Swidler, Eva. Can the Adjunct Speak?

Academe

Contingent employment always poses a threat to academic freedom. Until adjuncts can speak freely, without endangering their jobs, there can be no real academic freedom in today's colleges and universities.

In an article my colleague Jan Clausen and I wrote in 2013 for the AAUP's Journal of Academic Freedom, we outlined a series of academic "unfreedoms" that cascade from the core reality of academia today: that faculties almost everywhere are largely composed of workers serving on contingent and thus precarious appointments. We pointed out the potential for direct censorship of adjunct faculty speech in the classroom through faculty hiring and firing decisions made by individual department chairs. We lamented the self-censorship that reigns as contingent faculty members shield themselves from incurring disfavor. We described the undermining of the power of the faculty as a body to govern academic matters at institutions of higher education when the contingent majority is often driven to act and speak in self-protection. We wondered about the diminishing role of intellectuals in public life at this moment, when three-fourths of the faculty might fear to speak out on issues related to their own areas of expertise lest their comments come to the attention of a hostile supervisor. We were saddened by the impoverishment of education that occurs when contingent faculty are afraid to discuss controversial topics. In particular, we noted that the large numbers of working-class students and students of color who attend the underfunded institutions where contingent faculty are most heavily concentrated suffer disproportionately from these insidious effects of academic precarity on academic speech.

Shortly after we published that article, the insidious effects of precarity on public speech came home to me personally. In fall 2014, graduating students at Goddard College in Vermont, where I am a part-time faculty adviser, invited Mumia Abu-Jamal to address them from prison at commencement, a decision that sparked a flurry of press coverage. I soon began mentally composing an op-ed on the dustup, speaking as a faculty member of Goddard. I hoped to place the piece in a Philadelphia paper, since the Abu-Jamal graduation speech was receiving a lot of coverage. I quickly realized that I could not risk putting my name in print next to such an op-ed, given my semester-by-semester adjunct positions at a variety of institutions in town. I killed the project.

None of these observations on the gutting of academic freedom by the now-dominant academic labor system is novel to those of us active in the adjunct world. They are well worth restating and remembering, however, even for us. For those academics in the tenure system, these points are crucial, too.

Less visible was the issue I was invited to address in a panel on academic freedom at the 2015 Modern Language Association (MLA) annual conference in Vancouver. I was to respond to a specific prompt: "When does something count as protected speech or free assembly, and when does it count as disruption?" As I pondered this question, I wondered how the employment status of a faculty member might frame or determine how the instructor's speech is heard and categorized.

DISRUPTIVE SPEECH

Even tenured and tenure-track faculty members are today feeling the chill as the circle of acceptable speech shrinks amid accusations of "incivility." Most adjuncts, however, have no line between dissent and disruption to walk. Outside the classroom, adjunct speech of any kind, when identified as coming from an adjunct, is defined as disruptive.
Free thought, intellectual debate, and shared governance are supposed to be central principles of the university. But if the reality at the core of the academy is acknowledged -- that contingent faculty are necessary for the functioning of virtually all of higher education -- academic freedom and faculty governance begin to seem hollow. Thus, when we adjuncts stand up and say merely, "Here we are," we ourselves become a disruption. No matter what we say or how we say it, our existence as adjuncts reminds the audience of the papered-over contradictions of the academy and the gap between image and reality.

In consequence, while we are paid, however poorly, to speak to students, adjuncts are largely expected to remain silent among our putative betters; like servants in a nineteenth-century household, we are to keep our eyes cast down to the floor, use the back staircase and the dumbwaiter, and keep ourselves invisible, nameless, and faceless.

What does it mean to be, by definition, a disruption? It means being told to wait in a huddle in the hall outside a "departmental" meeting until the tenured and tenure-track faculty are ready to have us in the room (they had other important agenda items to finish first, and we, apparently, would disrupt the flow of the meeting). It means seeing people shift uncomfortably in their seats at a conference when you stand up and identify yourself as an adjunct before posing a question or making an intervention. It means being met with dismissal and perhaps something a little nastier -- you don't belong here, or maybe you don't deserve to speak here.

Disruption makes people uncomfortable. When your very being is defined as a disruption, people cease to listen to you; they focus on the fact of your disruptiveness, not on what you have to say. Is speech really speech if it doesn't have an audience? If we as adjuncts cannot get listeners, cannot find an audience, can we be said to be speaking?

Labeling adjuncts as disruptive is just as much an active way to ignore them as a passive consequence of the desire to hide the adjunct reality. How better to dismiss, undermine, or even prevent effective speech by an undesirable group than to frame members of that group as disruptive, illegitimate speakers? There are material reasons for the choice to see adjuncts as disruptive. We are evidence that important hegemonic claims about academia are suspect: the claim that higher education is ruled by faculty governance, the claim that academia is a functioning meritocracy, the claim that a viable arena for critical intellectual life can be secured through persuasion and reason rather than through unionization and militancy. We are evidence that academics in the corporate university are just workers. All of these contradictions between the ideology of academia and its Potemkin reality are embodied in the adjunct. When we adjuncts speak, we cannot but draw the mind of a listener to these suppressed truths. When we act -- whether organizing a union, speaking in solidarity with other university workers, or engaging in intellectual and political activism -- we challenge the way in which tenure has, too often, become a mark of favor and a prize for the compliant.

