

EBOO PATEL

On Building a Diverse Democracy

Justice and Identity in the Twenty-First Century

IN THE SPRING OF 2008, on a beautiful college campus outside of Pittsburgh, I found myself giving a keynote address alongside a man named Nechirvan Barzani. He was introduced to me by campus officials as an important Iraqi leader. By that time, the war in Iraq was over five years old and getting more unpopular by the day. I knew almost no one who supported it.

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The fact that Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction were a Bush administration fiction was just one of several reasons why. Another, perhaps more important, justification for being against the war was based on identity.

As an American

Muslim, I knew that the lives of many of my coreligionists would be ruined. Opposing the war was an act of solidarity with my people. Most other American Muslims shared this logic, and most multicultural progressives, seeking to be good allies, did as well.

Being in the presence of Barzani gave me the opportunity to express a deeply held view to a member of a group who was directly affected by my government's destructive actions. I shook his hand, gave him my *salaam*, looked him in the eye and said, "I'm so sorry for what my government has done to your country."

He stared back as if he didn't understand. I thought that perhaps his English was a little

shaky, so I repeated, "Mr. Barzani, I am sorry for what my government has done by starting a war in your country that has destroyed so many lives. I want to tell you that so many Americans—Muslims and those in solidarity with Muslims—opposed this war."

Again Barzani looked confused, but this time I realized that the source of his confusion was not an inability to comprehend my words. He was perplexed because he understood me only too well. I watched his face turn from bewilderment to frustration and then flash to anger. He composed himself for long enough to spit out, "The only thing you should be sorry for is that your government did not get rid of Saddam fifteen years earlier, when he was using chemical gas on my people. I am a Kurd, and that monster tried to destroy us many times over. Now that he is gone, we are finally free." And then he turned and walked away.

I'd had easily hundreds of conversations with fellow multicultural progressives about the Iraq war. The destructive impact of the invasion on Muslims was taken *prima facie* as a reason to oppose it. "Muslims" was always invoked as a single monolithic category, frequently preceded by the term "oppressed," and almost never described or delineated any further. In our minds, there were just two groups—the oppressor American government and the oppressed Muslims of Iraq. There was really only one side to be on.

Preferred identities

Being a multicultural progressive means paying attention to identity, and caring about justice, and seeing the relationship between the two. There is a resurgence of such conversations on college campuses these days, mostly to the good in my view. My encounter with Barzani forced

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me to reckon with the fact that my worldview was not quite as broad-minded as I'd liked to think. For as much time as my circles spent talking about the Palestinians, we almost never mentioned another stateless Muslim people, the Kurds. Having never really considered the experience or perspective of this identity, I had never conceived that they might have a different definition of justice when it came to the Iraq war.

The experience has made me wonder about which identities receive the most attention on college campuses, and what the implications of these dispositions might be. To that end, I was struck by a recent front-page story in the *New York Times* on campus diversity training.¹ Race, ethnicity, and gender were the focus of the workshops. There were references to safe spaces and trigger warnings, an implication that campuses employ such structures and devices to both

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heighten awareness of these identities and protect them from a range of aggressions. Such matters are quite familiar to me. They are the dimensions of identity that occupy my consciousness and the minds of

most other people I know. They are without a doubt the “preferred identities” on selective college campuses.

In the same day's *New York Times* was a column by Frank Bruni about an element of identity that wasn't mentioned at all in the front-page article on campus diversity training: being a military veteran.² It turns out that at many elite colleges, you can count the number of veterans on one hand, and in most cases, it won't even take all your fingers.

Something occurred to me. In all the multicultural progressive circles I've been in where people have been invited to identify themselves, I've probably heard hundreds of people say some version of, “my name is Erin, and I identify as a lesbian” or “my name is Carlos, and I identify as a Latino.” There is only one time I ever recall anyone identifying as a military veteran.

Is that because being a veteran is an insignificant identity? Because it does not shape one's life or outlook or how one is likely to experience college? Or is it because my circles are, in their own way, quite narrow?

In his column, Frank Bruni pointed out that campuses recruit people (students, staff, faculty, and administrators) who are part of some identity groups in order to enrich campus life. Clearly,

for elite campuses, veterans are not on this list. I started to think through the other implications of elite campuses preferring race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, while virtually ignoring military veterans. In addition to being the focus of recruitment and diversity training, there are courses on elite campuses that focus on some identities, centers where people from those identities can gather, paid staff with whom they can discuss their experiences. I wonder, for the few veterans at elite colleges, what courses they might take to explore their identity, what center they might go to where their community gathers, which staff or faculty members proudly wear their own military experience such that students who share that identity might approach them for an independent study or just an empathetic conversation over coffee.

