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Revolution vs. Devolution in Kansas: Teaching in a Conservative Climate

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Abstract: This paper is about teaching progressive ideas where fundamentalist and conservative views are prominent among the students. I take up two questions: What should we take our task as feminist teachers to be? How should it be carried out? I explore three teaching strategies that a progressive teacher might use in a hostile conservative climate: the whole truth strategy, the dismissal strategy, and the bridge strategy. I reject the first two of these and argue that the third is most likely to be effective and also best exemplifies the value of academic freedom.

Kansas is in the very center of the United States. But to say its politics are centrist is to misdescribe what is really a gaping cultural chasm between progressive and religious conservative elements that sometimes averages out in a center-right Republican or Democrat. As of June 2006, one of Kansas's US Senators is a converted Catholic, anti-choice conservative, and the other is a well-known hawk on defense who is deeply devoted to the strategy of state secrecy in intelligence and defense. There is one lone Democrat in the Congressional delegation, and he barely hangs on every two years by touting his Vietnam War record and pandering to veterans. Kansas has a Democratic woman governor because the last Republican primary was won by a religious conservative so far to the right that he frightened the traditional conservative Republicans.¹ In Lawrence, the town that is home to the flagship state university where I teach, politics are happily a little different. Lawrence was founded in 1854 by abolitionists who sought to keep Kansas free when it became a state, and its self-defining moment came in 1863 when the town was burned to the ground and the men massacred by Confederate guerilla fighters. In the last century Lawrence continued its progressive legacy by being a hotbed for radicals in the 1960s and 1970s. In the mid-1990s we were able to pass an ordinance forbidding discrimination in housing and employment against gays and lesbians,

and we now have a city commission with a majority from the “smart growth” Progressive Lawrence party. Kansas is rightfully the butt of many jokes these days from liberals like Bill Maher and Jay Leno. It is home to the meanest Christian in the world, Fred Phelps, the minister who pickets the funerals of AIDS activists and Iraq War veterans. Religious fundamentalists want to make Kansas once again the ground for radical change in civic culture. But like the Jayhawkers before us who held off the slave-holding Missourians bent on making Kansas a slave state, many of us in Lawrence are standing our ground on academic freedom, trying to bring about a progressive future in our state.

This paper is about teaching progressive ideas in Kansas, among the reddest of the red states. The basic issue is about maintaining and championing academic freedom in the face of religious fundamentalism. I take up two questions: What should we take our task as feminist teachers to be? How should it be carried out? Ultimately I aim to transform society through my teaching to value and accept peace, freedom, and justice. I believe that feminism provides both the analytical methods and the philosophical content to achieve a world of peace and justice, and therefore I want to transform the students into feminists. I do not expect this outcome in every case, or for it to come about quickly in many cases. I pursue more immediate and measurable aims that are appropriate to the subject and goals of the course, such as critical thinking; clear, analytical writing; understanding of classical arguments and how they might be criticized; and so forth. I see these shorter term goals as steps on the way to the ultimate goal.² Teaching for transformation requires patience with respect to that long-term goal, and sublimation of one’s ego as well. It requires one to resist trying simply to glorify one’s own position or prove one’s ability in rational argumentation. I want to shape, influence, affect, and persuade, not manipulate, indoctrinate, or simply win. Teaching is not an exercise in logic, although it requires logic; it is an exercise in moral psychology. Teaching progressive ideas both requires and exemplifies academic freedom, I shall argue, as I examine and recommend a strategy for achieving this revolution in the devolving situation that is Kansas.

Religious Fundamentalism and Academic Freedom in Kansas

The political problems of teaching in Kansas can be summarized as the challenge by religious fundamentalism to academic freedom. By academic freedom I mean the liberty of persons in academia to pursue ideas, their expression and critique, without supervision by governmental authority or subjection to extreme social pressure, but rather constrained only by the limits of imagination and the process of critical

peer review. Academic freedom requires that politicians and administrators permit and encourage the free exchange of ideas, subject only to the laws of evidence and logic, as judged by accepted experts in the field. These experts are in turn subjected to critique and are replaced by others when their judgments or ideas are judged by other experts to be inadequate. Academic freedom is thus a self-contained enterprise of academia, but its isolation from external critique is justified insofar as anyone is welcome to do the hard work necessary to become an expert: learn the language, make open and reasoned investigations into the subject matter, and subject one's findings to critique by other experts.³ Academic freedom can be justified as the first principle of academia for both ethical and pragmatic reasons.⁴ Ethically, academic freedom is about respecting individuals for their rational capacities. Pragmatically, academic freedom can be justified by the achievements of a free society and by the personal satisfaction of those who are free to pursue their own course.

