

What Does the Next Semester Hold for AEN?

Next semester promises to be a time of serious challenges for colleges and universities trying to keep the coronavirus off their campuses. It will also begin the Age of Atonement for America's sins that have imprinted continual shame on a nation where slavery and bigotry were once embedded in law. There is, then, both a sickness and a specter haunting the academy, and the scholarly study of Israel and of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict may, without intervention, be one of its victims.

Strategies for the re-opening of colleges and universities emerged only after difficult, if not tortuous calculations weighing health imperatives against budgetary constraints. At best, the hybrid model of in-person/remote instruction offers an attenuated campus experience; at worst, the university could become the site of a raging pandemic or suffer a disastrous decline in enrollment. Perhaps, because the apocalyptic viral threat hovers, there are few questions raised about whether this educational model diminishes the academic rigor that has generated so much imaginative thinking and creativity in America's universities. Can the intense and unfettered intellectual exchanges the university setting enabled go on? Are universities still committed to the pursuit of knowledge as a core principle and priority?

That last question has become more urgent as the brutal police killing of George Floyd triggered significant demonstrations accompanied by endorsements for Black Lives Matter rhetoric, indicting America for the perpetuation of what has been raised to the level of a self-evident truth--structural racism. Like corporations and civic associations, universities have responded by pledging allegiance to the anti-racism cause and seemingly to the Black Lives Matter curated reading lists, workshops, and lectures critical to its implementation.

Black Lives Matter has channeled discontent into what some claim is a revolutionary energy embracing a radical vision for the future. “The Left Is Remaking the World” proclaimed a recent headline in a *New York Times* essay.¹ Where its repeated cry to “defund the police” will take America is uncertain, but where the winds of change are trying to blow the nation’s campuses is no mystery.

Even before the virus wreaked its global havoc, Lee Bollinger promised that Columbia University would “bridge the world of scholarly endeavor with that of action and implementation.”² Not to be outdone, Wesleyan’s President, Michael Roth, has recently called on universities to ‘do more’ than simply support ‘free inquiry and expression in the abstract’.³ A binary philosophical view of racism appears to have taken hold of hundreds of faculty and students at Princeton who have advanced a proposal that includes monitoring classes and research to ensure compliance with newly developed norms for long overdue social change. One critical letter—not disputing that racism is a pressing problem but contesting how best to deal with it—triggered the very kind of virtual civil war the distinguished member of the faculty feared if the proposal became academic orthodoxy.⁴ It also brought him public condemnation from Princeton’s President who instantly transformed someone of international scholarly renown into the campus’s latest public enemy.⁵ Consider that the President took time out to give official momentum to a chorus of outrage descending on the professor while engaged in weighty reflections on matters of life and death for Princeton, as an institution and as a community. While calls for political activity coincide, in some instances, with statements supportive of

¹ Amna A. Akbar, “[The Left Is Remaking the World](#),” *The New York Times*, July 11, 2020.

² “[Announcing the Columbia Climate School](#),” July 10, 2020.

³ Michael S. Roth, ‘[Higher Education Needs Antifascism Now](#),’ July 2, 2020.

⁴ Joshua T. Katz, “[A Declaration of Independence by a Princeton Professor](#)” *Quillette*, July 8, 2020.

⁵ “[The Speech Police at Princeton](#),” *Wall Street Journal*, July 14, 2020.

intellectual diversity, the currents for making amends in the progressive stream may be difficult to hold back particularly if they are viewed as the campus common ground.⁶

That those of us seeking to preserve the academic study of any topic, let alone of Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict have reasons to worry is saying nothing new, but that we should prepare for more assaults and fewer defenses is worth pondering. Atonement for structural racism unleashed to purify the universities now has a sacred status notwithstanding the core academic principles tossed aside or the lives upended in the course of its consecration. Will university leaders be willing to oppose Twitter mobs and hashtags that go ‘viral’ in attacking those who resist ‘taking the knee’ to these commandments or will they succumb to them as the option least likely to run afoul of an increasingly mandatory discourse? Because so many of us are confined to an online reality where digital remarks can deliver validation akin to a feel-good dopamine hit, we have to be ever vigilant not to surrender values or allow them to bend beyond recognition.

The so-called moral clarity on racism has already drawn in groups like Students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace that have long advocated for boycotting Israeli institutions of higher learning and for not allowing students to receive credit for study abroad programs at Israeli universities. Given the viral spread, programs for study abroad are likely to be suspended temporarily, but a pause will probably not deter groups from attempting to prevent the resumption of such ties once the health emergency is lifted.

