When Projects of Critique Are Complicit with the Object of Their Critique: Enabling Whose Education?

Barbara Applebaum
Syracuse University

Megan Boler’s provocative essay titled, “All Speech is Not Free: Towards an Affirmative Action Pedagogy,”1 has become somewhat of a classic in foundations of education courses. As a critique of the ideal of democratic dialogue in progressive education, Boler’s essay sparked an ongoing discussion that continues to uncover the complex role that dialogue plays in education. Boler has additionally edited a collection of critical essays that take up various aspects of her main argument.2

Affirmative action pedagogy, according to Boler, “ensures critical analysis within higher education classrooms of any expression of racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, sexism, ableism, and classism.”3 It was, however, Boler’s contention that the objective of affirmative action pedagogy is to “bear witness to marginalized voices in our classroom even at the minor cost of limiting dominant voices” that triggered a contested but constructive exchange of ideas.4

Among the various forms that affirmative action pedagogy can take, Boler explores a “let all speech fly” approach and a “constrain speech approach.” Students, according to the former approach, are made accountable for their speech in the sense that others will challenge any “ignorant expressions rooted in privilege.”5 The latter approach, and the more obvious manifestation of silencing “even at the cost of,” involves constraining such expressions in the hopes that marginalized voices will be privileged. The latter approach is a radical challenge to the liberal belief that no student should be silenced in the classroom.

Although Boler’s critics challenge the ideal of dialogue itself, much of the discussion troubles the call to limit dominant voices. Rather than arising from educational theorists on the Right, these stimulating critiques arose from a variety of progressive educational thinkers on the Left. In this essay I distinguish between two strands of arguments — the Butlerians and the Pragmatists — that both reject speech restrictions in higher education and I tease out their different underlying concerns. Borrowing from a point made by Sara Ahmed in her examination of critical whiteness studies,6 I argue that the Butlerians are not only interested in the pedagogical pragmatics of speech codes but are also concerned with “how progressive projects of critiques can be complicit with the object of critique.” Then, given Boler’s more recent acknowledgment of the tremendous risks of censorship, especially in the post 9/11 context where speech restrictions backfire and silence dissent, and in which she reluctantly accepts the “’damned if you do or don’t’ bind of democracy,”7 I ask, To silence or not to silence: Is that the (only) question?

I conclude by arguing that an exclusive focus on the pragmatic question ends up recentering white students’ needs and interests and protects oppressive structures.
from challenge. Social justice educators and theorists must also ask the “complicity” question.

**The Butlerians**

A cluster of exceptionally valuable challenges to both democratic dialogue and speech restrictions have been inspired by Judith Butler’s powerful response to debates around hate speech legislation in the United States. Butler develops three arguments against using legal restrictions as a response to hate speech. First, it is the **historicity that must be challenged** rather than the **individual speaker and his or her utterance**. Butler contends that legal restrictions target the utterance and the person who makes the utterance but leave the power of regulatory norms unaffected. Focus on legal intervention thus diverts attention from the challenges to the root cause of the hateful speech. Second, legal restrictions have been used against those they were intended to protect. Legal restrictions allow the state to act as a seemingly neutral arbiter of speech when, in fact, the state has used the same arguments to censor the marginalized when it is in its interest. The United States military’s policy of “don’t ask, don’t tell” illustrates this strategy. The policy assumes the identification of speech with action in order to declare that to profess “I am gay” constitutes homosexual conduct and a justified restriction. Third, legal restrictions deprive the victim of the possibility of agency. Hate speech legislation constitutes its subjects as injured victims who are incapable of defending themselves, are unable to act for themselves, and in need of the law’s protection.

Given this emphasis on policy, some of the Butlerian critics assume that Boler is advocating speech codes and prescriptive policies of censorship and that she is proposing “an entirely political solution to a largely educational problem.” This is a mistaken and an ungenerous reading of Boler’s claims. Boler, who resists advocating any particular policy, defends the **provisional silencing of dominant voices** in certain contexts as a means to challenge the taboo on any silencing. She highlights how systemically privileged ignorance can hijack the class agenda and is also concerned to offset the tendency of democratic dialogue to focus exclusively on the needs and interests of more privileged students. As Ronald Glass explains, “Obstructive questioning must be clearly revealed as a tactical ploy aimed at reinforcing the same structure of silence that liberatory classes are attempting to subvert.”

