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Is Safe-Enough Pragmatism Good Enough?

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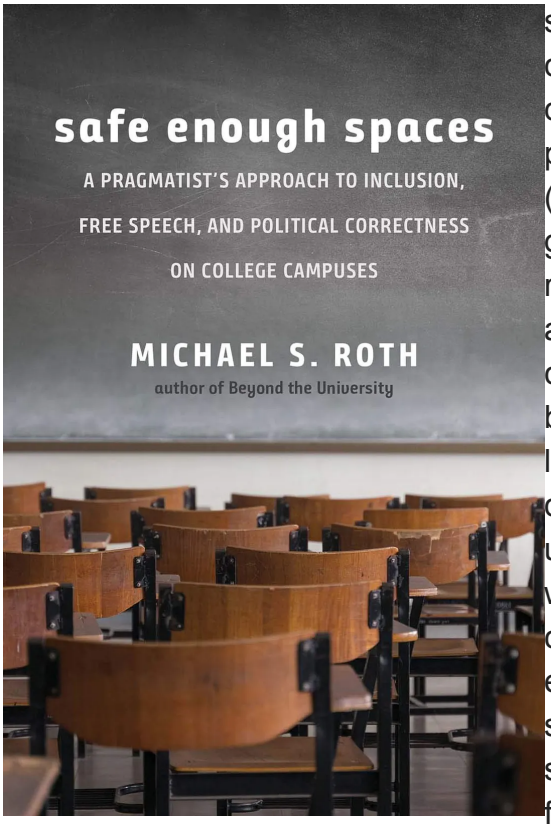

Safe Enough Spaces

Michael S. Roth

IT IS NO SECRET that social fractures have increased significantly in the past 40 years or so. Deep disagreements about rights and entitlements having to do with race (affirmative action and inclusion versus procedurally "equal" treatment), economic inequality (liberty in property accumulation versus fairness), gender and sexuality (liberal rights and demands for recognition versus suspicion and fear of social chaos), and religion (fundamental moral and social commitments versus neutrality) are endemic and all but intractable, argumentatively and politically. And it is likewise no secret that these fractures and disagreements have surfaced in colleges and universities, which are, after all, part of the social world and agencies in its reproduction and contestation. Thus, we have seen disputes in higher education about shutting down putatively harmful speakers (sometimes cynically funded by controversy-seeking national conservative organizations) versus free speech, about affirmative action, about inclusive curricula and campus cultures, and about what subjects are worth funding for what reasons. In 2018, the Tennessee state legislature considered (but did not pass) bills requiring all students at all state universities to earn three credit hours in economics, prohibiting any state university from requiring more than six credit hours in humanities as part of its general education requirements, and mandating so-called efficiency audits to be carried out by external, private-sector vendors. Increasingly, boards of college and university trustees are composed of business people and lawyers rather than academics, and humanities departments face threats of elimination. A 2018 Gallup poll found that over 50 percent of American adults now lack either "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in higher education.

Into this breach steps Michael S. Roth with a pragmatist plaidoyer for sanity. Roth is a distinguished intellectual historian — the author of six previous books, including *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters* (2014) — who has been the president of Wesleyan University since 2007, though he may also be more immediately remembered for

his appearances in the comic strip *Doonesbury*, after he cancelled the annual Wesleyan students' Zonker Harris Day art and musical festival in 2008 (subsequently reinstated in 2011). In *Safe Enough Spaces*, he offers in three short chapters a reliable history and reflective assessment of controversies about affirmative action and full inclusion in campus culture, of the development and use of the hypocrisy-charging term "political correctness," and of more recent controversies about free speech on campus. In each case, the watchword is *balance*. As a 2018 Harvard report puts it, in a thought Roth endorses, we need and can have both "rigorous inquiry," with respect to difficult topics that may raise tempers and resentments, and "respectful belonging" where we appreciate one another despite disagreements.

Colleges and universities should maintain a "welcoming campus culture" without becoming what Stephen Moore called intolerant "playpens of the left." It is reasonable to hope and to expect that there will be "iterative cross-pollination" between better "opportunities for the disadvantaged" and "better learning for all." Students, faculty, and staff should all "feel 'safe enough' to consider alternatives," without anyone becoming either cloistered or complacent and without cultivating fragility and dependency. We can take individuals seriously, while also being aware of the influence of social structures on thinking and behavior. "The free market approach to speech is not the solution"; it is important to cultivate a climate that affirmatively welcomes the views of those who are less rich and powerful and views that are unfamiliar — including "affirmative action programs for ideas emerging from conservative and religious traditions." (At Wesleyan, Roth has instituted programs for recruiting military veterans as students, and for hiring retired military professionals as teachers.) Above all, we need "inquiry, compromise, and reflection," in a spirit of "open-mindedness and pragmatic idealism."

These are all sensible views, and Roth writes with decent, humane intelligence. But there are also good reasons to wonder whether they amount to relatively empty bromides. The vocabularies and policies Roth favors might help to manage some campus controversies at the margins, but they are unlikely to address deeper issues about public trust in educational institutions and about the future of democracy. Roth was a PhD student with Richard Rorty, who notoriously urged that we cultivate what he called "the conversation of mankind" in developing our value stances rather than obsessing over the epistemology of perception. Here Rorty, and Roth following him, take up a Deweyan faith in progress to be achieved through more talk, at least among people who are decent and opposed to cruelty. Rorty was himself a trenchant critic of economic inequality and a defender of Whitmanian democracy. Roth follows him in noting that "dramatically increasing economic inequality undermines the belief that the democratic process can be used to address deeply entrenched social ills" and in endorsing democratic politics, Emersonian self-reliance, what Danielle Allen called "participatory readiness" for citizenship, and coalition building around moderate solutions that work. But are talk, decency, opposition to cruelty, and pragmatic moderation enough to give us a real purchase on our problems?

