

Speaking Truth to Power: A Tale of Two Universities

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Abstract

This article compares the experiences of resistance and accommodation by the University of South Carolina (USC) and Boğaziçi University to the imposition of a right-wing head of university by government fiat. I begin with a description of the USC case and examine one scholarly response. I offer a critique of that response in terms of the problematics about the gendered subject when involving the principles of free speech and the importance of speaking truth to power. I then turn to the Boğaziçi case and briefly examine two scholarly responses contained in a dossier published in the *South Atlantic Quarterly*. I conclude with a brief discussion of the differences between the two universities and thoughts about what radicalism entails in practice.

JEL Classification: A13, I21, H75, B5

Keywords

radical practice, radical economics, politics of education

I. Introduction

In 2018, the president of the University of South Carolina (USC) announced his resignation. We, the faculty, were apprehensive when three finalists were brought to campus toward the end of the Spring 2019 semester. Two were white men and one was an African American man who was by far the overwhelming choice of both the faculty and the students. However, the Board of Trustees, chaired by the Republican governor of the state (and vocal Trump supporter), Henry McMaster, had other ideas. They choose one of the white men, Robert Caslen, a former Army general, Trump supporter, and former superintendent of West Point. He did not have a PhD, nor any other necessary qualifications to run a large public research university such as ours. (West Point is more like a small liberal arts college for military types.)

The faculty and students were furious and engaged in a variety of protests including a unanimous vote of no confidence by the faculty senate. We were ignored and ridiculed. Despite the vote of no confidence, powerful opposition by every major constituency in the university community, and even threats to USC's accreditation, the Trustees selected a man who did not meet even the minimum qualifications for the position. In July 2019, when most of the faculty

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and students were gone, Robert Caslen was appointed by a board vote along party lines.¹ Fall arrived; the students returned, and classes resumed. Although there was some talk of a boycott or walkout, it never came close to happening. Life returned to normal.

At midnight on January 2, 2021, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan appointed a political crony, Melih Bulu, as the new rector to Boğaziçi University, a major research university in Istanbul, Turkey.² The response of the Boğaziçi faculty was much different than our own. Wearing their academic robes and holding signs that said, We Do Not Accept/We Do Not Give Up, faculty and students gathered every day at midday to hold a vigil in front of the rectorate (Gall 2021).

On January 4, 2021, the police intervened with pepper gas and plastic bullets. Forty students were ultimately arrested and released a few days later. The protests continued even though the police barricaded the campus with barbed wire and armed guards. Bulu was a member of Erdoğan's ruling party and the purpose of his assignment as rector was to change the ideological climate of Boğaziçi. As one of Turkey's most prestigious universities, its faculty had a liberal bent, characterized by, among other things, the support of LGBT+ students, faculty, and staff. Bulu was an anathema to liberal students and faculty who clearly saw what he portended for the future of the university (Gall 2021; Kirişçi, Eder, and Arslanalp 2022). Despite the threat of violent retaliation, the protests continued daily. While the protests, which may still be going on, did not succeed in an elected rector, which had long been the practice of the university, they were discursively productive in other ways.

My question for this article is this: Why didn't the USC faculty and students take a similar radical action? Why didn't we continue to protest? I cannot speak for the students, but I think the faculty was more interested in our public image than in taking any radical action. What was the cause of such timidity? Unlike the faculty at Boğaziçi, we were not facing armed guards nor the threat of beatings or imprisonment, nor any real threat of losing our jobs. I think that a large part of the answer is that most of the faculty and senior administration are heavily invested in projecting a public image of respectability, scholarly erudition, and liberal restraint.

In this article, I compare the stories of USC and Boğaziçi. My story of USC is more fully fleshed out because it was an event that I lived through and participated in. Nonetheless, I think the comparison of the two universities is useful for understanding the dynamics behind the resistance/accommodation dilemma that academics face in today's political climate. I begin with a description of the USC case, and one public scholarly response to it by Dr. Alan Miller, Carolina Distinguished Professor of Classics and Comparative Literature and former Vice Provost for International Affairs, published in *sympløke*. I offer a critique of Miller's response in terms of the problematics about the subject when we invoke the principles of free speech and the importance of speaking truth to power. I then turn to the Boğaziçi case and briefly examine two scholarly responses contained in a dossier published in the *South Atlantic Quarterly*. I conclude with a brief discussion of the differences between our two universities and thoughts about what radicalism entails in practice.

