Safe Space and Free Speech: Preparation for Public Life in the "In-Between"

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The university has long been presumed to play a democratic role in our society by preparing students for public life. One only needs to peruse through a few college websites to encounter sweeping democratic proclamations about preparing future leaders, local and global agents of change, and engaged citizens. One rationale could be that college students, usually eighteen-to-twenty-two-year-olds, represent our society's newest democratic participants, yet they are still on the precipice of being ready to take up their public roles. The college experience therefore readies students for their full emergence as political agents. Part of the process has long seemed to be gathering students from all different backgrounds, experiences, and social locations to dialogue around diverse perspectives and ideas. As Amy Gutmann describes, democratic education must provide meaningful opportunities for students to deliberate amongst competing conceptions of "the good life" and "the good society."[1] In other words, preparation for public life is contingent on dialogue and free speech.

However, a string of heated controversies has recently erupted on college campuses, questioning the viability of free speech as a method of preparing students for public life. At Wesleyan University, for example, students of color responded to a critique of the Black Lives Matter movement in their campus newspaper by targeting free speech: "We do not have the time, nor luxury, to be caught up in this smokescreen of free speech. . . . Free speech is not a one-dimensional highway—white, cisgender, heterosexual men are not the only ones with the right to free speech."[2] This example typifies the animating agenda of the "safe space" movement, which centralizes the experiences of nondominant students in order to stress the need for discursive arenas purified of the most toxic elements of public discourse. The arguments for safe space are motivated by democratic aims as well—public preparation requires an environment where minoritized students can engage in dialogue without being subject to noxious

speech that casts them as less than full participants.

This dynamic illustrates the central tensions of a polarizing debate in higher education, where some reassert the necessity of free speech to democratic education, while others question the extent to which free speech itself impedes upon democratic education. This controversy raises some central questions worth exploring: What role should safe spaces and free speech play in the preparation of students for public life? If democratic institutions, like colleges and universities, value free speech and robust deliberation, how can they prepare students for public life in a space that restricts speech? Relatedly, if institutions of higher education seek to prepare *all* students for public life, how can they ensure that minoritized students are not disproportionately excluded from democratic engagements? Drawing mainly from Hannah Arendt's distinctions of private and public, this essay parses through the tensions rife within the safe space vs. free speech debate in order to better discern how our colleges and universities can best prepare all students for public life.

ARENDTIAN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SPHERES

Arendt's magnum opus, *The Human Condition*, provides a broad account of humanity, chronicling the historical human arc into modernity while also sketching a rich description of human (inter)action and flourishing.[3] Her account revolves around two closely related distinctions. She distinguishes three essential modalities of activity—labor, work, and action—and she situates these in two realms, the public and the private.

Labor refers to the powerfully motivated, urgent activities that maintain life, including tasks such as eating, sleeping, and cleaning. The "monotonous performance of daily repeated chores" exists at the bottom of Arendt's hierarchy, despite its essential function.[4] In contrast, the activity of work holds higher value because it creates a sense of durability that can transcend the life of its human maker. Work, or fabrication, describes the human ability to create durable objects which constructs the "objectivity" of the world.[5] This character of worldliness serves as a prerequisite to action, creating the ultimate in-between amongst human actors: "Essentially a world of things is between those who have it in

common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time."[6] In this shared world, Arendt reserves the highest regard for action, the human ability to enact speech and deeds within a web of relationships with others. This interaction is made possible by the basic condition of human plurality, which simultaneously recognizes all people as equals while also acknowledging the distinctiveness of each person based on their experience and social location.[7]

The private realm, associated with the household and the family, is characterized by the human activity of labor.[8] The private domain is aptly characterized by privacy, which is as necessary to sustain life as labor. The four walls of the home "enclose a secure place, without which no living thing can survive. . . . wherever [human life] is consistently exposed to the world without the protection of privacy and security, its vital quality is destroyed."[9] House-hold life provides both physical and metaphorical enclosure for each person, which, in turn, enables that person to enter into the realm of human freedom and possibility: the public sphere. The public domain represents individuals' opportunity to enter into the unpredictable web of relationships created by public actors. Those who are willing to risk leaving the comforts of their private home are regarded as equals in the public scene. The world—a product of hu-man work—brings together a community of equals in a melding of "sameness in utter diversity" that gives rise to human action.[10] For Arendt, the ability to participate in public life—to recognize and be recognized for your speech and actions—represents the epitome of human flourishing.