Silencing dominant voices might also be an option as a means to avoid incivility. Yet, Boler is clearly opposed to pedagogies of tolerance or civility, as her insistence on a pedagogy of discomfort confirms. Boler does not propose censorship in place of education, nor is she recommending a political solution and ignoring the need for an educative one. She is, however, arguing that restricting speech can sometimes **enable** education. Whose education is a point that will be subsequently addressed. Nevertheless, it is around this latter question that I believe the Butlerian inspired critics raise valuable and constructive insights for social justice educators.

An important criticism against affirmative action pedagogy that Butlerians raise is the essentialism implied by “voice.” “What is meant by ‘voice’ here?”
Suzanne de Castell asks. Is it “the substance of what is spoken, or the identity of the speaker” that constitutes the basis of differentiated rights to speak?”12 If “voice” is determined by the identity of the speaker, how are we to account for the hybridity of identities and that some identities are both systemically privileged and oppressed. Moreover, de Castell notes, the focus on identities rather than substance ignores the fact that “marginalized” voices can repeat dominant discourses while “dominant” voices may challenge dominant ideology. Educators cannot assume that the marginalized will understand or be able to name oppression and that they never repeat harmful speech. Finally, de Castell argues that essentialist assumptions of identity construct the student “under the sign of passivity — the teacher, but not I myself, knows who and what I am.”13

An emphasis on voice is also problematic if based on the assumption that the marginalized should speak out for the benefit of the dominant. As Alison Jones inquires, for whose benefit is dialogue?14 Jones maintains that the call for dialogue is in the interests of the systemically privileged. Expanding on this point, Liz Jackson writes

> there is a tendency for dialogical pedagogy set against a dominant script to continue to focus on the needs of more privileged students, to provide context to enrich their privileged yet impoverished perspectives. While well-intentioned, such practice can perpetuate educational inequality as minority perspectives are viewed as educationally valuable in terms of the needs and/or interests of more privileged subjects of education.15

Granted the cautions of assuming essentialist notions of identity and voice that de Castell and others emphasize, it is still important not to reject all references to such categories as long as these categories are never fixed and constantly open to contestation. Butler clearly acknowledges that the deconstruction of a category does not lead her to abandon all use of it, “to question a form of activity or conceptual terrain is not to banish or censor it: it is, for the duration, to suspend its ordinary play in order to ask after its constitution.”16 The point is to consider what the concept of “voice” makes possible and what it forecloses from consideration.

Another series of arguments that Butlerians raise involves the ineffectiveness of speech restriction. First, speech restrictions do not avoid harming the systemically marginalized because, as de Castell argues, in order to prohibit harmful speech, it must be named and identified, “and in that re-citation, the possibility of repeating harms is ever-present.”17 Moreover, such restrictions often backfire. Not only have conservatives used speech codes to censor dissent,18 speech codes have often been used against the victim.19

Second, speech restrictions are not only ineffective but they also usurp the agency of the victim and shift the entire attention onto the sovereign subject thereby protecting the structural source of the harm from challenge. That speech can harm is not denied. Speech restrictions, however, confiscate the “agency of the victim to add subversive iterations” that act as counter speech and instead transfer power to those in authority as if they were neutral arbiters.20

Third, because speech restrictions do not educate, they can only lead to change in words, not attitudes. Civility, tolerance, politeness, and political correctness
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provide the veneer that something is being done about social injustice while structural inequities remain safely unchallenged. Although overt expressions of hate may be constrained, schools continue to engage in oppressive ways. When civility, as Cris Mayo contends, is the “only action taken to change the school environment,” subtle expression of denial, dismissal, and ignorance can continue to be spoken by individuals, on the one hand, and institutional expressions of discrimination such as “exclusions in curricula, educational and social resources, continue to be clearly heard, felt, and experienced” on the other hand.

