

# UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

## Lili Fabilli and Eric Hoffer Essay Prize

### 2018-19 Topic: The end of Civil Discourse?

Winners: Jeremy Brooks, Lily Greenberg Call, Michael Cervantes, Evan Cui, Sourabh Harihar, Justin Hudak, Elliott Lewis, Tara Madhav, Rudraveer Vinay Reddy, Max Stevenson, Sulaiman Syed, and Charlie Tidmarsh

#### **Jeremy Brooks**

The end of civil discourse? The topic itself is reactionary, moving towards a black and white paradigm that we see play out in media today. Nostalgia is not inherently problematic, but it should not cloud our judgement in recognizing that we have made great strides as a species in our ability to think, evaluate, and communicate. While many talking heads harken to the days of the American founding fathers, when the Constitution was constructed and the local pub served as a meeting ground to share philosophical ideas, they often conveniently leave out the father pa1i. As in, only males were allowed to take part in this construction of societal rules, and they had to be from a particular race and of adequate economic standing. If one loud, orange demagogue is all it takes to break our sophisticated yet fragile political ecosystem, perhaps we should question the way we consume information, which is far more responsible for the degradation of how we engage in discourse today.

Neil Postman was an educator and author who wrote the book *Amusing Ourselves To Death* in 1985, which offered a foreboding warning that Americans were more concerned with entertaining themselves than participating in democracy. Fast forward to 2018-the internet age-in which the media landscape is dominated by soundbites and flashy substance that satisfies this entertainment craze. As a society we have, whether through unconscious or knowing submission, exchanged our rights as citizens of a republic for our comfort as consumers.

We are all complicit in this, although to varying degrees. Some in power have intentionally tried to suppress access to information and further disenfranchise people who have been left out of conversations that decide the fate of this country. Yet there are plenty of us who want equality and equitable treatment, but are too busy with our own lives and amusing ourselves to make sacrifices to preserve the integrity of discourse today. This lack of participation has led to the election of a polarizing president who would rather appeal to spectacle through the use of ad hominem attacks than engage in a dialogue of political thought. It is a frustrating conundrum but there remains reason for hope.

If you think that civil discourse is over, you were not there for the Women's March. You did not listen to millions around the world saying Me Too. You did not see the recent record setting election in which the first Muslim women and Native American women were elected to Congress. You did not notice each day on the UC Berkeley campus students, faculty, and staff, with various gender identities, ethnicities, cultures, and socio-economic statuses come together to share ideas on how we can create a better future. This is not the end of civil discourse, it is an opportunity for all people to finally be represented in our society. The challenge for us is whether we are willing to give up our longing to be entertained for the responsibility to impact positive change.

## **Michael Cervantes**

### **We Are the Hope for Civil Discourse**

If you get your news online, on TV, or from a newspaper, it seems that civil discourse is reaching an end in our communities and in the United States. Even within the Berkeley community, civil discourse is in decline.

On February 1, 2017, provocative conservative speaker Milo Yiannopoulos was scheduled to speak at the UC Berkeley campus. In reaction, rioters began to smash windows of university buildings and started a fire on Sproul Plaza to protest Milo's presence on campus due to his history of hate speech. Due to the security threat, Milo's event was cancelled. Civil engagement was not allowed on the UC Berkeley campus, and it truly seemed non-existent. As the campus known for the Free Speech Movement, allowing any kind of censorship at UC Berkeley violates our traditions and values. Even if the opposing group uses hateful speech, the best way to counter those views is through civil debate, not through violence.

The end of civil discourse also seems likely in the national conversation. With the current U.S. president naming the media as "the enemy of the people", naming public servants with offensive nicknames, and naming Mexicans, Jews, and other minority groups with racist remarks, it reduces the civility and respect that American people have toward the U.S. government. With the increasing polarization of the two major political parties, it has become harder to compromise in Congress allowing gridlock to occur and major legislation needed to lead the U.S. is at a standstill. Recently, the U.S. Supreme Court faced its most controversial and toxic Supreme Court nomination in a generation due to sexual assault allegations. These events have made it more difficult to speak across the aisle and democracy cannot survive if there is no active civil engagement and compromise.

