

## Free Speech and Diversity: Current Perspectives on Public Discourse in the United States and Europe

Charb. 2015. *Open Letter: On Blasphemy, Islamophobia, and the True Enemies of Free Expression*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. 2015. *Between the World and Me*. New York, NY: Spiegel & Grau.

Garton Ash, Timothy. 2016. *Free Speech: Ten Principles for a Connected World*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

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Values of diversity and free speech have been coming into conflict on college campuses across the United States. According to some educators, requests for the courtesy of “trigger warnings” and sensitivity to microaggressions contribute to free speech’s desired outcome of pluralism. But for others, such heightened awareness and sensitivity to discourse and its effects on participation are so self-conscious that they coddle minds that are supposed to be stretched by the exercise of free speech, particularly in its more transgressive forms. Questions are being asked as to whether all speakers on campuses have equally valid rights to free speech, and whether those rights apply when certain speech is excessively disrespectful toward people based on their biological or social characteristics. The hotly disputed nature of the August 2017 rally of white nationalists in Charlottesville, Virginia, is a case in point. Meanwhile, across the Atlantic in Europe, vigilance against terrorism and the rise of nationalist parties to power in places such as Poland and Hungary have been testing the boundaries of the kinds of free speech and diversity that universities and the public at large are willing to accept. Surveillance of social media and protests against extremist political parties have contested the public legitimacy of all views.

What principles then might foster more civil and inclusive public discourse? What considerations need to inform such principles at a time when the competing claims of media and opinion platforms have suggested to many observers that we are entering a “post-truth” society? Are there forms of language that can fruitfully shake us out of a crisis of public debate?

One recent book by a British journalist and contemporary historian argues passionately for the role of free speech in maintaining diversity, while pointing to principles that might help us manage it in an unruly age. Timothy Garton Ash’s *Free Speech: Ten Principles for a Connected World* (2016) draws on the author’s decades of experience observing challenges to free speech during and after communist rule in Eastern Europe, as well as an ambitious research project that he has been directing at Oxford University. According to Garton Ash, we have entered a global “cosmopolis” where, thanks to the internet, we have unprecedented opportunity for freedom of expression, while at the same time, the “evils of unlimited free expression” have never been more potent. To try to support “more and better free speech,” he offers 10 principles that were refined through focus group discussions around the globe, including public

presentations in China and India and the online project of a graduate student team at Oxford University. The 10 principles are: Lifeblood, Violence, Knowledge, Journalism, Diversity, Religion, Privacy, Secrecy, Icebergs, and Courage. These principles reflect important concepts, as well as the starting point for different guidelines.

The book opens with a chapter on the nature of language, moving briskly to consider how affordances of new technologies are changing patterns of how we communicate, such as the proliferation of channels that are one-to-many. We must recognize the degree to which we have acquired electronic neighbors who have transformed our communities into global cities, Garton Ash argues. For instance, Garton Ash reports that of all the unrest that followed the 2005 publication of satirical cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in Denmark, only one person in Europe was among the more than 240 people killed globally. But an additional, and perhaps underappreciated, dimension to our globalized interactions has been the messy interplay of national and transnational legal frameworks, particularly the more libertarian U.S. one that has maintained a prominent role through the spread of the internet into lives across the planet. Through numerous examples, Garton Ash argues that legislating protections against abuses of free speech (such as offensive arts or statements) across communities and the national media are increasingly impractical. What might be forbidden in one place can easily circulate back after dissemination elsewhere (such as in the 2005 international row over the satirical cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed published in Denmark), a reality in keeping with the values of Silicon Valley, but not so much with values in other countries.

The author then turns to a chapter reflecting on “ideals,” framed by the question: “Why should speech be free?” Garton Ash reviews classic arguments that he glosses as “Self,” “Truth,” “Government,” and “Diversity.” The chapter draws richly from literature, song, and poetry to emphasize early on “that I establish not just what I think but who I am through relations with other people” (Garton Ash 2016, 74). The author finds that debates about free speech often attend to questions of what kinds of speech should be banned, and too little to matters of style, conventions, and mutual understandings that necessarily rely on self-regulation. Garton Ash pleads for sensitivity to context, paired with transcultural openness, to help us “agree on how we disagree” in cosmopolis (2016, 114).

The subsequent 10 chapters each articulate one of the principles that Garton Ash proposes. “Lifeblood” meditates on freedom of expression as essential to our humanity, as well as a human right. “Violence” explores the misuse of language as a means of intimidating or silencing others with whom we disagree. “Knowledge” emphasizes the interrelationship between free speech, science, education, and informal kinds of learning. “Journalism” outlines the importance of news media in good governance. “Diversity” describes various types of conflict and the role of civility in solutions. “Religion” argues for respecting a believer even if we find it difficult to respect the content of a belief. “Privacy” notes the social importance of our individual reputations and how free speech and inquiry can depend on them. “Secrecy” makes the case for transparency and freedom of information. “Icebergs” cautions against potential illegitimate encroachments by both public and private powers. Finally, “Courage” maintains the need for responsibility in language use.