Fundamentalists believe that there is a foundational, literal interpretation of their favored religious text, that the behaviors prescribed by these texts are commanded by God and override any secular norms, rules, or laws, and that only those who agree with them are the chosen people. Fundamentalists are therefore interested in only a very limited debate about the literal interpretation of their favored text. That interpretation then constrains and guides their ideas on everything else; nothing in politics, science, or ethics, for example, may contradict that interpretation. Evidence that is unrelated to the literal interpretation of the favored text cannot be brought to bear on arguments unless fundamentalists decide that the text is silent on the issue. While there is much that is discussed in a university on which the texts are silent (such as the optimal chemical composition of asphalt sealants), the texts determine the answers for most of the topics taken up in social and political philosophy. In these areas, along with others such as evolutionary biology and medicine, fundamentalism opposes the free exchange of ideas demanded by academic freedom.

There are five related academic issues about which fundamentalists in Kansas feel religion demands conformity to a position that is opposed by many or most academics and particularly feminists and biologists: evolution, sexuality education, abortion, stem cell research, and academic freedom itself. Each of these issues and the related controversies in Kansas illustrate how fundamentalists would restrict the world view of students and researchers in the interest of their own religious agenda.

Evolution

The evolution debate in Kansas began in the late 1990s when the State Board of Education was targeted for a stealth campaign by religious fundamentalists. By 1998 they had the votes to remove all references to evolution in the state science standards, effectively leaving it up to the discretion of individual science teachers whether or not to teach evolution by natural selection, the unifying theory of modern biology. In 2000, the state's citizens were mobilized to overturn that majority, and the standards were quickly revised to include the teaching of evolution. But in the 2004 election, fundamentalists again achieved a one-vote majority on the Board and once again changed the science standards, this time more subtly but more dangerously. Now they mandate that students learn some "criticisms" of evolutionary theory, including "a lack of empirical evidence for a 'primordial soup,'" "the lack of adequate natural explanations for the genetic code," and "the sudden rather than gradual emergence of organisms."⁵ Most seriously, they removed the definition of science as "the human activity of seeking natural explanations for what we observe in the world around us."⁶ Thus science in Kansas is now subject to critique by those who believe in supernatural explanations of phenomena. These are persons whom scientists (on the traditional understanding of the term) dismiss as quacks rather than accept as fellow experts.

Evolution has been the subject of a concerted attack, dubbed the "wedge strategy,"⁷ by a large national effort on the part of persons connected with the Discovery Institute, a conservative Christian think tank in Seattle. Their idea has been to use the notion of academic freedom to introduce Christian-inspired critiques of evolution by natural selection and to replace the teaching of evolution with the neo-Creationist idea of intelligent design by a divine creator. But, not being accepted by scientists as experts, they fall outside the group of those privileged to critique scientific explanations within the institutions of science. Thus, the key element in replacing evolution with intelligent design in Kansas schools comes in the replacement of natural by supernatural explanations. The wedge strategy proponents claim that they simply want educators to "teach the controversy." But there is no controversy among scientists about the basic process of evolution by natural selection, nor is there controversy among philosophers of science about the definition of science as involving naturalistic explanations of natural phenomena, specifically ruling out supernatural ones. Thus, to teach this controversy is to commit the fallacy of *non sequitur*. And for a political body—the State Board of Education—to insist on it against the advice of scientific and philosophical experts is to violate, not protect, academic freedom.

Sexuality Education

Two recent events in Kansas have centered on sexuality education, another hobgoblin of the fundamentalists. The most recent came in the 2006 legislative session when the Kansas legislature passed a bill requiring parents in Kansas to sign a permission form for their children to be able to participate in sex education in schools. This so-called “opt-in” policy replaces the “opt-out” policy where it was assumed that all children were to take part in sexuality education unless their parents took steps specifically to have them excluded from it. A more spectacular example of the chilling of academic freedom surrounding sexuality education came in April 2003, when a legislative intern to State Senator Susan Wagle, who had enrolled in the course in order to spy on it for the Senator, alleged that the professor in her Human Sexuality in Everyday Life course was teaching in an obscene manner that constituted sexual harassment. The Fox Channel’s *O’Reilly Factor* aired a segment on this featuring the senator. Now this course is one of the most popular courses on our campus, or was, rather, until the professor’s retirement last year. After a very thorough investigation and over a month of scrutiny by the KU administration and harassment by members of the public and the press, the course was formally found not to be obscene. Academic freedom prevailed in the end, but the situation was traumatic for the professor.