College campuses that employ safe spaces and trigger warnings typically do so for preferred identities. The rationale is that racial minorities, women, and members of the LGBTQ community have experienced marginalization, oppression, and trauma in the larger society, and ought to be proactively protected in the intense environment that is the college campus, even if it means restricting the freedoms of others. A safe space for black students to talk about policing may, for example, bar white students.

What might happen if such protections extended beyond the preferred identities of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality to, for example, veterans? Consider this story. A friend of mine is a professor of religious studies at a highly diverse Texas university. While teaching his standard world religions course, he opened his unit on Islam by playing a recitation of the Qur'an. He noticed one of his students shift uncomfortably in his seat, get visibly distressed to the point of looking sick, and finally pack his bag and leave. This student came to see him during office hours and explained that he was a veteran and had recently done a tour of duty in Iraq. Several friends of his had been killed there, and he had been wounded himself. Anytime he listened to something as distinctive as Qur'an recitation, he had flashbacks to his friends being killed by IEDs to chants of *Allahu Akbar*. He asked the professor—my friend—why he wasn't warned that Islam would be presented in such a vivid manner. He requested that he be excused from the entire unit, saying he could get a doctor's note that confirmed that material about Islam triggered his PTSD.



Notre Dame of
Maryland University

Should military veterans as an identity group get warnings in courses—religion, history, literature—where Islam is on the syllabus because it might trigger their medically diagnosed PTSD? Ought there to be safe spaces set up for veterans when a Muslim speaker—say, me—comes to campus?

Expanding my worldview

College is where I developed my own multicultural progressive politics. I grew up in the western suburbs of Chicago during the 1980s and 1990s, and my highest aspiration was to be white. Of course, I didn't realize this until I got to college in 1993, a time of identity consciousness that reminds me of our current moment.

I remember going to see the film version of Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club* with a group of guys from my residence hall during my first year in college. I walked out with tears in my eyes because the film reminded me so much of my own childhood growing up in an Asian-American household. They walked out asking about the nearest Taco Bell. I let them get their fake burritos and went to the library to look up books about minorities in America. In high school, I would have buried my ethnic identity; in college, I got to explore it.

Just about all the courses I took had some kind of focus on minority identity experiences.

It was in college that I first considered the long-term effects of slavery and segregation, that I first recognized that there was such a thing as “the African American experience,” and that I became aware of the racism in our criminal justice system. I was surprised to learn that crack cocaine had significantly higher criminal penalties than the powder form. “Why's that?” I wondered aloud in a sociology class. A black student a few rows away looked at me and said, incredulously, “Do you not know?”

It was in college where I made my first gay friends and went with them to see *Angels in America* three times. I was profoundly affected by their stories of coming out, of people they knew who were HIV positive, and those they knew who had died in the slaughter years of the 1980s. I came to share their deep frustration that it took a straight white boy named Ryan White to contract HIV and die of AIDS for the American public to start paying sympathetic attention.

I had a friend who was part of the Society of Women in Engineering. I scoffed when she left dinner early one night to attend a meeting of the group. “Do you know how male-dominated engineering is?” she scolded me. “You don't think the Barbie doll that said ‘math is hard’ has anything to do with that?”

I started to see how much of my life and my world had been defined by race, gender, ethnicity,

and sexuality. It was like the scales falling from my eyes. Some people, by dint of their privileged identity in the aforementioned categories, were oppressors. Others were oppressed. I applied this Manichean lens to just about everything.

I went off to England to do a PhD. I knew I wanted to do an ethnography of young people that had something to do with identity. I fell in with a group of young South Asian Londoners and started doing participant observation in their world and engaging them in semi-structured interviews. Naturally, I asked them how their ethnicity affected their lives. It had affected mine so profoundly, something I had realized when I was about their age. They didn't really know what to do with my questions. I told stories of my own growing up and wondered aloud if they related to the overt racism and microaggressions I'd experienced as an adolescent.

They didn't. I theorized that they had simply internalized their racism so deeply that they had neither the framework nor the language with which to describe it. I read British postcolonial theory and

came up with ingenious ways to interject race and ethnicity into conversations and interviews. Still no spark.

"Maybe they just don't think of themselves primarily through the lens of racism?" my advisor mused after I showed him my field notes and the transcripts of the interviews. "A white guy would say that," I thought to myself. I kept trying to dig regarding racism, and my research subjects kept shrugging their shoulders as I asked my questions. At some point, I had to wonder to myself: Why do I keep insisting that they feel and see things that they don't seem to be feeling or seeing? Do I *want* them to be victims of racism? Was I guilty of telling these people what their experience was, or worse, what it ought to have been?

For their part, what they kept telling me was that the most important part of their identity was being Ismaili Muslims. "Aha," I thought to myself, "I don't know much about religion, but I know what paradigm to put that in. As Muslims, you must feel oppressed by Christians." And so the whole cycle started again. I'd do semi-structured interviews trying to get them to talk about how oppressed they felt by Christians and, well, let's just say my advisor had to make a similar comment to me about six months later.

