truth. Because there exists a crisis does not necessarily mean that truth is a lost cause.[62]

Dewey presciently maintained that democracy has to be renewed regularly.[63] However, Dewey did not adequately focus on how to do so when people have divergent views about democracy and the democratic purposes of public institutions. Elizabeth Anderson suggests that one way to address this is for democracy to be lived on college campuses; academic freedom requires

scholars and students to make truth claims in light of disciplinary standards and methods of inquiry.[64] For Dewey, it is meaningful democratic education that helps young people develop the habits needed to participate constructively in inquiry and in remaking their democracy, habits such as critical discernment, the willingness to question our assumptions, whole-heartedness, dialogue, deliberation, and responsibility.[65] Such inquiry includes thoughtful reflection and decision-making, along with a good understanding of our social, cultural, and historical context.[66] This reflects the idea that inquiry happens both in scholarly research and in daily life.[67] Under pragmatism, epistemic claims that result from systematic inquiry are connected with what actually happens in lived experience and the consequences of the inquiry.[68] Cheryl Misak explains how this kind of inquiry works: "[m]oral and political judgments aim at getting things right and the best way of achieving or approximating that aim is to engage in reasoning, debate, and the consideration of different perspectives and evidence."[69] Pragmatist inquiry thus builds on itself; that is, it relies on an iterative process of knowledge production and communication.[70]

Understanding inquiry in this way is important for deliberative democracy, because lived experiences and further inquiry can lead to changed or expanded knowledge. In fact, Talisse notes, "the pragmatist endorses a specific model of democracy and citizenship for the sake of proper epistemic practice."[71] So, we should view knowledge as both partial and self-correcting. What this means is that in a deliberative democracy, citizens act on the knowledge we have, with the understanding that we will regularly revise what we know and link it to what we do. This is where extremists go so wrong; epistemic humility is in short supply—they are not open to inquiry, to the possibility that they might be wrong.[72] Also—and importantly—any discussion of knowledge and truth has to contend with the unjust history of how "evidence" has been used in profoundly racist, sexist, homophobic, and anti-Semitic ways to justify bigoted agendas against marginalized groups, whether by Nazis, white supremacists, or eugenicists, for example. In addition, some critics of pragmatism contend that it does not take structural inequalities properly into account.[73]

Now, the crisis of truth is characterized primarily by the outright lies told

by far-right extremists—that Democrats eat children or that transgender people do not exist, for example—as well as less dangerous lies such as the numbers of attendees at the 2016 inauguration.[74] These lies have made their way onto university campuses, through harmful legislation or through far-right extremist speakers on campus. According to McIntyre, part of the problem is that feelings are in shaping people's beliefs about what is true.[75] Both communication and inquiry break down in the quest to call out or shame others. The indiscriminate primacy of feelings is reflected in the extreme-left's penchant toward disproportionality, where every problem or slight is perceived as *the* worst, most nefarious possible. Mitchell shares the example of an *uncomfortable* interaction that is then described as "not only unacceptable but 'violent.'"[76] This description may be understandable; the reality of the pain and trauma of racial injustice and other injustices sometimes makes it nearly impossible for marginalized persons to feel beyond that trauma, to accept that positive change may be occurring, albeit achingly slowly, or to see how allies may be working authentically for justice.[77] Nevertheless, Mitchell maintains that this disproportionality "ultimately weakens meaning, dulls analysis, and robs us of the ability to acknowledge and process instances of violence and oppression. If everything is 'violent,' nothing really is" he says, "[i]f every slight is 'oppression,' nothing is."[78]

Scholars have to be able to get to a place where engaging in discussion or critiquing our colleagues' positions is an ordinary part of university life. Truth has to be arbitrated by deliberative democratic principles—reciprocity, accountability, publicity—along with scientific and ethical inquiry and evidence.[79] I propose that while honoring truth claims based in part on people's experiences, we seek to understand these experiences, pragmatically, as a source of collective knowledge and as part of a broader process of inquiry, rather than as the end point of that inquiry.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

There are good reasons for questioning grand narratives and capital T truth, but the insistence on the contingency of all truth, which emerged partially out of postmodern thought, has—perhaps unintentionally—led to a dangerous relativism and science denial, and to Orwellian destabilization of both capital

T truth and little t truth.[80] Postmodern conceptions of deconstruction, truth, and inquiry have weakened democratic education and in some ways fostered the rise of "post-truth" extremism. Higher education cannot successfully pursue its central mission of knowledge production and the pursuit of truth under such conditions.

If scholars and students feel disrespected and threatened by those who disdain universities and professors, and if communities of scholars themselves cannot model democratic discourse and behaviors, how can we expect students to engage in the practice of democratic life through their education? My concerns about the anti-democratic impulses of those on the extremist-left reflect what Sara Ahmed pointed out: "There is no guarantee that in struggling for justice we ourselves will be just. We have to hesitate, to temper the strength of our tendencies with doubt; to waver when we are sure, or even because we are sure."[81] When those on the side of equity and justice focus so much energy and labor on disagreements with others also working for equity and justice, rather than on building coalitions to combat destructive and authoritarian movements on the far right, what should philosophers of education do to foster the democratic aims of higher education?

I believe that philosophers of education not only should but are uniquely equipped to contribute centrally to shaping the direction of higher education, serving as a conscience, as apologists for meaningful and just democratic politics, and as partners with other education scholars across disciplines to champion an education system that explicitly nurtures democratic values. This will require an active stance to counteract the decline of truth, which is linked to the general undervaluing of the humanities in academia and in education schools in particular.[82] We need to be advocating for more informed public discussions about knowledge, truth, and what makes for a reasonable perspective versus what is demonstrably false. This focus on truth does not mean I am claiming that we need to be value-free or neutral researchers. That is not possible. But it does mean that I am in favor of systematic inquiry in which researchers and scholars are aware of how values and beliefs affect the inquiry enterprise.[83] We need to build both intellectual and political coalitions toward these goals. I have argued

that a pragmatist view of inquiry might allow us to rethink our understandings about identity and experience, and the democratic aims of inquiry. Democracy is imperfect, but when at its best, I can think of no better way of organizing the university and our social lives in the context of pluralism and disagreement.

Let me end with a story that illustrates the tensions scholars will have to navigate in building coalitions across difference. Writer David Treuer is the child of an Ojibwe mother who grew up on a reservation and a White father who immigrated to the US to escape the Nazis. Treuer grew up caught between two distinct worldviews: his mother's perspective that the US would take any opportunity to harm its marginalized citizens and his father's view that America had saved his life. Treuer explains, "In order to survive, I needed to hold within me two opposing ideas: I needed to believe in my mother's version of things, that America will always try its best to break us down . . . I also needed to hold onto my father's vision that America can . . . nurture and sustain us. This country," Treuer says, "is a terrible country, and this country is not."[84]

Maybe Treuer's story spoke to me because as the child of immigrants myself—a Latina mom and a Holocaust refugee dad—we navigated similar tensions within my family. But I think it also spoke to me because we scholars can learn from the way Treuer explains and reconciles living within the contradictions in his family. We have to learn to live within the university's spaces of conflict and tension and compromise, and within the complex understanding that the university is terrible. And it is not. We have to learn to better navigate the complex intermingling of extremist views that are undermining the university's mission and degrading truth and democracy. And to celebrate what is beautiful and valuable about the truth-seeking university as we work from within to nurture democracy and justice.

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