Abortion

No issue in this country is more fraught with controversy than abortion, and Kansas is no exception. The University of Kansas Hospital, the hospital connected with the state university’s medical school, was prohibited by legislation passed in 1997 from performing abortions except in an emergency. Thus, the students are not able to train to perform routine abortions in the university hospital. While this restriction does not completely preclude the teaching of abortion techniques, the fact that the restriction was placed on the hospital for purely partisan, political reasons, and that it runs contrary to the wishes of those professors who would otherwise teach abortion methods in their courses, means that this is a serious breach of academic freedom.

Embryonic Stem Cell Research

There has been a similar story with embryonic stem cell research, and although the problem this time is federal law, one of its staunchest supporters is Senator Sam Brownback of Kansas. Embryonic stem cell research has been considerably slowed by the Bush Administration’s policy to prohibit the use of new embryos. While embryonic stem cells show great promise for healing a wide range of human disease,

religious fundamentalists consider the destruction of embryos as equivalent to murder. Brownback stated recently, “We all have a duty to protect the innocent, and stem-cell research that destroys embryos kills young human children.”⁸ I cannot defend here the claim that this is an unsupportable view of human personhood, but given that it is only supported by those who hold a religiously based view of the matter, to deny researchers the ability to pursue their work on the basis of that view is a breach of academic freedom.

The Academic Bill of Rights

The final assault on academic freedom that I want to mention that has come to Kansas is the David Horowitz show, inaptly named the Academic Bill of Rights, which was debated by the Kansas Legislature in February and March 2006. The Academic Bill of Rights is a document drawn up by conservatives who deplore the presence of progressives in academia. They view the professoriate and academia as dominated by liberals and leftists, and want to (1) eliminate programs, professors, and courses that teach progressive political views, and (2) start an affirmative action program for conservatives in the remaining fields. While the Academic Bill of Rights begins with a number of statements that anyone in favor of academic freedom would agree with, such as the value of diversity and the prohibition on indoctrination in the classroom, it ends up by calling for oversight of the content of state university courses by the state legislature. As I began writing this article, I was alerted to the testimony of David Horowitz before the Kansas House accusing the Women’s Studies Program at KU, of which I am the director, of teaching such politically controversial views as, paraphrasing Horowitz, that social injustice exists, that women are oppressed, and that they are nonetheless agents of change. Horowitz claims that these ideas are “controversial issue[s] that divide our political culture.”⁹ In the next section of this paper I will discuss our faculty’s response to this incident. Now I want to turn to teaching in this compromised academic environment.

Teaching in a Climate of Conservatism

The students I teach come mainly from Kansas and many of them, or their parents and neighbors, vote for the politicians who hold the conservative and anti-academic freedom views that I have mentioned. Many of them—perhaps 50 percent—are fundamentalists.¹⁰ These students not only hold views on evolution, abortion, and sex that are anti-feminist, they are also opposed to arguing rationally about those views on grounds other than grounds that I reject and have a fiduciary responsibility not to discuss in class. What is a progressive teacher to do?

Teaching Strategies

As I stated earlier, my ultimate aim is nothing less than social transformation. I want to argue that it is important to draw a distinction between the strategic situation of the long-term outcome we seek and the tactical situation of the political and social climate and what that means for the classes we teach, at least in the short run. In the long run we may seek an openness and frankness about social values and goals we feminists hold, but in the short run it may be counter-productive to express them in the most explicit and efficient terms. For example, given the current climate of feeling about religion and the vast appeal of religious fundamentalism, it may not be in our long-term interest to pursue an argument about abortion on demand, and instead we should pursue arguments about abortions that almost anyone is inclined to agree with, namely where the pregnant person was raped or her life is at stake. Or maybe it is even best to avoid abortion altogether at this point and discuss in other contexts such related topics as bodily autonomy, coercion, and the hallmarks of moral personhood. Taking a tactical approach may mean forgoing speaking the (whole) truth in the short term. Such an approach, I suggest, is like accepting a (perhaps unnecessary) loss in a poker hand in order to win the pot at the end of the night.