It turns out that my Ismaili Muslim subjects did feel uncomfortable vis-à-vis another group in Britain—other Muslims! This did not fit at all comfortably into my multicultural progressive worldview, especially when I learned that many of those other Muslims occupied a lower social class than the well-heeled Ismailis. Which group was the oppressor, and which was the oppressed?

And so I faced an interesting conundrum. Would I expand my worldview in a manner that absorbed what I was learning about the world, or would I try to squeeze the world into my worldview?

Which lesson would I choose to draw from my college experience? That I had now discovered the identities that matter and would go through the rest of my life looking at the world through that paradigm? Or that I discovered identities and experiences that were previously unknown to me—identities I hadn't paid much attention to, experiences I haven't had—and that there are likely to be more of those as I continue with life? College had been a wonderful expansion of a narrow worldview. What other expansions might be in store?

Liberal education

Martha Nussbaum makes a powerful observation that is highly relevant to our current moment: "All modern democracies are prone to hasty and sloppy thinking and to the substitution of invective for argument."³ A rigorous liberal education that emphasizes critical thinking about one's own paradigm and a sympathetic understanding of other identities serves as a kind of public health plan for societies like ours. It is particularly troubling, therefore, to see social justice conversations tend toward denouncement over engagement in the very places—college campuses—charged with advancing liberal education.

Extrapolating from Nussbaum's thesis that liberal education is about "the creation of a critical public culture, through an emphasis on analytical thinking, argumentation and active participation in debate,"⁴ I believe a liberally educated person should recognize that, in a world of different identities, there are likely to be different definitions of justice, especially when it becomes clear that different people who have similar identities interpret those differently. Diversity is not just about the differences you like. It's also about the differences you don't like, the disagreements. Any time

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you are in a room where everyone agrees with your definition of justice, it is probably not a diverse room.

A liberally educated person should also recognize that the reasonable expression of one identity can be an affront to another. The desire of a Kurd to remove Saddam Hussein is an injury to the hope of a Sunni Ba'athist to keep him. When a Christian says that Jesus is the Son of God, it affronts a Muslim's belief that Jesus is the Messenger of God, but not his son. When Muslims eat beef, it affronts a Hindu's belief that cows are sacred and should not be slaughtered for food.

And a liberally educated person should recognize that it is not always easy to determine which identity matters more, or which side to be on. Oppression is a slippery standard, and an overused and overheated one. Also, even when who qualifies as oppressed is clear, the next steps are fraught. Kurds are oppressed in Iraq. Does that mean you or I should have been in favor of the war?

One mark of being an educated person is recognizing that the world is unlikely to fit inside your worldview. Part of what I believe a college education is about is proactively looking for the hard examples, the cases that do not fit inside your worldview, precisely to expand it. This is a variation on Karl Popper's falsification theory. Put simply, do not look for the illustrations that confirm your paradigm. Instead, be on the lookout for the examples that challenge and, therefore, might expand it.

There is value in the multicultural progressive paradigm, and there are limits. My favorite story about the current limits is contained in James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*—a mid-twentieth-century book that has been rediscovered in recent times, referenced heavily in works by Ta Nehisi Coates and Jesmyn Ward. It rocked my world when I first read it in my early twenties. I loved its pull-no-punches description of the effects of white racism on black lives: "This is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it."⁵

But in my rereading, a different storyline emerged for me. Baldwin, largely out of his disgust regarding white racism, accepts an invitation to Elijah Muhammad's dinner table. He finds

himself profoundly uncomfortable there. He finds the talk of total racial separation to be borderline insanity. The comment about the evils of drinking the white devil's poison makes him shift in his seat, considering that he is heading to the north side after the dinner for a drink with a white friend.

At the end of the day, Baldwin understands Elijah Muhammad's anger, but he doesn't want to live in his world. It causes him to reframe some of his own thoughts about his role in the United States and his dreams for his country.

He ends the book with two observations that I keep close to me as I participate in the American experiment:

*I am not a ward of America; I am one of the first Americans to arrive on these shores.*⁶

*If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and change the history of the world.*⁷ □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author's name on the subject line.

NOTES

1. Stephanie Saul, "Campus 101: Learning How Not to Offend," *New York Times*, September 7, 2016, A1.
2. Frank Bruni, "Elites Neglect Veterans," *New York Times*, September 7, 2016, A23.
3. Martha Nussbaum, "Liberal Education and Global Community," *Liberal Education* 90, no. 1 (2004): 44.
4. Ibid.
5. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial Press, 1963; reprint, New York: Vintage International, 1993), 5. Citations refer to the Vintage edition.
6. Ibid., 98.
7. Ibid. 105.

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