2. The Mainstream Media and USC

To be radical is, at the very least, to stand up for your values even when they oppose the status quo and to attempt to speak truth to power. Speaking truth to power requires, at a minimum, a venue from which to speak. Those of us who continued to protest Caslen's appointment were met with a huge amount of resistance on all fronts, especially the print media and the legislature. Neither of the two major newspapers, *The State* and *The Post and Courier*, would publish our

¹Robert Caslen's presidency lasted only two years. His downfall came when he plagiarized his commencement speech and greeted the graduates of the University of South Carolina as graduates of the University of Southern California.

²Boğaziçi University is one of the top three universities in Turkey (Gambetti and Gökarkısel 2022).

critical op-eds. The only paper that would publish us was the libertarian online paper, *FITS News*. A few of us published under our own names, but eventually the publisher convinced us to adopt a collective pen name, The Scholastici.

The two major newspapers, as well as the network news outlets, fell neatly in line with the governor and his political cronies. They received ample press space. The Treasurer of South Carolina, Curtis Loftis, was particularly virulent:

I fully support Governor McMaster's efforts to provide leadership at USC. The Social Justice Warriors, both students and faculty, will protest, moan, and groan at every turn, but the working men and women of this state deserve proven leadership that will not bend to fickle wants of the mob. These Social Justice Warriors want to redistribute our wealth and opportunities based on their Marxist ideologies and without worry about the consequences to our future. (Loftis quoted in Davis 2019)

In addition, a concerted effort was put forward to portray retired General Caslen as the leader that we wanted and needed. His son and former students chimed in about what a great dad he was and what a great job he did as superintendent of West Point. So beloved was he at West Point that he has called "Supe Daddy" by the cadets. Other stories showed that he was a man's man, killing a deer with his bare hands after a missed shot while deer hunting (Daprile 2019). The end result was an amusing and engaging narrative about a brave and beloved military man being opposed by bunch of left-wing, most likely Marxist, professors who opposed him precisely because of his military record and macho behavior.

As much amusement as this story provided to everyone—I mean everyone loves to make fun of egghead professors and champion the cause of a latter-day John Wayne—the threat we faced from the legislature was quite real. Treasurer Loftis ended his screed about social justice warriors and Marxist ideologues with this chilling comment:

They [the social justice warriors] believe in the minority rule of the angry mob, not the majority rule of the silent, hardworking, tax paying men and women of SC. If USC allows itself to be led by the mob, the people of SC need to reconsider their support for USC. (Loftis quoted in Davis 2019)

The threat was perfectly clear. If we did not settle down and play nice, the state will cut our funding. Although the state only provides a small proportion of our funding, further cuts would hurt. Our concern for our public image is understandable. One well-respected faculty member, Kirk Randazzo, Professor of Political Science, put it this way in a Facebook post:

Instead [of a reasoned debate], we'll be facing comments from folks like Loftis about our Marxist ideology. This rhetoric will be reinforced by an image of leftist professors fighting against a military hero. Such an image will not play well in the court of public opinion, which in many circles already believes we indoctrinate our students.³

3. Free Speech and Speaking Truth to Power

This sentiment to protect our public image in order to protect the measly funding we got from the state of South Carolina was fairly widespread. As Miller (2021: 186) puts it in his scholarly article:

There were some small protests. The faculty senate voted no confidence. But what could be done? We had work to do. We would manage the new president. We would quietly guide him.

³Prior to the fait accompli of Caslen's appointment, this faculty member had spoken eloquently against him and the corrupt process. (Kirk A. Randazzo, Professor of Political Science, USC, Facebook post, quoted with permission.)

Miller goes on to draw the connection between the people, Trump supporters all, who had selected the General, or Bob as he liked to be called, and the internal politics of the university. The same politicians who hired Bob were spreading lies about the Corona virus, about climate science, and about racism and racial injustice. They were the same people who incited a violent riot at the US Capitol and spread the lie that the 2020 presidential election had been stolen. Who, Miller asks, made the connections between the lies spread on the national level and the fiction we were living at the university? My own opinion is that although there were certainly faculty members who saw that connection, we were mainly powerless. We were not in the sort of leadership positions necessary to make real change. For those at the top, the status quo seemed to prevail. Quoting Miller (2021: 187) again:

The faculty senate President now worked closely with “Bob.” People who wouldn’t move on were marginalized. They were troublemakers. They were impractical dreamers who were hurting the university. They were paranoid. Didn’t they know they were only hurting themselves?