Though Arendt does not explicitly describe the temporal locations of the private and the public sphere in *The Human Condition*, I echo Chris Higgins when I claim that Arendt's interpretation of education provides a sense of their temporality.[11] In her view, education is the means by which adults, as public agents, assume responsibility for the world by shielding the revolutionary capacity within each student from the full "implacable, bright light" of a flawed and declining world.[12] Educators do so by gradually exposing students (in a developmentally appropriate manner) to the world that they will eventually inherit and have the opportunity to renew, upon their debut as political actors in public life. Higgins

summarizes Arendt's distinctive interpretation of education as a "graduated spectrum" of world exposure:

> The school sits on a spectrum of increasing exposure to the emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal demands of the world, a spectrum between childhood home, which already represents a partial exposure to the world, and adult independence, which still requires powerful forms of insulation. . . . The school should not then be conceived as existing in an interstitial space, neither public nor private, but as a space that allows the right amount of the world to filter into its semi-sheltered confines.[13]

This interpretation of education as occupying a transitory space helps us to better visualize an Arendtian progression of time. The arc of education, defined as K-16, serves to shift students from a primarily private state into a predominantly public one over time. One implication from this interpretation is that during the period of education itself, there is a blend of both private and public elements. The temporal progression from Arendtian privacy to publicity has implications for the safe space vs. free speech controversy, as taken-up in the next section.

PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SPACES ON THE COLLEGE CAMPUS

Drawing from Arendt, I now offer a recasting of the safe space vs. free speech debate using her terminology and temporal sequence. First, I claim, and illustrate in the subsequent sections, that the arguments for safe space align with Arendtian privacy, while the arguments for free speech align with her articulation of the public sphere. This conclusion seems to resolve some of the tensions: safe spaces (and the private sphere) should reign supreme in early development, while free speech (and the public sphere) should dominate in later adult stages of life. However, when we cast the safe space controversy on this temporal progression, we run into an alternative dilemma. The safe space vs. free speech debate implicates university life, which happens to be situated at a middle mo-

ment of development when *both* private and public elements conjoin. When we look at the college campus using this logic, it is already possible to see that both private and public elements exist. Some spaces, such as affinity spaces or college dormitories, veer closer to private while other spaces, such as the campus quad or dining hall, align more closely with publicity. However, I conclude this section by discussing the college classroom, which, like the university writ large, includes a delicate balance of both private and public.

ON ARENDTIAN PRIVACY

Arguments for safe spaces refer to the creation of physical or metaphorical spaces where students can fully express themselves without fear of ridicule or violence as a result of their identity. Safe space advocates will be the first to tell you that these characteristics do not currently define our educational institutions or the state of our world. As a microcosm of society, the university is subject to all of the same "social norms, structures, and processes that differentially confer power and privilege upon individuals based on their social location."[14] Therefore, students with nondominant identities along lines of race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, among others, are subject to greater risk of harm than other more privileged students. A demand for safe spaces therefore can be construed as a recognition of the precarity that can come to minoritized students in the university and as a simultaneous call to action: we recognize the lack of safety and will strive to create spaces where all students, including marginalized students, can thrive.

However, to what extent can "safety" for nondominant students be promised? As some educators describe, minoritized students "may, in fact, react with incredulity to the very notion of safety, for history and experience has demonstrated clearly to them that to name their oppression, and the perpetrators thereof, is a profoundly unsafe activity, particularly if they are impassioned."[15] Therefore, the college campus might never be fully safe for our most vulnerable students—the dominant culture of oppression is systemically entrenched, and therefore its subsequent undoing is not a task that educators can burden alone. However, this is not to say that educators should abandon supporting students in their deserved spaces of belonging. Instead, a call for safe spaces is a demand,

to some degree, for Arendtian privacy on the college campus.

Arendt's description of the private domain is generally understood to be temporally located during early development, providing children "who by nature require the security of concealment in order to mature undisturbed."[16] However, Michael Oakeshott helps us to discern that the necessity for protection should also be extrapolated to implicate undergraduates, whose developmental status indicates that "he is neither a child nor an adult, but stands in a strange middle moment of life when he knows only enough of himself and of the world which passes before him to wish to know more."[17] In this middle developmental moment, 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."[18] Or, in this case, solace from the constant barrage of microaggressions, slights, and discriminatory actions that minoritized students face in educational institutions.