Anyone defending a pragmatist commitment to what works must sooner or later ask, “Works for whom, and in what respects?” Here one must face the fact that college and university towns throughout the South, Southwest, Plains States, and Rust Belt *are* blue islands in vast red seas. As the psychologists Jonathan Haidt and Nicole M. Stephens and her colleagues have argued, what happens in the educational institutions in these blue islands is that cosmopolitanism, individualism, independence, and tolerance are promoted and reinforced, while loyalty, patriotism, honor, interdependence, and trust are generally scanted. Institutions of higher education in general are emphatically not neutral with regard to red/blue conflicts, and on the whole (agriculture schools, technological institutes, business majors, and so forth to one side) they do not work to advance the way of life that is favored by rural Republicans and educationally disenfranchised whites. If there is to be any hope of progress in democratic life, then, instead of talk and pragmatic compromises within educational institutions, we will need resolute defenses of cosmopolitanism, individualism, and tolerance, *coupledwith* the development of on-the-ground policies that will address both economic disenfranchisement and intellectual frustration at not being heard. No society can survive well without significant measures of loyalty to its institutions and trust among its citizens.

Without mutual trust in reliance on each other’s word, contracts are liable to become worthless — as the behavior of our current president shows — and fair economic competition is liable to collapse into open class warfare. Sentimentalist conceptions of moral values and conceptions (encouraged by the predominance of the activities of buying and selling in daily life) that tend to reduce values to subjective preferences are no help. They threaten to leave us with contending populist appeals from both the left and the right to a general will or a supposed unanimity of sentiments, where each side is subject to what Hegel criticized as an insane frenzy of self-conceit in thinking that it alone has the right sentiments and preferences. Meanwhile, inequalities in income and wealth go on increasing, as the privileged are able to buy educational and occupational advantages for their children, and resentments grow apace.

Hegel relied on a combination of family life, where trust could be cultivated, education, generally progressive Christian religious understanding, corporations that offered workers “membership for life,” and a state committed to democratic values and superintended by an educated class in order to curb the depredations of an otherwise valuable free market economy and to maintain relations of mutual trust among citizens. John Rawls relied on what he called a shared “sense of fairness” — one of the two human “moral powers,” along with an ability to articulate and pursue a conception of the good — being brought to bear in public life. But as Marx saw, family life, religion, the management of corporations and the state, and the very sense of fairness as a value have all been colonized and distorted by the untrammeled workings of the market and the rapaciousness of the wealthy. As a result, under current conditions procedural representative democracy seems unlikely to restore shattered solidarity and mutual trust, and, as noted, contending sentimental populisms are unlikely to yield social consensus. Nor will appeal to an abstract ontology of moral facts be much help in the face of lived social antagonisms and value stances.

So what, if anything, can we hope for in these parlous times of a colonized and hollowed out public order and a sentimentalized conception of values? Roth proposes that “inquiry, compromise, and reflection” carried out in a spirit of “open-mindedness and pragmatic idealism” will help, and he notes that “students across the country are refusing to retreat from the public sphere.” Yet he also says that “there’s no denying that there is a serious problem of [left] political bias on college campuses.” Here it is unclear whether he quite trusts what activist faculty and students in mostly elite institutions are saying and doing. The charge of left bias both indicates a failure to take seriously the values and judgments at stake in left activism that addresses climate change and economic injustice, and it ignores the situation and forms of activism that are present in the much larger number of non-elite institutions. (There are more students enrolled in the community colleges of the state of Florida than there are in the top 50 private universities and top 50 private liberal arts colleges combined.)

Perhaps a good crisis will help — 2008 was sadly wasted — though, however likely one is to occur, it is also likely folly to place bets on a happy resolution. Responding to what he called “the degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation” on the part of his urban and economically self-seeking countrymen, William Wordsworth proposed that the true poet “must create the taste by which he is to be relished.” This holds out hope that poetic art, or art in general, might sometimes successfully solicit both non-consumerist absorption in the work itself and heightened attentiveness to what it thematizes about common life. It might help us to see and feel more clearly together, thus becoming members of fuller and fitter communities than we now mostly are, and even in the face of lived self-centered material priorities. Some people, perhaps enough people, often experience something like this absorption and heightened attentiveness in their engagements with works of art of all kinds, from novels to television programs to installations to musical performances. If only we could seek out, trust, and talk about these experiences, even when we disagree — then there might be hope. Trust in such experiences and in talk about them can at least sometimes change and inform patterns of attention and concern.

Given their current pragmatic and technocratic dispensations (STEM and business majors, outcomes assessments, and acceptance of the need to prove “value for money” in economic terms) as well as their costs to families in the form of tuition, this is sadly perhaps unlikely to happen within educational institutions at all levels, where it ought to happen. Things might be otherwise, were both high schools and universities to institute serious requirements in humanities, foreign languages, and history. Unfortunately, parents and state legislators are unlikely to be willing to pay for that. But trust and talk might happen little by little in community film centers, art galleries, bookstore readings, musical performances, and coffee shops, as self-sustaining patterns of attention and conversation emerge and develop. A genuine public for art and democratic citizenship might, over time, be built, even where it does not already exist, largely outside educational institutions.

Or maybe, along with Michael S. Roth, I am whistling in the dark.
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