

Sex, Pedagogy, and Academic Freedom

by Dean Saitta, Professor of Anthropology and President, DU Chapter AAUP

In the last two weeks the Arthur Gilbert sexual harassment case has blown wide open. An article by Peter Schmidt appeared in the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#). A piece by Peter Bonilla was posted to the [Foundation for Individual Rights in Education](#) (FIRE) website. A column by Vincent Carroll appeared in [The Denver Post](#). All focus on the issue of whether Professor Gilbert's due process rights were respected in the run-up to his being removed from the classroom, suspended from campus, investigated by authorities, branded as a sexual harasser, and sentenced to sexual harassment re-education. Much less was said, even in official case review circles, about whether Professor Gilbert's classroom speech was justified by academic context and thus protected by academic freedom.

Our [campus AAUP chapter](#) expressed concern about the due process and academic freedom dimensions of this case when it first broke last spring. We worried about the consequences for all DU faculty—especially contingent faculty, given their much greater vulnerability—if Professor Gilbert is wrongly busted for justifiable classroom speech. Combining what I now know about this case with what I knew going in, I believe that Professor Gilbert was unfairly charged with sexual harassment and, based on the available evidence, did not even come close to crossing the line of protected academic speech. Professor Gilbert should be fully exonerated of the charges against him and fully restored to his teaching position in the Korbel School of International Studies. It remains to be seen, however, whether the judgment against him will be vacated by DU administrators as requested by FIRE in a letter sent to Chancellor Coombe.

An email I sent to Peter Schmidt commenting on the case from a personal perspective was excerpted in both *The Chronicle* and FIRE pieces. I worried about how my own academic freedom—even as a tenured full professor—would be severely compromised by the unjust decision to brand Professor Gilbert as a sexual harasser. I was not being hyperbolic. I teach a course on human evolutionary psychology called [The Cultured Ape](#). In one section I play devil's advocate and challenge students to think about how rape prevention policy changes if we see rape as not simply about power (the nearly exclusive view these days) but also about sex. This is an argument that plays off an understanding of humans as evolved primates. That is, I take an explicitly interdisciplinary, bio-cultural (E.O. Wilson would say "[consilient](#)") approach to this and other hot button topics in the study of human behavior. Invoking an evolutionary position is a risky proposition in itself, given that 45% of the American public isn't persuaded that evolution is a scientific fact. Moreover, 81% of advanced DU undergraduates don't understand how evolution works even after taking a year of general education science (this conclusion is based on assessment data in my possession that I've shared with appropriate administrators, but that they've so far ignored). Given this widespread ignorance the classroom conversation about rape can get pretty dicey, especially if there are rape hotline counselors in the class. This is so even though the explicit objective of the unit is to think a little more broadly and perhaps a little more clearly about how we might eradicate the societal scourge of rape. Faced with this volatile mix of student ignorance and hot-button controversy I could very easily be charged with spreading lies about the nature of rape, if not accused of sexual harassment. Will the

university's administration have my back if this should come to pass? At the moment I have absolutely no confidence that it will.

I also teach a course called [Ancient Worlds](#), which is an exploration of the origins and evolution of the modern human mind. Like *The Cultured Ape*, the course gives history to human behaviors that citizens often take-for-granted or knee-jerk classify as either "natural" or "unnatural." One of the units is on the meaning of Ice Age art (paintings and sculptures). I introduce material from a literature dealing with sex in the prehistoric world. We look at paintings and sculptures representing human penises, vulvae, dildos, sexual bondage, sadomasochism, and the like. My strategy is akin to Professor Gilbert bringing his now infamous antique vibrator to class (which, by the way, I take to be an archaeological artifact that's fully appropriate for classroom presentation if the topic is masturbation as it relates to cultures of sin). The point of *Ancient Worlds* is to investigate and explain the radical explosion of human creativity, self-awareness, environmental consciousness, identity-making, and "cognitive domain-crossing" (e.g., ecological, social, psychological, sexual) that occurred in human history 50,000 years ago. This topic is typically illustrated in classroom life by showing the standard Ice Age artistic representations of [therianthropes](#), speared animals, and pregnant "Venus figurines." You can find this stuff in any children's book about the topic. However, this conventional approach is quite limited and, in my view, unbecoming a college-level course when the physical evidence (no doubt repressed by textbook publishers for generations) invites us to explore the much fuller range of human behaviors that were "present at the creation," including behaviors that are considered today as lurid and unspeakable. Will I do this in the future and risk someone finding my classroom teaching to be, as some have opined with respect to Professor Gilbert's, crude and salacious? That depends on our academic leaders and how seriously they take our expressed commitment to "add value" to the education that DU students are already paying a perverse amount of money to purchase.

In my opinion Professor Gilbert has been teaching in the rich intellectual tradition begun by those original cognitive domain-crossers of the Ice Age. Over his long career he's been pushing the interdisciplinary envelope and exploring connections between disparate phenomena that, on the surface, appear unrelated. Some of these phenomena may very well be unrelated, but we won't know for sure until we go there. My favorite definition of "academic quality" is one that Julanna Gilbert in our Center for Teaching and Learning helped me compose a few years back. In my view academic quality is research and teaching that makes "beautiful connections" between the varied phenomena that attract inquiry within the great domains of human knowledge. That's why I love the old faculty warhorses—some would say "dinosaurs"—who are now retired or nearing retirement. For one thing, they understand the meaning of academic freedom. For another, they tend to approach their topics trans-historically, cross-culturally, and inter-disciplinarily. In so doing these faculty are the true keepers of the Enlightenment flame. Tragically, they are now almost completely replaced by an army of academics who know more-and-more about less-and-less as a consequence of universities having become institutional sites of professional job training and credentialing. Instead of vilifying the Arthur Gilberts of the world we should be honoring them. And, of course, working with them to keep the Enlightenment flame from being completely extinguished.