If we look closely, college campuses actually already support these semi-private refuges. Consider the role of affinity spaces, including cultural houses, women's centers, religious sanctuaries, or LGBTQ centers that play critical roles in supporting students and building community. Though these spaces cannot guarantee safety, they approximate it in their efforts toward building community amongst students who share important aspects of their identity. The goal of these kinds of safe havens is to foster a sense of belonging and comfort for students with non-mainstream identities. Similar to the necessity of the Arendtian private home, these identity sanctuaries provide students with the retreat needed to adequately participate in the risky, public engagements that comprise the rest of the college campus.

ON ARENDTIAN PUBLICITY

Though a commitment to free speech is not new on college campuses, the rise of "safe space" rhetoric in recent years has motivated scholars, educators, interest groups, and concerned citizens to reassert the importance of free expression to the academic enterprise and democratic society. There are at least two factions of free speech advocates. One is more extreme in that they

view the safe space movement as centrally motivated by a radical-left agenda in higher education, which marginalizes more conservative ideologies.[19] In this case, it is difficult to deny the critique lambasting the free speech movement as an alt-right backlash against perceived liberal bias.

However, a second faction sees the problem of safe space as a well-intentioned, if misguided, effort toward inclusion of minoritized students. They agree with safe space advocates about the necessity of engaging non-mainstream students in campus and classroom dialogue, for a commitment to free speech is reliant on *all* students having the chance to freely express their ideas and opinions. The difference, however, is that these free speech commentators see the creation of safe spaces as perpetuating the problem. As UC-Irvine chancellor Howard Gillman states:

> Universities support free speech and condemn censorship . . . to expose hateful or dangerous ideas that, if never engaged or rebutted, would gain traction in the darker corners of our society. Hate speech is like mold: Its enemies are bright light and fresh air.[20]

This line of thinking illuminates an underlying assumption undergirding the free speech view: curtailing bigoted speech could exacerbate underlying prejudices, which further harms disempowered students. Instead, a commitment to free speech ensures that harmful opinions are exposed, thereby giving individuals the opportunity to confront one other using thoughtful, if heated, dialogue. This faction sees free speech as the means by which minoritized students change the conditions of their disempowerment, rather than be infantilized via false claims for safety.

It is this second line of reasoning from which I derive my Arendtian assessment of publicity. Free speech advocates imagine the college campus and the greater democratic society to be a fully realized public sphere, where each individual is viewed as a political equal. Each person's voice has just as much power as anyone else's—the voice of a campus speaker who shares a dis-

criminatory opinion is equally as powerful as the voice of a dissenting student protester. Therefore, their favored solution is unrestricted free expression, such that dialogue serves as the vehicle for determining which view prevails. In this vein, I argue that free speech advocates assume that the college campus (and society) exists within the Arendtian public domain, in its most idealized form.[21]

Free speech advocates contend that the college campus offers each student the ability to bring their distinctiveness to the metaphorical "table," where they encounter a community of others in their full plurality and can engage in Arendtian action. In fact, if we look at the college campus today, we see many spaces that already fit this notion of the public: dining halls, the campus quad, various clubs and extracurricular societies, among others.[22] These spaces are characterized by minimal restrictions on students' words, actions, or associations, exposing them to the full extent of public risks and possibilities.

THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM AS A HYBRID SPACE

In the event that I have convinced you of three things thus far: 1) safe space arguments align with a call for privacy, while free speech arguments call for publicity; 2) the university, situated in-between the private and public, should therefore include a blend of both; and 3) the university already does blend elements of private and public to some extent, I now draw attention to one campus space that has yet to be accounted for: the college classroom. Where does the quintessential educational space on the college campus fit into this Arendtian model? Does it veer toward private or public, as its other spatial counterparts do? I argue that the classroom, as a distinctive learning space, needs to achieve a tricky balance of **both** private and public elements.[23]

Educators might rightly ask, what does this balance look like? I turn to a vignette described by feminist scholar and educator Jeannie Ludlow to illustrate what this balance looks like in practice. For context, the following example describes an interaction in a cultural diversity undergraduate course, concerning violent events in the Bronx where Amadou Diallo, a Black man, was killed by four White police officers. This conflict was foregrounded amidst national protests of police violence against Black lives in Cincinnati, a situation

that closely mirrors the contemporary movement for racial justice today in re-
sponse to the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, among countless
others. Below, I quote Ludlow at length in order to capture the essence of her
classroom discussion about the issue of police violence:

> One white student, the son of a police officer, argued
> passionately for the difficulty of the job. "If you are a cop,"
> he said, "you never know when you are going to find yourself
> in danger." "Well, if you are a young Black man in the city,"
> countered the first student, "you do know when you will find
> yourself in danger—whenever there is a cop around." Several
> white students rolled their eyes and shook their heads. Other
> students in the class wanted into the discussion, but the verbal
> space was filled by these two students' disagreement. In order to
> allow the argument to cool down and to provide opportunities
> for other students' voices, I spoke up. "Everybody, take out a
> sheet of paper and write down two things you want to say or
> ask about this conversation." The room was silent as students
> scribbled their ideas on paper. When, after a few minutes, I
> asked, "who wants to go first?" students volunteered to read
> from their papers. . . . We were at the end of the session. "You
> have to get ready to go," I said. "We are now one day behind.
> What do you want to do?" The student whose father was a
> police officer said, "we need to talk about this more. We don't
> know enough." Others agreed. We decided to suspend the
> course syllabus for the next two class periods.[24]

What Ludlow's vignette illustrates is the creation of at least two moments
of contemplative privacy, embedded within a near wholly public environment:
the first being a pedagogical pause in conversation and the second being a collec-
tive hiatus of the course syllabus. At the start of this classroom interaction, we
witness the rise of heated public dialogue between the two students who come
to the shared topic of concern—police violence—from each their own social

locations. The disagreement between the two students stimulates others in the classroom to voice their opinion on the topic, invoking Arendt's metaphor of the "table" as the in-between: police violence, an issue of community concern, relates and separates participants at the same time. However, it is clear that the discussion quickly escalates, and it is at this point that Ludlow intervenes with a pedagogical strategy. She intentionally *pauses* the conversation and asks each student to quietly engage in introspection and reflective journaling. In doing so, Ludlow's teaching approach invokes the importance of Arendtian privacy in the college classroom.

This brief moment of contemplation creates the conditions of a private home, where students are able to retreat, for a moment, from the pressures of the near-public classroom and from engagement in Arendtian action. As David Blacker elaborates, a pause of this type provides students with momentary refuge in order to "catch up" with themselves and engage in "some method by which [they] might render the ends of [their] activities graspable, in both the sense of understanding them and also (potentially) manipulating them or otherwise altering them."[25] Though Blacker refers to Arendtian privacy by a different term—Cartesian inwardness—he shares a similar sentiment: in order to adequately engage with others in rich, dialogic deliberation (especially of the polarizing variety), students must be given opportunities to turn inward and decide for themselves what they believe.

Though there are certainly other pedagogical strategies that could create this experience of momentary privacy, Ludlow's chosen intervention is particularly relevant, as it offers a second kind of pause—a suspension of the course syllabus.[26] Here, she recognizes that the duration of private introspection needed is contingent on circumstance. Therefore, she does not require that students make their "final" decision about police violence at the end of that class period. Instead, she provides students with the opportunity to prolong their reflection, with permission to explore their own notions about the world without the pressure to immediately commit to new ones, as the student at the end of the vignette chooses: "We need to talk about this more. We don't know enough." I see this attention to privacy in the classroom as mimicking the gift

that Oakeshott associates with university life:

> Here is an opportunity to put aside the hot allegiances
> of youth without the necessity of at once acquiring new loyal-
> ties to take their place. Here is a break in the tyrannical course
> of irreparable events; a period in which to look round upon
> the world and upon oneself without the sense of an enemy
> at one's back or the insistent pressure to make up one's mind;
> a moment in which to taste the mystery without the necessity
> of at once seeking a solution.[27]

In both cases, Ludlow uses her pedagogical expertise to create a delib-
erately hybridized classroom, with both private moments of introspection and
public dimensions of dialogue.

If the classroom were to abide only by the rules of the public, this
conversation about police violence could easily end in further harm, severed
relationships, or political gridlock (as we have repeatedly witnessed). However,
one of the wonders of the classroom and the classroom educator is the dis-
tinctive attention to moments of privacy as well. Educators, like Ludlow, are
able to enact pedagogical strategies to foster moments of reflection, refuge,
and retreat for their students, which, in turn, provide them with the security
necessary to sustain the rich, contentious dialogue characteristic of Arendtian
"action" and ultimately, robust democratic participation. The classroom, as a
hybrid space, therefore, heeds simultaneous commitments to both private and
public elements of learning.