The best teaching tactic in a fundamentalist climate, such as that in Kansas now, I believe, is to attempt to win the trust of the students through displaying respect for whatever beliefs, values, and argumentative skills the students have that I can respect. The idea is that the teacher attempts to build on whatever rationality the person possesses, while avoiding as long as possible confrontation with the affectively loaded fundamentalist beliefs. The teacher must not deny feminist ideals or truth, but she can avoid discussing them, using her authority to change the subject to something closer to a solid, common ground of basic agreement. The teacher then can inch forward one small premise at a time, retreating to the scaffolding of agreement when there is disaffection, and inching forward again when trust is restored. I call this the *bridge strategy* because it is an attempt to build a bridge to the fundamentalist students that they can cross to the feminist side of the chasm. Even if this bridge can be successfully built, it will allow a two-way passage for some time. Old ideas shared with family and friends will not easily be abandoned. And yet, this back-and-forth will strengthen the confidence of the student in the solidity of the feminist side, even before she realizes she is visiting the feminist side.

The bridge strategy is the best to pursue for both ethical and pragmatic reasons. To see this, let me compare it to two other possible strategies. One is to lecture the students and ridicule or dismiss any objections that might arise from the conservative students. Let's call

this the *dismissal strategy*. Another strategy is to teach, according to one's convictions, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, allowing for discussion and questions from the students, but making sure to win all the arguments. Let's call this the *whole truth strategy*. Both of these alternative strategies have their advantages. They both allow the progressive teacher to feel superior and to maintain a kind of self-respect, knowing that one is not allowing bad ideas to sully one's classroom. The dismissal strategy injects righteous anger on the right side of things for a change. So it feels fair and just. But it doesn't work. Not only does it fail to persuade the ridiculed and the dismissed, but it makes them the underdogs in the classroom where the teacher has most of the power, and it causes the more neutral students to switch to the underdogs' side.¹¹ The whole truth strategy feels ultra-respectful because it treats the students like fully rational beings who can hold their own in debate, but only if their ideas and arguments are sound. This is the strategy I have pursued in lots of classes; it is the strategy of beginning teachers and teachers whose primary aim is to look smart. But it doesn't work to influence and persuade, either, in part for the same reasons that the dismissal strategy doesn't work: it makes the fundamentalists the underdogs. It also doesn't work because it fails to empower the students who are slower to catch on. In my experience, at least, those students who do not resent the teacher or who are not quick enough to learn the techniques and arguments on one hearing, turn to the teacher as the authority and fail to develop their own capacities for thinking things through and constructing arguments. This makes those students vulnerable to charismatic fundamentalists in the future.

The bridge strategy is most likely to influence students positively and it treats them as worthy of respect in just the way students should be respected by teachers—as independent thinkers who are capable of changing their minds, and as worthy of the efforts of the teacher. This kind of teaching requires academic freedom for both the teacher and the student. The teacher must have the freedom to present progressive ideas, but also to present ideas that are not fully the truth even as the teacher sees it, or not fully the best arguments for the truth. The students must have academic freedom to express their conservative or fundamentalist ideas, too, although here the teacher must use her authority and power to change the subject, when necessary, to avoid stalling the class in a pit of fundamentalist, racist, or sexist ideas. Expression of these ideas has to be forestalled until there is so much trust on the part of the students that the teacher can successfully call them into question and raise doubts that only the most indoctrinated can resist. Now one might object that by giving these students such freedom there will be times when they appear to have the last word, or at least a very harmful number of words in the class. Surely the teacher should intervene at this

point to refute the ideas with whatever dismissal or whole truth tactic is available. But I want to suggest that this temptation to ensure a win in every class period should be avoided. First, it must be remembered that students do not stop thinking when they leave our classes. Students will go on to nurture those seeds of doubt that have been planted and fed in a ground of trust and respect. Second, the objections to the other strategies still hold. So even if the students do not go on to nurture doubt about those bad ideas, they will not be any more persuaded by being dismissed or crushed by (what they will see as) mere clever argument. Third, the bridge strategy exemplifies academic freedom. The bridge strategy allows debate and discussion of ideas through finding common ground on which to proceed, rather than simply browbeating the less powerful side or giving the students reason simply to placate the teacher by appearing to agree. It thus exemplifies full debate by means of public reason, that is, by reasoning that is acceptable to a wide overlapping consensus of the society. Such debate and persuasion is not the only kind of academic freedom, to be sure. Academic freedom must also encompass the right to speak ideas that do not fit into the overlapping consensus. But this sort of debate and persuasion is part of the open exchange of ideas that academic freedom fosters in those who are formulating their views. By practicing academic freedom in the classroom, students come to appreciate that freedom. Since the principle of academic freedom itself conflicts with fundamentalism, its practice will encourage doubt about fundamentalism.