Most significantly, civility, as Mayo so powerfully argues, does not enable but rather is an obstacle to antibias education. Civility condones distancing and ignores conflict and entails obligation that reproduces dominant status. In addition, civility demands reciprocal civility and hides hostility. Jones similarly argues that when the framework of civil dialogue is exclusively concerned with the education of the systemically privileged, it is a safe space for the systemically privileged but not for the systemically marginalized. Those who are protected in “safe” classrooms, according to Audrey Thompson, are

those who are unmarked by visible or closeted forms of difference.…A classroom in which students of color feel safe, supported, and acknowledged in talking about the racism they face — and such safety is almost unimaginable except in segregated spaces — will be a classroom in which white students almost certainly do not feel safe, affirmed, or free to talk in ways that seem natural and spontaneous and appropriate to them.

Civility as a product of constrained speech does not promote real change and, in fact, protects the status quo from scrutiny.

Furthermore, civility reproduces the innocence of the systemically privileged. As Mayo explains,

practices of civility, such as using the correct words to address minority groups and using sensitive language, enable dominant people to protect their own property interest in the source of their dominance. By keeping up the appearance of being cultivated and sensitive, they seem less culpable for inequalities.

Butlerians implore educators to consider, “how does our conception of violence alter when we shift critical attention from state violence to the violence of citizens towards minority group members, and presume the state to be its neutral arbiter?”

A fourth argument that Butlerians raise about the ineffectiveness of speech restrictions is that they actually shift our attention away from and conceal what really needs to change. By focusing on reactive rules and policies that target individual speech, the social structures that support discriminatory curricula and social practices remain intact. This has led some Butlerians to assume that individuals are not responsible for their speech and, thus, should not be blamed for it. Jackson moves dangerously close to such a position when she advocates that we teach “without judging students for the voices they have been given.” It is important, however, to underscore that most Butlerians, and Butler herself, do not reject individual responsibility, although the conception of responsibility they assume moves away from an exclusive focus on blame, control, and causality.
In her discussion around homophobic slurs of bullies in schools, Claudia Ruitenberg provides an exceptional illustration of the problem of taking the individual as the source of inequality. Although, as Ruitenberg insists, the bully is irrefutably responsible for what is said, it is important not to take the bully as isolated agent or as source: the particular discourse was already available, as was the context in which the particular discourse constitutes harm. It is relatively easy for schools to put the blame for the proliferation of homophobic discourse entirely on the shoulders of individual bullies; it is much more uncomfortable for schools to address the way in which the discourses that it circulates help maintain this homophobic context. The absence of same-sex families from its curriculum materials, the off-hand sexist comment of a teacher to a male student (If you don’t smarten up, I’m going to put you on the girls’ team!”), and the unquestioned assumption about the composition of couples on prom night all help keep homophobic discourse in circulation, available for the next bully to cite.28

Butlerians not only ask, “To silence or not to silence?” They also emphasize the need to ask, “Who benefits from silencing? By silencing, how are we maintaining an unjust system?” Although they eschew prescriptive speech restrictions as policy, Butlerians recognize that a teacher might find that “temporary, tactical, and selective suppression and privileging of what students might wish to say” is necessary.29 They emphasize, however, that in order to educate it is important to recognize that “what gets said in the classroom may be more important than whether or not it is the students themselves who say it.”30

Butlerians are thus concerned with educating all students and they worry that speech restrictions might be employed as substitutes for educating. Finally, Butlerians ask that teachers turn the critical reflective gaze on themselves and ask how do they benefit from using speech restrictions in their classrooms? Are speech codes used to avoid conflict and confrontation and to circumvent dealing with discomfort? The concern is that it is not the courageous educators seeking equity and social justice even at the risk of breaking the law, but, sadly and pathetically enough, the too-frequent timidity of educators who clutch at the First Amendment as a justification for not doing what they ought to do, and saying what they ought to say, even though their freedom of speech is protected.31

When Butlerians reject the regulation of speech and when they argue that such policies are ineffective, they are not rejecting silencing tout court. Their primary concern is with who is benefitting from such regulation and what such policies do. Although also focused on the ineffectiveness of speech regulation, the Pragmatists have a very different primary concern.