Our speech is disruptive because we adjuncts raise issues that themselves are unwanted and disruptive. Do we need to challenge the definition of disruption or do we rather need to create a political situation in which the truths about the hierarchy and controlling values of academia are confronted and adjunct speech is valued because adjuncts are seen as central to reclaiming academia from the corporate agenda?

THE DIVIDED FACULTY
Correlation does not prove causality. I can't help wondering, however, whether the ever-tighter definitions of acceptable speech for even tenured faculty are directly enabled by the framing of adjuncts as disruptors. As adjuncts become the great unwashed of the academic world, fear of them among
administrators, as well as desire among tenured faculty members to distance themselves from their adjunct colleagues, grows.

To what extent is the increasingly deep and insurmountable chasm between the contingent majority and the tenure-track and tenured minority being used as part of an elaborated Gramscian strategy of control? Coercion: watch out lest you, too, be reduced to the itinerant and humiliating status of an adjunct. Clearly, an unspoken fear of reduction to adjunct status looms over nontenured full-time faculty members. Cooptation: you are one of the anointed, not one of these lowly, strident losers. Clearly, there is a cultural and psychological perk offered to the privileged faculty minority in the tenure stream. Manufacture of consent: this is, after all, a meritocracy, and adjuncts are just not scholars worthy of tenure. And by the way, since you have been chosen to be one of the fortunate elite, you have responsibilities. You must remain reasonable. You must maintain the dignity of the profession.

To survive as a site of intellectual life, academia needs to acknowledge the adjunct reality. We adjuncts will cease being a disruption to other faculty members only when the distance between contingent and tenured is bridged, and only when securely employed academics choose to advocate for adjunct free speech. All faculty members will likely thereby become disruptors to administrators, but in that unity, we will face the shared battle for academic freedom with a possibility of victory. Notwithstanding the efforts to enshrine at least some principles of academic freedom in union contracts, academic freedom as we know it -- as the freedom of individual academic speech but also the freedom to participate in meaningful academic governance and to engage in extramural speech - will disappear if we remain divided. Adjuncts stand ready to unite with their tenured and tenure-track colleagues. Can those within the tenure system bring themselves to set aside their privilege and unite with us? This is the task that lies ahead.

Unfortunately, those of us serving on contingent faculty appointments face material obstacles to free speech that prevent us from providing the disruption that is so essential to the rescue of the academy. These practical obstacles range from finding time to research and write while teaching multiple packed classes and applying for food stamps to funding our way to conferences on crowdsourced budgets. (A fellow adjunct pointed out at a conference I recently attended that we are currently suffering the intellectual consequences of shunting the majority of academics into precarious contingent employment. Harsh economic realities have already caused an irrecoverable loss of a generation of scholarship that could have been.)

Though these quotidian burdens of adjuncts are not typically framed as free-speech issues, that is what they are, at least in part. If structural economic realities prevent someone from speaking, does a meaningful right to speech exist? Are rights real when the economic ability to enforce or employ those rights is lacking? If an adjunct cannot find time to speak or to compose speech, can he or she be said to have the right to speech? If a writer is too busy grading exams and driving from campus to campus teaching to be able to write a paper, has she or he merely failed to exercise a right to speech?

Here's one concrete example of the impact of adjunct economics on speech. This past fall, when a course I was scheduled to teach on an adjunct basis had low enrollment, I became concerned that it might be canceled at the last moment. The institution where I was to teach that course had funded my trip to the MLA conference to speak on the academic freedom panel. If I lost my course, I wondered, would I no longer have my airfare covered? My right to free speech is not meaningful if I cannot afford to reach my audience.

Adjuncts across the country have been fighting back against the forces undermining their scholarship, teaching, and speech. Union contracts are slowly bringing higher (though still disgraceful) pay, and sometimes a few dollars for conference attendance. Yet what is necessary is not a slow improvement
of the conditions of piecework but a fundamental redefinition of faculty positions. To create the real conditions for academic freedom in a country where three-quarters of faculty members serve on contingent appointments, the economic structure of the faculty itself needs to be redrawn. Bread-and-butter battles are as essential to securing academic freedom as discussions of culturally silenced voices. The challenge to tenure-stream faculty is to renounce their status as a kind of labor aristocracy in the academy and realize that the faculty will, in the end, stand or fall together. Speaking out against the shameful pay and working conditions of adjuncts in a departmental or university-wide setting will garner no immediate rewards, but it may make possible the long-term social survival of the intellectual.

The disruption that adjuncts embody draws attention to realities that are relevant not just to contingent faculty but to all those concerned about the fate of higher education, including the majority of college students and other faculty members. The continued existence of a meaningful academy hinges on enabling, embracing, and broadcasting adjunct speech.

Can the adjunct speak?

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