However, there is hope that civil discourse can still exist and thrive and that depends on myself and you, the reader. It means deciding to respect others when there are disagreements. It means voting for political representatives that value civility and will not add to political polarization. It means appreciating the value of others despite differences in religious and political beliefs. It means being willing to learn from each other and actively seek those opportunities and not seclude ourselves to our own bubbles. And importantly, it means deciding not to engage in inflammatory speech when talking with each other. Only then, can civil discourse survive and thrive.

## **Rudraveer Vinay Reddy**

Civility in discourse is a radical idea that masquerades as an institution in liberal democracies. The ability of a society to openly debate ideas that are subjects of broad disagreement within the individuals who constitute it without resorting to open warfare is a substantial achievement in itself. However, for civil discourse to prevail in a society requires its constituents to not only have those debates peacefully but to conduct with politeness without impugning the motives of those you disagree with. It represents the pinnacle of civilization because it curbs the instinct towards conflict in the service of a higher ideal.

The radical nature of civil discourse also makes its demise almost inevitable. As much as we garb our nature in ideologies such as nationality, religion and political leanings, the animalistic nature that predisposes us to tribalism is not concealed by any cloak. The tendency towards conflict is innate and primal. Eventually, there comes a dispute that ruptures the bonds that hold a peaceful society together. What follows next is the destruction of an institution that is built on an enlightened conception of human interactions that contradicts certain fundamentals of human nature.

In the American context, civil discourse as an ideal has been enshrined in the First Amendment to the US Constitution. This provision ensures, in clear and unambiguous language, that no group within our society shall be able to use the powers of the State to clamp down on free expression. It is impossible for a society to guarantee rights to free speech without subscribing to the idea of civil discourse. If a large enough contingent of our society believed that those who disagreed with them were not only wrong but also evil, that would mark the end of the freedom of speech and civil discourse. Nowhere is this truth more openly manifested than on the UC Berkeley campus. The night Milo Yiannopoulos was scheduled to give a speech, I saw one of my close friends beaten up mercilessly by outside agitators and taken to the hospital to treat his concussion. Our campus combines college idealism with deeply held political differences into a potent cocktail that reveals the fragility of our discourse. At all times, we are one agitation away from abandoning civil discourse for the tribalism that it aims to combat.

We cannot ignore the existence of marginalized groups who have historically been excluded from our discourse, undermining the values that all Americans claim to hold dear. However, I contend that deeply flawed societal institutions do have value because they are a blueprint when the forces of democracy seep through a society, making it more equitable for all its constituents. History does not look kindly on the arrest of Martin Luther King, Jr. in Birmingham for demonstrating to end segregation.

Civil discourse is the only institution that could ensure that such tyrannical acts don't enter the annals of our history again and its demise would further the aims of those individuals who perpetrated those acts years ago.

## **Evan Cui**

*For you are you, and I am I -  
Intertwined but bound by an epistemic divide.*

Modern-day America has witnessed a dramatic erosion of trust in its democratic institutions. This erosion is directly intertwined with the divisions permeating the national conscience. Discussions of race, gender, and class have pulled at the fabric of America since its national inception, but growing distrust of social and political institutions has brought such tensions to a boil. The state of civility has not gone unscathed. When it becomes so that citizens no longer invest themselves in a shared political culture, when our ever-present divisions acquire heightened saliency, the bonds of solidarity unravel at frightening speed.

Is it so that the divisions of our nation have reached an impasse? The answer is unclear. Rigid partisanship is palpable, but are citizens rebelling in opposition to the ideals of freedom and equality or precisely in respect to? Is it that Americans have renounced their subscriptions to liberalism en masse, or perhaps that they are merely demanding their fair share of the bargain?