*Free Speech* offers a robust defense of diversity. Some readers might find it to be the exact voice we need in a global age that only seems to grow more discordant. For other readers, however, Garton Ash’s very systematic and rather puritanical, classically liberal style of

argument might seem as untimely as many analysts found the recent presidential campaign of a member of the liberal “global elite,” Hillary Clinton. Might the most fruitful mode of engaging with this time of terrorism, politically motivated assassinations, racially patterned police brutality, anxiety over globalization’s excesses, and distrust of institutions be not a rational one, but one of revolutionary poetics? Two recent smaller monographs make this case, almost as if in reply to Garton Ash.

*Open Letter: On Blasphemy, Islamophobia, and the True Enemies of Free Expression* (2015) is a posthumous manifesto by the editor in chief of the French satirical journal *Charlie Hebdo*. The author, Stéphane Charbonnier (or “Charb”), was among the journal’s staff assassinated in January 2015 after years of publicly defiant ridicule of religion and particularly Islam, made famous by the journal’s 2006 republication of the Danish cartoons. The 80-page polemic defends free speech during rising xenophobia in France.

Charbonnier writes in a voice of deep frustration over the unleashing of racist speech in public after the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy and subsequent confusion over its nature. Some of this disorientation, Charbonnier argues, has been caused by activists and an opportunistic media that have denounced a fear of Islam when the root cause might be phenotypical difference (e.g., a non-Muslim who “looks Arab” because of family origins in North Africa versus a Muslim who “looks white” thanks to family origins in France). Some of the responsibility lies with a secular elite who, in Charbonnier’s view, “infantilizes” Muslims by seeking to protect them from *Charlie Hebdo*’s satire (2015, 32). The manifesto defends the journal against the “clowns” who have attacked it (Charb 2015, 34). Charbonnier protests, “We are asked to respect Islam, but respecting Islam is not the same as fearing it” (2015, 51). From there, the author touches on the Catholic French far-right, anti-republican blasphemy and a counterpart to Islamophobia: “atheophobia,” or the violent criticism of atheism.

A fair portion of the “manifesto” concerns details of French politics that are valuable to a non-French reader interested in a comparative analysis of diversity and free speech, but perhaps not so much to a reader without this interest. The foreword by longtime *New Yorker* contributor Adam Gopnik adds helpful context. The subject of the manifesto as a whole might leave us with an unsettling question: How can we consistently avoid the kind of sincere logical slippages and insincere rhetorical confusions that Charbonnier seeks to set straight? Can this even be accomplished in France, a country with high levels of education and reflexivity on language, or are the ideals of protecting diversity within free speech doomed to metalinguistic muddling?

If the voice of *Open Letter* is that of a racial majority intellectual mounting a vehement and mocking defense of free speech against a front of alleged minority overreaction, political opportunism, and disorderly discourse, then the deeply personal essay *Between the World and Me* (2015) pushes back, hard, against the conceits and illusions of a white majority. The book—*The Atlantic* correspondent Ta-Nehisi Coates’s letter to his teenage son—recounts moments of racial violence in the United States that Coates himself has lived through, and it poses profoundly unsettling questions about the utopian promise of the “American Dream” and its racist foundations. Coates’s language is unshrinking and penetrating, such as when he observes: “they transfigured our very bodies into sugar, tobacco, cotton, and gold” (2015, 71). Because of the deep fissures that race has carved into national consciousness, young men in the United States who are profiled as “black” must walk through society with a different self-conscious “responsibility” for the actions of other black bodies. How can such self-consciousness, painfully

necessary in an era of racially patterned police shootings, not restrict the speech of some for the benefit of others?

Garton Ash's account of the rules to guide cosmopolis seems to skate quickly over this ice to avoid the bracing reality of racial inequity underneath. While Garton Ash acknowledges to some degree, and seeks to resist, the present structural inequities that compromise a truly diverse and pluralistic civil society (see page 29), in reading *Between the World and Me*, the reader cannot help but be pessimistic about how the long and deep workings of racism have rendered the ideal of one nation to civil societies or public spheres in the plural. Coates, in fact, finds a triumph of spirit to celebrate when he writes, "They made us into a race. We made ourselves into a people" (2015, 149). Garton Ash's treatise does not really engage with the problem of how most global commons are shot through with such histories of power known and less known.

While perhaps a bit long (at 381 pages), *Free Speech* is a thoughtful and lucidly organized contemporary guide for navigating the choppy waters of free speech in cultural oceans that we are increasingly aware we must share with vessels on other courses. No single map or guide suffices. International educators might find the book appropriately complemented by other recent publications, such as *Open Letter* and *Between the World and Me*, that impassion critical reflexivity to engage with the upheaval in discourses and social structures that are transforming the conditions for pluralism as we have known it.

## References

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