

Three Notes About Safe Spaces

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Samantha Ha DiMuzio offers an Arendtian reading of the current campus culture wars, with a focus on the tension between calls for safe spaces and demands for free speech.¹ She makes the case for seeing some campus spaces as private, and others as public or hybrid, such that the acceptability of calls for safety is mitigated by the public nature of the specific space in which an exchange takes place.

In this brief response, I focus on what it would mean for a campus, or some spaces within it, to be safe. I ask how safe spaces help protect free speech, and suggest in response to DiMuzio's arguments that the tensions between the notions of safe spaces and free speech is overblown, and that the two might work together not only in practice, as her article demonstrates in its final section, but also in theory.

The promise of safety in the private sphere, particularly one that is located outside the home—in a college dorm, or in an affinity group—is not as complete as an Arendtian account would suggest. Complicating our ability to follow Arendt's neat distinction between public and private spheres are the new connections formed in virtual contexts and particularly through social media. DiMuzio says, "arguments for safe space align with Arendt's notion of the private home, which gives people necessary shelter from the 'merciless glare of the public realm' or in this case, solace from the constant barrage of microaggressions, slights, and discriminatory actions that minoritized students face in educational institutions."²

DiMuzio sees students' identity-based organizations as spaces of solace from the pressures of being constantly observed as a minority member on campus. Clearly such solace is needed, as was evident when a

Black Yale student who dozed off in a common room only to be woken up by the police, who were called by suspecting (White) peers.³ Students are regularly policed for their race, gender identity, religious garb and other identity features. But the demand to create and maintain identity-safe contexts creates its own problems, of which I discuss one theoretical, one political, and one practical concern.

Theoretically: the merciless glare of the public realm is broader than the “barrage of micro-aggressions” that students may face on campus as a result of their immutable traits. The public gaze is also evident in the media attention directed at colleges, turning even small missteps by office holders—from college presidents to classroom teaching assistants—into further evidence of an imagined broad left-wing conspiracy to brainwash students. At Penn, a graduate student proclaimed on social media that in a class for which she was a teaching assistant, she prioritized minority students who wanted to speak; she was subjected to an immense barrage of hatred, and was made into a symbol of the imagined incessant indoctrination that typifies higher education in the minds of its critics.⁴ The public glare of social media, in this case, demonstrates the futility of trying to shield students and other members of the campus community from intentional efforts to portray them as “snowflakes” or as menacing anti-American forces, or both at once.

This gaze, which is often weaponized by ideological interests, undercuts the effort to find safety in private or semi-private domains, and can affect personal behavior and interpersonal relations in learning and living spaces. Pressure is exerted on students and instructors through social media, or on campus in response to social media posts, or sometimes by the reporting of private behavior as well as classroom exchanges on social media. Given the low bar and low cost of expression on social media, students are exposed to significant amounts of casual talk from

their instructors. When they find out for example that these instructors harbor negative views on some minority groups—as was the case with a well-liked statistics instructor at Harvard, who expressed bigoted views on social media—the perception and the relationship can easily sour.⁵ Thus, virtual connections permeate private and semi-private spaces, reorganizing the possibilities and assumptions we can make about privacy, and creating new forms of conversation. Those can be productive but can also become treacherous and detrimental to learning, to freedom of speech, and to inclusion.

Politically: there is concern about using private spaces to address exclusion and marginalization. Many Republican-controlled state legislatures are proposing and passing laws that prohibit such contexts in public universities. Various recent bills should raise concerns about both safe spaces and freedom of expression: they bar public schools and colleges from allowing classes, activities, or events that promote “division between, resentment of, or social justice for” any “race, gender, political affiliation, or social class” thus limiting the academic freedom of instructors and students to discuss issues of concern; some of the bills further demand that “[n]o events or activities should group students based on ethnicity, race, religion, gender, or social class.”⁶ Some of these bills would prohibit teaching classes on gender or race, others would prohibit students from organizing or participating in events and groups that provide them with safe and welcoming environments, such as La Casa Latina, the African American Cultural Center, the Catholic and the Muslim students organization, Hillel, or Women in Engineering. The public sphere, with its polarizing forces, is pushing against the possibility of marking and maintaining an affirming identity-based context on public campuses (which serve close to 80% of American students), making the retreat to private quarters into a luxury many cannot afford.⁷