These are questions that necessitate discussion, but a great challenge impedes such progress. This immense obstacle is the endeavor to reconcile the personhood of an individual with the perspective and opinions that they harbor. I ask, are we to judge an individual's views to be a singular reflection of their moral character? In other words, can we love that person who is our ideological enemy? Judgment of opinion is an unassailable virtue of our democracy, but we must not be so eager to make moral judgments of others. We are called to understand different perspectives and expand the understanding of our so-called opponents as well.

To secure the common threads by which our fates are interwoven, it is a premise that all individuals bear a responsibility to defend the liberties of one another. But when it becomes so that a people have lost sight of their presupposed foundations of cooperation, it can only follow that the fabric of their solidarity must unravel. Each individual endangers their own right to thought and speech when they relinquish their responsibility to their neighbor. For civil discourse is the steward of truth, and we all must question whether silence will diminish the golden luster of Her scales.

## **Lily Greenberg Call**

**The end of civil discourse'?**

It is the beginning of the end.

I worked in Washington, D.C. for seven months this year. Every time I saw the glimpse of that tell-tale red hat on a person in my view, the iron gates of judgement crashed shut in my brain. What does MAGA mean to a Berkeley student like myself? Nothing I want to hear.

I spent July 4th in the Holocaust Memorial Museum with my family. Like the good masochistic Jews we are, we decided that was how to celebrate Independence Day. To my horror, I saw many red hats that day. Tourists flood the National Mall on July 4<sup>th</sup>, hoping for a glimpse into a slick political world they never get to see from the square states. Apparently we weren't the only ones who thought hitting as many Smithsonian museums as possible was a good way to escape the suffocating DC heat. Yet I could not hold back my shock at seeing so many Trump supporters in the Holocaust museum. Did they not see the comparisons? The eerie similarity in photos of my imprisoned brethren and migrant children at the border? Stories of dehumanization and separation? I almost opened my big mouth and said something. But, I held my tongue.

I realized later that I do not understand what I viewed as clear cognitive dissonance on display that day because, in fact, I have never listened to a Trump supporter. Listened, not argued. And I am not alone in this. In an era of five-second sound bites and viral tweet campaigns, when was the last time a healthy, civil political debate was broadcast on national television?

Conflict continues when civil discourse fails. I have friends and family in Israel who live within eyesight of Palestinians, but have never spoken to them. No wonder everyone there is so bloody terrified of each other. I worry that we have forgotten how important constructive engagement is to a thriving democracy. The Roman Empire fell when political norms like discourse crumbled and institutions declined. It would do us good to remember that these institutions require care, and a recognition by all involved that the rules of political life mean honoring your fellow citizen and the institutions they care about. Trust is at the core of a functional democracy, and it becomes nearly impossible to trust people when you believe their intent is to do you harm.

But we can change the course of this sinking ship. I may not want to listen to that mother in a MAGA hat at the Holocaust Museum, but I probably should ask her what keeps her awake at night. I bet her concerns are not too far from my own mother's. What is truly radical is compassion, empathy, and kindness. It takes real guts and courage to listen to someone you disagree with on nearly everything. If you want to change the world, start with an open mind, and an open heart.

## **Sulaiman Syed**

Civil discourse is discussion with the end goal of understanding. It allows members of a society to approximate truth by weighing varying points of view in a respectful manner. Due to the current political and social climate, it is tempting to say that civil discourse has only now come to an end. I would disagree with this claim, but not because it is alive. Indeed, civil discourse has been on a rapid decline for the past 40 years, primarily driven by the conscious commodification of every aspect of society. And it continues its decay today under the current circumstances.

The drive for hyper-commodification has continued the spread of racial and political segregation in our country. Housing costs and shifting industries have created new social classes in which few are winners and many are losers. Large cities continue to espouse neo-liberal dogma -free trade, open borders, policies in favor of large corporate interests -while surrounding regions feed the oligopolies of the city with labor, crowding the aging freeways with mind-numbing traffic. The pains of the working

class are belittled by statistics and their lives publicly shamed when their pictures appear on "People of Wal-Mart" as commodified amusement for the privileged.