**The Pragmatists: Rejecting Any Silencing**

In his response to my exoneration of Lynn Weber Cannon’s classroom guidelines (which are described as a form of affirmative action pedagogy) from the charge of indoctrination, Mordechai Gordon contests the claim that such guidelines can be conditions for student engagement.32 Like the Butlerians, Gordon points to the ineffectiveness of speech restrictions. Appealing to Martin Buber’s insights on student resistance, Gordon argues that Weber’s guidelines point to a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of education — “imposition rarely works”33 — and
have the potential to backfire such that students only “pretend to engage in order to please the professor or not offend anyone, yet not really change their underlying attitudes or beliefs.” Gordon recommends that instead of employing guidelines that restrict, teachers “be completely present and attentive when we teach, especially during controversial classroom discussions.” In addition, Gordon insists that Weber’s guidelines should be understood as “goals of courses that deal with diversity and social justice” rather than necessary conditions of such education and that we remember that “multicultural education is a slow, transformative process by which we attempt to bring about comprehensive social change.”

In a recent essay titled “Facing Fear, Releasing Resistance, Enabling Education,” Barbara Stengel picks up on Gordon’s point that Weber’s guidelines may be counterproductive and discusses the fear that she claims is at the root of white students’ resistance — a resistance that she argues “begins in doubt and blossoms into fear” (“Facing Fear,” 67). Stengel takes a pragmatic approach to such resistance. She insists that resistance, which she defines as “close-mindedness in the face of doubt,” is not unique to social justice education. Doubt follows from “the recognition that another’s habit of thought is challenging one’s own” (“Facing Fear,” 67). Applied to resistance to social justice education, Stengel argues that such resistance is the understandable result of being accused of racism. Resistance is a consequence of having one’s moral innocence challenged. Stengel explains that students will be “interpreting the instructor’s rules for engagement as an attack, an interpretation that prompts fight, flight or paralysis — and none of these responses will advance antiracist education” (“Facing Fear,” 67). Stengel endorses Lawrence Blum’s reticence to use the morally loaded term “racist” to describe white practices because she is concerned that white students “don’t want to think of themselves as personally guilty of the moral evil that is racism” (“Facing Fear, 70).

Resistance, according to Stengel, is described as a defensive mechanism and an understandable response to the morally charged accusation of racism. Resistance is the way that white students fight back and is an expression of their doubt. Stengel maintains that “the better they are as students, the more they must fight” (“Facing Fear,” 73).

Calling upon Charles Peirce’s analysis of responses to doubt, Stengel explains how doubt morphs into fear, a fear that she explicates using Ahmed’s work. One response to doubt, according to Pierce, is “the method of tenacity” or “a refusal to let go of one’s belief no matter what the evidence” (Facing Fear,” 68). Because white students are being asked to question and possibly give up their most basic beliefs about the social world they live in and that privileges them, Stengel believes that it is not surprising that they remain stubbornly defensive and resistant to learning. Stengel contends that this resistance is an expression of their doubt and that they doubt is an indication that they do take race concerns seriously. Emphasizing what she reads as the constructive nature of doubt, Stengel writes, “The doubt and fear that students experience in the face of antiracist pedagogy is a function of their own embryonic recognition of the claims of race concerns” (“Facing Fear,” 69).
Stengel then appeals to Ahmed’s work on the affective economy of fear to explain the fear that provokes resistance. Stengel notes Ahmed’s insight that fear is not an interior state, something that comes from inside and then is applied to something outside of oneself, but instead is an effect of histories of relations. Fear engenders a relationship in which “when I am afraid of you, I am blaming you for making me afraid” (“Facing Fear,” 72). Indeed, fear, according to Ahmed, plays a role in conserving power and is crucial to the very forming of the surfaces of entities and borders between entities. Fear allows the white body to be constructed in opposition to the Black or non-white body.