Conclusion

I want to conclude with two stories of responses to the two challenges to academic freedom in Kansas that I have discussed. One of my colleagues in the Religious Studies Department at the University of Kansas was unfortunately involved in the evolution pseudo-controversy. He planned to teach a course called "Intelligent Design and other Creation Myths" this past spring semester, and it had enrolled a couple dozen students. Then a message he had sent to a listserv for a student group he advised, saying that this course would be "a nice slap in their big fat face," referring to fundamentalists, was made public by a local fundamentalist activist. The professor was quickly at the center of an investigation into his credentials and teaching methods. He ended up canceling the course and resigning as the chair of the department. Perhaps needless to say this is not the reaction that I would praise on his part, although it is an understandable one. In his e-mail this professor reveals that he does not, perhaps cannot, respect the fundamentalist students who may sign up for his class. He seems to be pursuing the

dismissal strategy. As my theory would have predicted, the result has been to strengthen the anti-academic freedom group.

The second story is the Women's Studies Program's response to the attack by David Horowitz, which was of a different character, exemplifying the bridge strategy. After a day of dozens of e-mails among our advisory board, debating our best response, the core faculty decided to write a letter to the editor of the local paper responding to Horowitz in a way that could reach out to thinking people of a variety of political and religious backgrounds. We wrote: "Our Program is all about academic freedom and adamantly opposed to the indoctrination of students by any force whatsoever. We teach students to think critically about their world in order to take their place as responsible adult stewards of our local and global communities. We are very proud of our program and the accomplishments of our students and faculty. We invite you to investigate us and view examples of our students' work on our website." We then went on to explain how peer review works to build reliable knowledge in the academy, our field being no exception. We argued that the ideas that Horowitz criticized "are an essential part of the global discussion of human rights, injustice, inequality, and freedom, engaged in by persons across the spectrum of philosophical, religious, and political views." Finally, we granted that "David Horowitz is free to speak his mind about this or any other idea, of course. We remain committed to free intellectual debate. As a part of this free debate," we added, "it is essential that all of us hold each other accountable to evidence for ideas we express, particularly those with which we seek to influence political action to constrain others' rights to freely express themselves." With this letter we were trying to teach our fellow citizens about the importance and value of academic freedom, while exemplifying it in an exchange of ideas grounded in public reason. This is the sort of response, I submit, that builds a bridge and may forestall a devolution.

Notes

1. In the Nov. 2006 election, in which the Democrats won majorities in both houses of Congress, the most conservative Republican representative from Kansas was replaced by a centrist Democrat.

2. I thank Alison Jaggar for challenging me to distinguish between these two kinds of goals.

3. The "dense web of institutions" that constitute peer review in academia is usefully described in Schrecker, "Worse than McCarthy." Now I do not want to claim that peer review is flawless, or that it does not have inertial biases that are difficult to overcome. This has certainly been the case for progressive ideas that attempt to expand the subject matter beyond traditional boundaries. (See my "Objectivity and Ethno-Feminist Critiques of Science.") Peer review, however, is the only game in town.

4. Jaggar, "Teaching in Colorado," sets out additional arguments to justify academic freedom.

5. Kansas state science curriculum standards, as quoted in Julie Mettenburg, "Evolution of a Controversy," 25.

6. Ibid.

7. Center for Renewal of Science and Culture, "The Wedge Strategy."

8. Gertzen, "Stem-Cell Rules."

9. Testimony of David Horowitz before Kansas House of Representatives, 14 March 2006, 7.

10. In a large (200-person) class I teach, I have asked them whether they (1) believe in the literal truth of the Bible; (2) think that the theory of evolution by natural selection is the best scientific explanation of the origins and development of life on earth; and (3) believe that (1) and (2) are consistent. About 50 percent of them answer yes, no, no, and thus I would classify them as fundamentalists.

11. Anita Superson points out to me that the dismissal strategy has its legitimate use. The dismissal strategy may be appropriate in a non-required feminist class, where the students are expected to have mastered the basic ideas of feminist theory that are not in dispute among those who construct the theory, just as in a calculus class where it would be inappropriate, and cause for dismissal, for a student to question basic arithmetic.

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