Anxieties are stoked by news media in their ravenous scramble for ratings, leading the population to a perpetual state of worry and fear. Social media, the last outpost that bears any semblance to a form of community, has created algorithmic silos where frustrated individuals can be grouped together in echo-chambers, each echo fanning the flames of tribal fervor. Finally, they are packaged and sold as commodities to the highest bidder. Often that bidder is a political group, itself wholly concerned with raising donations from corporate interests and the wealthy elite. The politician panders to the group with advertisements of misleading half-truths and conspiracy theories, pushing them further to the fringe.

Any attempt to revive the commons is met with the condescending question: "But where will the money come from?" This question is asked while cities shamelessly shower offers of subsidies and tax breaks on Amazon's beloved HQ2. The neo-liberal project started in the early 80s has evaporated meaning out of the structures of public discourse. The dogma of neo-liberalism cannot accommodate critical and civil discourse as it may lead to inefficient outcomes. As such, the market has become the final arbiter of truth. The market is efficient and price is sacred. Anything that can have a price will have a price, whether it's a product, person, school, city, or government. This has led to an obsession over quantification and an inflated managerial class, micromanaging key performance indicators and setting targets that lack long term vision. All of this done in order to derive exchange value, the only true value left.

When the banality of commodified existence under the market smothers any hope for a meaningful exchange of thought, people will lash out from the extremities of their hearts. Commodified existence is antithetical to civil discourse and a civil society.

## **Max Stevenson**

### **Civil Discourse in Dark Ages**

As someone who studies the early medieval period. I'm professionally required to bristle at the idea of the Dark Ages. I spend my time trying to convince my students that what they've been taught about Europe after the fall of Rome is wrong, that the very idea of the "Dark Ages" is an elaborate public relations campaign to make the Renaissance seem bright by comparison, and that a time many imagine as barbaric produced scholars and thinkers, artists and artisans, and laid the foundations of our modern world. Looking out on that world today, though- a world characterized by the sense of its own unraveling, a world of broken norms and broken glass-it's hard to escape the conclusion that perhaps not all times are equally bright after all. Maybe, as the center fails to hold, as our discourse turns uncivil, we're spiraling down into our own Dark Age.

So is it the end of civil discourse? It's a question that presupposes a historical change, a falling off from a period of coolly rational and generously respectful debate into a dark age of disagreement, an age where truth takes a backseat to tribalism and argumentation yields to arguing. There's an alternative, though, to that thinking- one that, if depressing, is better born out by history itself. What if, yes, just as I teach my students, it's true that the Middle Ages are just as bright as the Renaissance - not because the former are lighter than we imagine them to have been, though, but instead because the latter weren't nearly as Light?

That is, what if all our ages have been dark?

The truth is that our discourse has never been civil. There's never been some arena of idealized Athenian debate, of thoughtful rhetors in togas as pure as their dispassion convincing one another through the sheer force of their reason and mutual respect. Socrates was made to drink hemlock; at the foot and font of the discursive tradition in the West is a deeply uncivil act of violence.

And that tradition of uncivil discourse has continued throughout the history of the West, and throughout the history of this country. "The Three-Fifths Compromise," "The Missouri Compromise," "The Compromise of 1850" - the bloody and violent (and fundamentally uncivil) institution of chattel slavery was upheld by a series of discursive moments that prioritized the civility of our union over liberty for all its members, leading ultimately to a bloody and violent Civil War. The "civil society" of the mid twentieth century met the Civil Rights movement not with reasoned debate, but with rubber hoses and raw coiled rope.

What is ending in 2018 is perhaps not civil discourse, but the fiction of that civility, the fiction that our country has ever made progress through calm debate rather than through direct action. And, perhaps perversely, that is itself progress: the only way to find our way to a truly lighter age is to recognize what it really means for an age to be dark.