Miller’s message, however, was that this is a time when American universities are in crisis and professors, including himself, must once again find what it means to speak truth to power. He crafted an erudite and sophisticated argument about the nature of truth and the roles of intellectuals in its articulation. He drew on Foucault to call on us to develop “an ethics of truth, a set of practices for forming the self as speaker of ‘fearless truth,’ what the Greeks termed *parrēsia*” (Miller 2021: 188).

I agree with Miller’s Foucauldian conception of truth. He and I are also in agreement that people who deny science, advocate white (male) supremacy, and even storm the capital are not necessarily uneducated rubes. They are ordinary people living ordinary lives, “but they do not live the truth, their lives are not devoted to acts of truth, the truth is separated from what they believe” (Miller 2021: 189). So, what is truth? Miller argues that truth is not something that is out there, but rather that truth is produced within discourses and institutions. To speak the truth, we must be:

willing to risk our prestige, our office, our status. Otherwise, the university simply becomes one more institution to increase and legitimate forms of discourse and forms of production that serve the interests of power, that seek to legitimate inequality, racism, economic exploitation, authoritarian politics under the guise of republican democracy. (Miller 2021: 189)

Discourse can be thought of as a way of speaking or writing that defines what can be intelligibly said and thought, and what cannot. It is here that truth claims lie. For something to count as a legitimate discourse depends on who is speaking. Where does their authority and status derive from? What is the accepted ontological and epistemological framework of the discussion? Who and what remain invisible? And finally, what are the material consequences? Who wins and who loses? How can we speak truth to power when truth and power are constitutive of one another?

Radical speech is not just a province of the left. The radical right has adopted it as well. They are just as convinced of the rightness of their positions as we are. The question of whether to bring right-wing, controversial speakers to campus such as provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos, neo-Nazi activist Richard Spencer, or psychology professor and right-wing activist Jordan B. Peterson are framed around the debates over free speech (Mangan 2017). The question then becomes, free speech for whom? What class of people are afforded the rights to free speech and which classes are excluded? Framing the question this way leads me back to Miller’s argument about the importance of speaking the truth in the university. Scholars of Foucault understand that the truth value of any utterance partly depends on the status of the speaker. To go back to Miller (2021: 192, emphasis added):

Truth, then, as a meaningful statement is an action performed by a *qualified subject* that is able to be received and validated by another such subject. It is not simply the expression of an autonomous will or opinion. It is dependent on the historically embedded existence of institutions of veridiction and verification that qualify what counts as true in a given context, and those institutions in turn must be wholly engaged by the speaker of truth to produce a moment in which their act of veridiction and their subjective being coincides.

Miller's articulation of truth as constituted within discourse is masterful and a pleasure to read. I say this without irony. But it leaves out one crucially important consideration: the embodied subject. Miller's subjects, whether they are high-level university administrators, faculty, staff, students, or members of the public, are abstract, disembodied, liberal subjects. The ethical choice for them is to speak the truth, to practice *parrēsia* as opposed to speech that is only factually true.⁴ For example:

I can stand before an audience of political and business leaders and say, "climate change has many causes." That is a true statement: carbon dioxide accumulation, methane, solar flares, volcanic activity. But why do I say this particular thing in a specific context before a certain audience? Because I am defending a particular position, a set of interests, because I want to draw attention away from the fact that human behavior is destroying the planet and that certain industries and economic interests find it useful to obscure and complexify the human causes of climate change. Because I fear losing the support of the public and private funders of my research. *We must be speakers of truth who are willing to risk our prestige, our office, our status.* (Miller 2021: 189, emphasis added)

Again, there is much to agree with and to admire about this articulation. However, it obscures the embodied identity of the person or group of people making the statement. The credibility of a highly educated white man, dressed appropriately in a business suit and tie, is much greater than it would be for women as well as black, brown, and indigenous people (unless they were speaking in the interest of the status quo).