But I urge us to remember that the classroom is not the only space
poised in the "in-between"—the entirety of college education occupies this
deliberate, middle space. This conclusion implies that the dual attention to
both private and public applies to spaces beyond the classroom as well. This
means that semi-private affinity spaces should also work towards incorporation
of public elements. Perhaps cultural centers should maximize their role in or-
ganizing "counterpublics," collectives who leverage their shared marginalized

identities to produce counter-discourses and reimagine a more inclusionary public sphere.[28] Likewise, public-leaning spaces, like the campus quad, should also pay better homage to their private dimensions. For example, controversial campus speakers should be coupled with opportunities to process the event in private, forums to collectively unpack the consequences for broader campus culture, and discussions to inform decision making in future invitations. It is through this dual attention to both private and public aspects of learning, reckoning respectively with its implications for safe space and free speech, that college students can be best prepared for their full debut into public life.

Acknowledgements

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1 Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987/1999), 44.

2 Wesleying, "An Open Letter to the Wesleyan Community from Students of Color," *Wesleying*, September 2015, http://wesleying.org/2015/09/25/an-open-letter-to-the-wesleyan-community-from-students-of-color/.

3 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

4 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 100.

5 Arendt, 137.

6 Arendt, 52.

7 Arendt, 178.

8 Arendt, 45.

9 Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Education" (1961), trans. D. Lindley, in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin

USA, 1977), 186.

10 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 57.

11 Chris Higgins, *The Good Life of Teaching: An Ethics of Professional Practice* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

12 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 51.

13 Higgins, *The Good Life of Teaching*, 226.

14 Betty J. Barrett, "Is 'Safety' Dangerous? A Critical Examination of the Classroom as Safe Space," *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 1, no. 1 (2010): 1-14.

15 Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens, "From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces," in *The Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections from Social Justice Educators*, ed. Lisa M. Landreman (Sterling: Stylus Publishing, 2013), 140.

16 Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," 188.

17 Michael Oakeshott, "The Idea of a University," in *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education*, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 100.

18 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 51.

19 The essays included in Tom Slater's anthology epitomize this view by con-flating free speech with the expression of exclusively right-wing views, such as pro-life perspectives and denials of white supremacy or structural margin-alization. Tom Slater, *Unsafe Space: The Crisis of Free Speech on Campus* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016).

20 Howard Gillman, "Bigots at the Gate: Universities Shouldn't Duck the Fight Against White Nationalism," *Los Angeles Times*, December 20, 2016, https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-gillman-campus-white-su-premacy-20161220-story.html.

21 A significant critique asks free speech advocates whether today's version of the public sphere actually resembles Arendt's idealized description of the common world. Many critics argue that the world *as it is* aligns more with Aaron Schutz's characterization of the "power public," characterized by fraught power dynamics and conflicts over resources; Aaron Schutz, "Power and Trust in the Public Realm: John Dewey, Saul Alinsky, and the Limits of Progressive Democratic Education," *Educational Theory* 61, no. 4 (2011): 497.

22 Sigal Ben-Porath's book, *Free Speech on Campus* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), dedicates an entire chapter to free speech on "the quad."

23 At face-value, this spatial distinction seems to mirror John Palfrey, who articulated a need for both "safe" (i.e., characterized by protection from prosecution and harm) and "brave" (i.e., characterized by uncomfortable dialogue that requires bravery) spaces on college campuses. Though we share a vision of the university as a space where safe space and free speech coexist, my account diverges from Palfrey regarding the classroom. I see the classroom as necessarily hybrid, including both private (safe) and public (free speech) elements, while he contends that it is only one: a brave space characterized by free speech. John Palfrey, *Safe Spaces, Brave Spaces: Diversity and Free Expression in Education* (Cambridge: MIT Press Open, 2017).

24 Jeannie Ludlow, "From Safe Space to Contested Space in the Feminist Classroom," *Transformations* 15, no. 1 (2004): 46.

25 David Blacker, *Democratic Education Stretched Thin: How Complexity Challenges a Liberal Ideal* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 127.

26 Examples include the use of affinity reflection groups, meditative thought exercises, or private journaling.

27 Oakeshott, "The Idea of a University," 101.

28 Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 56–80, https://doi.org/10.2307/466240.