## Tara Madhav

I grew up next to a woman named Nancy who watered her lawn, was friendly to her white neighbors and showered her brown neighbors with racial epithets. My family called her the Witch - the term was our small rebellion against her demands that we go back to our own country and her charming reference to us as "monkeys." One night, as recounted to me, my mother and my aunt sat in our kitchen with the windows open and the sound of their conversation traveled. From her house, the Witch exploded with a new, inventive string of insults aimed towards the kitchen. My mother broke the code of a well-behaved neighborhood and called the police that night.

In the retelling, a white policeman comes to the door. In my mind, he speaks quietly but with a firmness which confirms his untold abilities to dictate the terms we live by. "Ma'am, we live in a free country. I can't do anything about what she said."

Neighbor upon neighbor, block parties, tight-lipped smiles until its foreigner against native and then this is a free country.

There is an untold tax that one pays to be civil in the face of degradation. It is a tax that takes away from the moral fortitude of the person, and yet society demands that when faced with insults, with disrespect, with threats to who we are, we take the high ground to prove something to ourselves. Civil discourse no longer works if one person capitulates their sense of worth so another person can exercise their right to undercut, demean and harass in the name of free speech. Every second, another person of color, another woman, another LGBT community member has to give up their convictions because if they call out their oppressor's hypocrisy -they are no longer civil.

The next day, another knock at the door. A black policewoman at the door - the head of race relations for the police department. She had noticed there wasn't a police report filed for the officer's visit and had come to assess what had happened last night.

A hand in the murkiness. Society finally told my mother to fight back

## Justin Hudak

### *De discursu civili*

The question itself has all the trappings of the clickbait to which, in the midst of our present political malaise, members of the left are every bit as susceptible as are their counterparts on the right. Indeed, this question is as imaginable a headline for The New York Times as for Fox News, for the title of an op-ed by David Brooks as for a talk show segment by Sean Hannity. Herein lies—from the perspective of this fuddy-duddy philologist—an unexpected cause for hope, for civil discourse surely remains possible if the two sides of a divided citizenry can still express their cynicism in the same terms.

Let us, then, probe these terms, beginning with the word end. Perhaps the more natural interpretation is the more cynical one: a close, a limit, a termination. But the word may also signify an aim or a purpose. To choose the latter meaning is to change the question, to invite debate rather than despair. Let us so choose; let us so invite; and then let us pluralize the word, so as to pave the way for a more capacious understanding.

Civil, too, moves in two directions at once. These days, the more common meaning ('polite') is also the more insipid. Let us revive the adjective's more venerable meaning, rooted in ancient Rome, in the Latin word *civilis* ('of or pertaining to citizens'). Civil discourse seems likelier to avoid an ending and to achieve its aims if in our conversations with one another we privilege civic-mindedness—that is, an appreciation of our membership in the same body politic—over mere politesse.

That discourse may need at times to eschew politeness in favor of vigorous opposition is suggested by its very etymology: derived from the Latin prefix *dis-* (as in 'discord') and the verb *currere* ('to run'), the word originally meant 'a running in different directions.' Insofar as civil discourse depends upon divergence, we ought to celebrate rather than to condemn the rushing of some citizens to the left, of others to the right.

Finally, to return to the beginning of the question being posed and probed, let us reject not only the singular number of the word end but also the premise of the definite article that precedes it. To defy such definition is a lesson I learned in my first semester at Berkeley, in a *Finnegans Wake* reading group. Joyce's prodigiously polysemous prose epic lacks an ending: what appears to be its final sentence in fact brings us back, midstream, to its first. In the wake of the work's non-ending, we come to understand its title differently: *Finnegans* means, among other things, 'end-denying' (< Latin *finis* 'end'+ *negans* 'denying').

Like Joyce's dream-drama, civil discourse admits of no one end. It demands, instead, multiple aims (ends), civic-mindedness (civility in the older sense), and swift movement in different interpretative directions. It depends on questions like the one interrogated here, and on more inquiring minds.