The history of women's exclusion from the category of truth tellers is long and well documented. Consider an article by law professor Mary Anne Franks (2019) which argues that it is misleading when free speech proponents claim to be defending hate speech. Defenders of free speech acknowledge that diatribes against the LGBTQ community, as well as racial and religious minorities, are potentially dangerous. But, Franks argues, "it is this very characteristic that compels its protection" (Franks 2019: 123). Although free speech doctrines and practices have focused on men's speech, it is "*women's* speech that has been most feared, and thus extensively regulated, criticized, and prohibited throughout American history" (Franks 2019: 124, emphasis in the original). Although the longstanding efforts to silence women is rarely acknowledged in mainstream political thought, the concurring opinion of Justice William Brandeis in the case of *Whitney v. California* (1927) is an exception:

The case involved a woman prosecuted for helping to organize a group that sought to use violence to effect political and economic change. She argued that this was not her intention and claimed that her conviction violated the First Amendment. The court upheld her conviction arguing that the right to free speech was not absolute, and that the state could punish those who abuse this freedom by utterances that constituted a clear and present danger. Although in the end Justice Brandies concurred, he articulated an eloquent defense of the fundamental importance of free speech to the functioning of democracy:⁵

⁴During the 1990s, when writing about epistemology was in fashion, we used to distinguish between truth with a small t, and Truth, with a capital T.

⁵Brandeis concurred because there was evidence of a criminal conspiracy

Fear of serious injury cannot alone justify suppression of free speech and assembly. Men feared witches and burnt women. It is the function of speech to free men from the bondage of irrational fears. (Whitney v. California 1927, Brandeis concurring)

Frank thinks that Justice Brandeis's invocation of witch hunts and the burning of women is more illuminating than perhaps he intended. It points to the many historical attempts to suppress women's speech not only by witch hunts "but also by a wide range of legal, political, and cultural deprivations" (Franks 2019: 124). If the free speech advocates practiced what they preached, then women's speech should be valorized as free speech *par excellence*. As we know, however, it is not.

This leads Franks (2019) to claim that the notion of the American commitment to free speech is a seductive fraud. In practice, it protects speech that does not directly challenge men's monopoly on power. Using the #Me Too movement as an example, Frank claims Orwellian inversions of women's speech twist the meanings of speech so that men's abuse of women is seen as a dangerous form of censorship. The pursuits of male abusers are characterized as "witch hunts," and women's speech continues to be feared and repressed rather than celebrated and protected.

Although Frank's argument is specifically about women, *qua* women, I argue that the reasoning applies to any individual or group outside the hegemonic mainstream. In the USC case, many of us did speak up, but we lacked any way of really getting our voices heard. Many of us (those who advocated continuing to protest) were women or people of color. We were almost exclusively members of the College of Arts and Sciences. USC is a large university with many professional schools and colleges. Support from faculty members in these schools was seriously lacking. When school started in the Fall, a few of us openly advocated going on strike. It did not happen. That the majority of faculty leaders and administrators decided to work with President Caslen did not surprise me. The money and power at USC are centralized at the top. Although we in the College teach most undergraduates, we do not see a commensurate share of the revenues. Why endanger what little we have?

4. Another Paradigm: Boğaziçi University

It did not have to be this way. The protests at Boğaziçi University, which are still going on, did not result in a rector independent of the Turkish state. Although Erdoğan removed the controversial rector, Melih Bulu, and appointed former Vice Rector, Mehmet İnci, in his place, it was a change without substance (News List 2021). İnci was cut from the same ideological cloth as Bulu. However, the protests and demonstrations were productive in other ways (Gambetti and Gökarkırsel 2022).

One tangible result was a dossier in the journal *South Atlantic Quarterly*. I begin with the article by Zemet Gambetti (2022) because like Miller (2021) she examines the notion of truth in university discourse. In spirit they have much in common. The difference is her starting point—rather than starting from *parrēsia*, she asks what it means to speak the truth in an age of post-truth.

The age of post-truth in which we are now living is characterized by an "inversion of conventional syntax, the reversal of victimhood status, and the concoction of ad hominem arguments based on dubious causalities [and is] not confined to the field of electoral or populist politics alone" (Gambetti 2022: 178). Her article begins with a quote by Gürkan Kumbaroğlu, one of the three vice rectors appointed by Professor Melih Bulu. On April 21, 2021, he proudly claimed "Boğaziçi is now doing science." She replies, of course, Boğaziçi had always been doing science! It has long been a nationally and internationally respected research university in Turkey. However, what İnci meant by science was not disinterested scholarly pursuits but rather research tied to the military industrial complex and Erdoğan's agenda:

What he meant by “science” was to be subsequently revealed, not in words but in deeds. First came the convoy of Mercedes-Benzes with tinted windows, bringing state officials to the rectorate. Then came the television satellite van. Men in dark suits were escorted into the conference hall to inaugurate a partnership with the Ministry of Transport. The vice-rector promised more contracts with the military-industrial complex. In turn, the new rector, appointed by midnight decree by President Erdoğan, prophesied that Boğaziçi University would become an “entrepreneurship factory” under his good guidance. (Gambetti 2022: 179)

Gambetti argues that while academics still need to fight and resist, the old methods will not work in a post-truth age. They won’t work because knowledge/power nexus has been broken. In an age of post-truth only power remains. Although the corporatization of the state and the university is not new, what is new is that now, “there are no moral, legal, or logical limits to the strategies that can be employed. Power outmaneuvers truth, since truth no longer procures power” (Gambetti 2022: 179–80).