SEARCH FOR ALLIES:

⁶ Michael S. Roth, “[Will The Pandemic Blow Up College in America?](#)” *Politico*

This is the pivotal moment to search for Allies, for people who believe that the problems associated with structural racism should be addressed without dismissing the core principles of the academy that protect the integrity of research and the excellence of teaching. Administrative support for subordinating these values to an anti-racism agenda using disciplinary tools to eliminate not only racial bigotry but also what is labeled white patriarchy could dramatically transform universities from places of dynamic discourse and fresh perspectives to institutions drawing boundaries over word and deed. Discussions of anti-racist programs are inevitably debating the distribution of power. The possibility of introducing a new locus of power in the academy ought to generate incentives for participation from faculty who normally avoid campus disputes. Because if this revolution finds its way on to the campus, it endangers the very meaning of the scholarly mission.

If lockdowns and quarantines taught us anything, it is the importance of nurturing the mind and imagination. Even our ‘selfie’ age needs literature to understand how to live simultaneously preoccupied with daily chores while acknowledging the dark pulsing terror of one or another global crisis. We live in a confessional age that prizes vulnerability and truth telling when it hurts—especially if it hurts. Perhaps, this is one reason why the relevance of the humanities has only been intensified in these past months when we have been forced to keep at a safe distance from contagion. We cannot touch; we cannot join together to celebrate milestones or to mourn losses. COVID-19 is as much a social as physical disease. Judging by online orders, people are looking for books that convey the suffering accompanying plagues. At a time when there are many forms of home entertainment available, people have been drawn more to classical studies that explain what it means to confront a force that can only be contained by practices of

isolation totally at odds with human instincts. When it is impossible to touch, it is more important than ever to imagine.

American universities are heirs to an important intellectual tradition and to core principles that place a high value on the life of the mind and on a free exchange of ideas. The allure of the American campus to students from all over the world comes primarily because it has always existed as free a place for thought and speech on this planet. International students are drawn to American universities by the idea of becoming something new, trying out new roles and identities perhaps only temporarily and briefly but long enough to discover the connections they have with others who carry and/or observe quite different customs and traditions. The promise of examining the individual life is not escape; it is revelation. American universities must continue to strengthen an educational culture of dissent where moral ideas are debated freely and where no one is shamed for holding views contrary to the mainstream.

A genuinely scholarly community promotes the energetic exchange of ideas for the purpose of nurturing new voices. For what is it we scholars are trying to accomplish? Surely our combined academic progress is measured not only in the discovery of answers but also in the production of the next set of questions to probe and in the creation of a new generation prepared to offer its answers. This collaborative effort is strengthened when we can come together to exchange ideas and information. We learn from listening to one another. The people backing the emergent rhetoric are proposing a sweeping theory of what sorts of speech threaten ‘harm,’ intending to impose a dictionary not only of acceptable terms but also and more ominously, of rules structuring how these terms are to be used. That such a move is likely to narrow the range of topics for research is as obvious as the chilling effect it will cast on a new generation who might, under different circumstances, consider a career in the academy.

Those of us writing about Israel and the Middle East Conflict are something of expert witnesses on how a radically and thoroughly a hegemonic lexicon can degrade scholarship. Starting with a presumption of complexity challenges the so-called intersectional rubric where diverse histories and cultures are force-fed into a binary narrative dividing the globe into oppressor/oppressed. That the vocabulary coming from this binary view has achieved dominance in the academic study of Israel and of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict has resulted in placing emphasis on purported feelings over hard evidence and in pigeonholing events into moral absolutes that appeal to emotions or to a larger ideological agenda. Fitting developments into a predetermined narrative undermines the demanding work and mission of scholars in uncovering new knowledge, a critical shortcoming in trying to explain the reasons for the persistence of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. A binary perspective on almost any controversial topic has to sound a discordant note to gender theorists. A shared opposition to such thinking may be able to draw those who teach and write about gender into an academic alliance on curricular matters and the importance of unfettered research.

WHAT MUST BE DONE AND WHAT CAN BE DONE BY THE ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT NETWORK

It is often forgotten that although COVID-19 taketh, COVID-19 also giveth. Confinement has substantially expanded the number of webinars offered by think tanks and policy programs that deal with Israel and the Middle East and has widened access to them. The internet connects people who work and write beyond the campus perimeter, and it reaches all parts of the world. The web can thus provide the intellectual space for broadening knowledge and for allowing debate without personal abuse. There are now multiple possibilities for reaching students, faculty, and administrators through zoom presentations, and AEN should take

the initiative to provide them. A rich selection of Israeli cultural programs can deepen fluency in Hebrew and enrich knowledge of the creative arts in the country. AEN should take advantage of the hybrid-educational model not only to offer webinars to faculty and staff on controversial and on widely misunderstood topics like Zionism the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, Colonialism in the Middle East, Israeli Politics and Palestinian Politics, but also explore whether students can take courses for credit via Zoom at other campuses. Getting all of this off the ground will take time and resources, but the need for a humane, tolerant, provocative community where people listen to one another and learn from the exchange of views is more urgent than ever.

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