Practically speaking: the argument for identity-based groups as private safe spaces places responsibility on these safe havens, which while important, do not in themselves address the pressing demands for safety on campus. The very idea of a safe haven, or the need for solace, recognizes that the clamor of diverse views and competing arguments in classrooms, dorms, labs, civic groups, and other diverse and public spaces on campus, can be not only exhausting but also diminishing for some members of the campus. The need for safety is not fulfilled by being able to escape into an affinity group, although that is surely a much-needed space in many cases. Safety is important in the classroom as well, which DiMuzio argued for as a matter of structural justice, and I would like to additionally justify as a matter of fulfilling the mission of truth-seeking that is central to the work on campus. DiMuzio abandons the discussion of safety in favor of focusing on the private contemplation and public discussion that, when alternated in class, can together provide for a thoughtful exchange. This depiction seems to denote for her a form of safety. Clearly, the tension between free speech and a sense of belonging in the classroom is at the core of the current campus wars. Pedagogical moves, such as taking breaks to cool down a heated discussion about a controversial topic, and inviting more classmates to join into a back-and-forth between two opposing students, are important to consider and expand.

As I have argued in *Free Speech on Campus*, classrooms require clear norms and boundaries for speech, ones that communicate a commitment to truth-seeking and to inclusivity, even when it seems that the two might pull in opposite directions.⁸ The goal of inclusive freedom on college campuses is to reduce some of these tensions by framing and pursuing the two missions as mutually reinforcing rather than competing: to include more people and more perspectives in a conversation allows for it to be further enriched, and serves both the intellectual and the

ethical goals of the classroom.

Intellectual rigor is served by including more voices, as is clear in DiMuzio's example of a discussion in class about police brutality against Black people. I worry to some extent about students in the class who were less inclined to join or be engaged in this discussion, which evidently was outside of the lesson plan and the syllabus; without further information about the course, it is hard to say if suspending the planned material serves everyone's learning goals, and whether it can engage all or most of the students in a productive discussion. Assuming that it relates to the learning goals of the course in question, and noting the instructor's pedagogical acuity in navigating this difficult terrain, the example demonstrates the interweaving of public discussion and private inward observance. It also illustrates the possibility of abiding by the demands of free speech and inclusivity at the same time, and demonstrates how to defuse not only the tension between students but also the perception that two concepts and goals cannot be fulfilled together in both public and private spaces on campus. A framework of inclusive freedom, and the pedagogical tools that enable it, can provide a respite to weary campuses from the constant din of the culture wars, promoting a safe space in which both free speech and inclusion can be possible, and serving the university's mission to advance knowledge through embracing diversity and inclusion.

1 Samantha Ha DiMuzio, "Safe Space and Free Speech: Preparation for Public Life in the 'In-Between,'" *Philosophy of Education* 77, no. 3 (2021).

2 Ha, "Safe Space and Free Speech."

3 Christina Caron, "A Black Yale Student Was Napping, and a White Student Called the Police," *The New York Times*, May 9, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/09/nyregion/yale-black-student-nap.html>.

4 Alex Rabin, "A Penn TA Is under National Scrutiny for Using Progressive

Stacking. But What Is It?” *The Daily Pennsylvanian*, October 28, 2017, <https://www.thedp.com/article/2017/10/a-penn-ta-is-under-national-scrutiny-for-using-progressive-stacking-but-what-is-it>.

5 Hannah J. Martinez, “Harvard Undergraduate Council Endorses Removal of Gov 50 Instructor,” *The Harvard Crimson*, October 28, 2020, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2020/9/28/UC-endorses-gov-preceptor-removal/>.

6 “Map Where Critical Race Theory is Under Attack,” *Education Week*, June 11, 2021 (updated October 15, 2021), <https://www-edweek-org.proxy.library.upenn.edu/policy-politics/map-where-critical-race-theory-is-under-attack/2021/06>; Mark Lowery, “To Prohibit Offering Courses, Events, and Activities That Isolate Students Based On Characteristics Within Programs of Instructions; and to Adjust Funding for Schools That Offer These Prohibited Courses, Events, and Activities,” Pub. L. No. HB1218 (2021), <https://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/Bills/Detail?pid=HB1218&chamber=-House&ddBienniumSession=2021%2F2021R>.

7 Melanie Hanson, “College Enrollment & Student Demographic Statistics,” *Education Data Initiative*, July 8, 2021, <https://educationdata.org/college-enrollment-statistics>.

8 Sigal R. Ben-Porath, *Free Speech on Campus* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).