Still the protests and demonstrations were productive in other ways. Also writing in the same issue of the *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Saygun Gökarkınel (2022: 189) makes the important point:

But what those protests, particularly the faculty vigils, highlight are the embodied forms of power and labor of resistance, especially the bodily dimension of public collective action. Indeed, Boğaziçi protests, I would argue, could be seen as part of the making of a counter or dissident body politic, which seeks to rethink and invigorate, at this conjuncture of neoliberal authoritarianism, the university as a critical social institution and as an arena of democratic struggle interconnected to other social struggles for equality and liberty in the country and beyond.

In other words, we can think of the protests as a manifestation of biopolitical power in the sense used by Hardt and Negri (2005): the potential power of the multitude.

5. Differences

The state, whether it be South Carolina or a nation state like Turkey, is justified in its distrust of the university. Students and professors have long been the vanguard of social justice movements. To be radical is still to speak truth to power but with the proviso that power now trumps (pun intended) truth. The nexus is broken. What is needed is to create a dissident body politic. Erudite reasoned arguments alone will no longer win the day. We need an embodied politics and collective actions. Erdoğan’s authoritarian politics, crackdowns on dissident professors, and brutality toward the Kurds are well known. The protests at Boğaziçi were championed by many both inside and outside of Turkey. Moreover, organized resistance to the state was part of the intellectual culture at the university.

Still, the protests were not without costs. Among the most recent consequence was the firing of three university deans: Özlem Berk Albachten, Metin Ercan, and Yasemin Bayyurt. They were fired by Turkey’s Higher Education Council. People think that the reason for their dismissals was that they were among the academics who criticized the appointment of Bulu and his successor İnci. It sends the signal that even mild dissent will not be tolerated (Grove 2022). I have a feminist economist friend in the economics department at Boğaziçi, and she reports that the faculty are “dispirited.” So even though the protests were, on the one hand, incredibly productive in a positive sense, on the other this David and Goliath fight is taking a huge toll.

Conditions at USC were and are quite different. Corporate takeovers of universities, including flagship institutions, are becoming commonplace. While many of the cast of characters occupying the state legislature are reprehensible, in no way do they match the sheer brutality of Erdoğan and thus do not engender the resistance they deserve. Moreover, organized political resistance is

not an integral part of the culture at USC. Finally, USC is in Columbia, South Carolina. The city of Columbia is but a blue dot in an overwhelmingly red state. It is unlikely that we would have had any real support from outside the university. And even within, support would have been mainly restricted to the faculty in the College of Arts and Sciences.

6. Conclusion

Still, we should have done more. That is what radical action demands. As a faculty, we were the polar opposite of radical. Caslen brought about his own downfall by a huge gaffe at graduation ceremonies and plagiarizing parts of his address. (Ironically, Erdoğan has also been accused of plagiarism.) Our new president, Michael Amiridis, is far more acceptable to the faculty. He is our former provost who left for seven years (2015–2022) to be the chancellor at the University of Illinois, Chicago. Most of us respect him. However, the process of his appointment was just as problematic as Caslen's. He also was chosen by the trustees with almost no faculty, staff, or student input whatsoever. From his comments thus far, I think that his vision for the future of the university is firmly in line with the corporatization of the university and cooperation with the large funding agencies of the United States. This will have negative repercussions for the humanities and for interdisciplinary scholarship that is not grant driven.

In the past, I have worked with President Amiridis on tenure and promotion cases. He is an honest person who treats the faculty with respect. The problem facing us is not a personal or even a political one, as it was for Caslen, Bulu, and Inci. The problem is structural. Having abrogated our right to the principles of shared governance during the Caslen debacle, we are left without a plan, without a vision with which to resist the changes that are likely in the future. Taking the radical path when we had the chance would have been costly. Would it have been worth it in the long run? I cannot say. I can only remember that even Socrates, with all his erudition and charm, eventually was forced to drink the hemlock.

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