## Elliot Lewis

In Book III of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke differentiates between philosophical discourse, which rigorously concerns the apprehension of the true, and civil discourse,



which he defines as: "such a communication of thoughts and ideas by words, as may serve for the upholding common conversation and commerce .. in the societies of men." In addition to this separation of civil discourse from philosophy, and its confinement to the domain of "common conversation and commerce," we can note another implicit yet real exclusion which defines the boundaries of those 'societies of men' wherein civil discourse reigns. In Locke's schema, there are Civilized Men, who can participate in civil discourse, and there are Others. The very social forms which exclude certain bodies from the legitimacy of the "civic," such as the demos of ancient Athens which rested upon slave labor, simultaneously determine everyday life as a step removed from ethical and philosophical engagement.

Nonetheless, the sphere of civil discourse has provided a terrain of contestation, where historically marginalized groups have won major victories, such as the inclusion of previously excluded minority groups in the right to citizenship and the vote, and the recognition of racial, gender, and ethnic equality. Thus there is a dialectic between civil discourse and its constitutive outside. In moments of political and economic crisis in societies such as ours, the resulting fragility and crisis in civil discourse accordingly has a twofold character.

On the one hand we witness dangerous attempts to push back the progressive gains achieved in struggle by the historically marginalized, attempts enabled by a destabilization of the common ground of public debate. Previously unquestioned principles are challenged, and often for the worse- the risk of our society regressing to a more violent and oppressive state should not be underestimated. However, at the same time, with the emergence of the unconscious of civil discourse through its destabilization, other willfully repressed ongoing forms of exclusion are given voice. Thus, while dangerous politicians speak of blocking immigrants of certain religions and ethnicities from the United States, more attention is brought to the fact that even in a "normal" state of affairs, many poor and marginalized people in this country and outside of it face violence and economic exploitation, a fact which too often goes unrecognized in civil discourse. Thus the destabilization of "civil discourse" merely reveals the already antagonistic separations whose presupposed repression constitutes its possibility as a separate sphere. The truth of the antagonism between the emancipatory will of the people, and the elitist selfishness of the few, who benefit from dividing the population, is thus revealed in the fragmentation of civil discourse. While real dangers become visible in this opening, so does the possibility for a more just and egalitarian world. Perhaps in such a world where the separation of "civil discourse" from its Other would be dissolved, the world would also lose its Lockean separation from ethical and philosophical truths, in the movement Henri Lefebvre called the "world becoming philosophical and philosophy becoming worldly."

## **Sourabh Harihar**

### **The End of Civil Discourse?**

A chicken and a pig were walking by

On an Orwellian street not rough to ply  
When the piglet, indignantly, said:

"Why does your rooster oft let out

His crows of wisdom, far and loud

And not heed our grunts instead?"

The chicken, now incited, thought:

'How offensive of the porcine lot

To snort about the rooster's clout!

"He hears all howls and growls and stuff

But, from you folk, he's had enough",

The piglet heard the chicken shout.

Then the piglet grunted her retort:

"Look, we're not of the nasty sort.

but, if that fluff-bird will not hear us,

We'll sure not brook his noisy coo.

And we've issues with your ilk, too.

Better watch out 'fore you come near us."

The chicken wouldn't take this lying down.

It's the rooster, after all, that wears the crown.

Said she, brandishing her firearm,

"Who're you to scare our chirpy flock?

You snort, and we'll put you in the dock.

For four years hence, we rule the farm."

Red with rage, the piglet frowned.

She grunted with the loudest sound

That none in the farm would fail to catch.

The chick, enraged at the piglet's pluck,

Instantly voiced her noisiest cluck,

And then there was a shouting match.

Hearing the chick and the piglet raise

Their voices in that raucous race,  
A cow, some distance from the source  
Didn't moo but, ruminating, thought  
'For all the freedom that we've got,  
If we were to moo with greater force  
And hear no other speak their mind,  
How are we to progress our kind  
In absence of civil discourse?'