Most significantly, and this is a point that Stengel seriously underemphasizes, Ahmed insists that fear contributes to the construction of white bodies as morally innocent. Fear does something — it re-establishes the white body as good. Thus, white student’s expression of fear is not only, as Stengel puts it, an “act to control a doubt filled and perceptibly dangerous situation” and a mechanism in which the white student puts himself or herself in control (“Facing Fear,” 71). Expressions of fear also function to protect white innocence that is supported by dominant ideologies. In addition, some students do not approach social justice curriculum with fear and doubt but rather arrogance. White privilege, as Peggy McIntosh (and others) remind us, can authorize white people’s ignorance and arrogance often without white people realizing that that is what they are doing. White privilege is often manifested in discursive practices that deny complicity and that profess white innocence, as is evident in distancing strategies and white talk that researchers have studied.

Because she explains resistance exclusively in terms of reactions to doubt and fear, Stengel concludes that the pedagogical challenge is to move students to “a place where they are able to engage thoughtfully and based on evidence” (“Facing Fear,” 70). To achieve this, Stengel contends that we must avoid blaming students, as this leads to fear, but somehow must also not abandon responsibility. She goes so far as to suggest that educators reject the “anti” in antiracist pedagogy because it encourages resistance.

As the above discussion illustrates, Pragmatists raise important questions about affirmative action pedagogy and white students’ engagement. Can such engagement be demanded? Is engagement a precondition of real learning or is to do so to determine the outcome in advance? Of particular interest is how we describe the source of white student resistance in courses that teach with commitments to social justice. Is, for example, white resistance exclusively about fear based in doubt or is it a form of arrogance that is institutionally supported as “knowledge”? What does such resistance protect? How are the educational needs of the systemically marginalized affected when educators focus on “defusing” the resistance of the systemically privileged? Whose education is enabled and whose concerns are prioritized with the claim that “the better the student, the more they must fight”?

Tim Wise recounts a response to his essay against speech codes on college campuses. In this essay, Wise argued that instead of restricting speech on
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Campuses, a more effective response would be for students who are against hate speech to organize so to ostracize the offender. The respondent argued that the offender was in need of education, not ostracism. The respondent maintained that change requires time, is incremental, and takes patience. Although acknowledging that such appeals to education are heartfelt and well intended, Wise asks “education at whose expense?” As Wise elaborates, should the need to guide and patiently help white people work through their ignorance be thought of as more important than — or even equally as important as — the right of students, staff and faculty of color to be able to work and go to school in an environment free from overt (and I would add covert) forms of racist hostility?…to what extent should persons of color be expected to bear the weight of this re-education process? Ultimately, the approach that prioritizes the education of white students at the expense of the systemically marginalized recenters whiteness. It may, thus, be unwittingly complicit in the maintenance of unjust oppressive systems.

Glass notes that it is “often only the silencing of the dominant voice that is regarded as out of alignment…the structural silencing of the poor, people of color, and women” is the taken for granted norm. The issues the Pragmatists raise about white student resistance and engagement are important. Yet these issues must not eclipse the point that when the promise to further equity focuses on white students needs, while ignoring the needs and the frustrations of students of color, such pedagogy operates to reproduce and endorse racial domination.

**Conclusion**

Both the Butlerians and the Pragmatics provide us with constructive cautions about using speech restriction in education. The former, however, are also concerned with the complicity question while the latter are predominantly concerned with the pragmatic question. Policies and institutional restrictions on speech function to protect the status quo and keep the institutional structures that support ignorant speech from challenge. If educators only ask the pragmatic question they risk focusing on the education of the systemically privileged at the expense of the systemically marginalized and risk reproducing rather than challenging the injustices that are the objects of their critique. One of the most potent insights of the debate around speech codes is that the pragmatic question must never be considered in isolation from the question of complicity.

4. Ibid., emphasis added.
5. Ibid., 322.
8. I use the term Butlerians because all these scholars have been inspired by Judith Butler’s work. I do not mean to be facetious and have only admiration for this body of scholarship.


13. Ibid., 332.


22. Ibid.


24. Mayo, “The Tolerance that Dare not Speak its Name,” 35.


27. See Ruitenberg, “Check Your Language,” 43.


29. Ibid., 333.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.


33. Ibid., 347.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid., 347–48.

36. Ibid., 348.

37. Ibid.

45. Ibid.