

Read Barbara Ehrenreich's essay Zipped Lips •

Question 1 in Questions for Writing/Small-Group Discussion. Using this question for guidance, write a brief (2 pages maximum) reflective paper sharing your thoughts on the subject of academic freedom.

Zipped Lips

by Barbara Ehrenreich

- 1 Earlier this month a fellow named Sam Young was fired from his grocery-store job for wearing a Green Bay Packers T-shirt. All right, this was Dallas, and it was a little insensitive to flaunt the enemy team's logo on the weekend of the N.F.C. championship game, but Young was making the common assumption that if you stay away from obscenity, libel or, perhaps in this case, the subject of groceries, it is a free country, isn't it? Only problem was he had not read the First Amendment carefully enough: it says government cannot abridge freedom of expression. Private employers can, on a whim, and they do so every day.
- 2 On Jan. 10, for instance, a Peoria, Illinois, man was suspended from his job at Caterpillar Inc. for wearing a T-shirt bearing the words DEFENDING THE AMERICAN DREAM, which happens to have been one of the slogans of the United Auto Workers in their 17-month strike against Caterpillar. Since the strike ended in early December, the firm has forbidden incendiary slogans like "Families in Solidarity" and suspended dozens of union employees for infractions as tiny as failing to shake a foreman's hand with sufficient alacrity.
- 3 It is not just blue-collar employees who are expected to check their freedom of speech at the company door. In mid-December, Boston physician David Himmelstein was fired for going public about the gag clause in his employer's contract with doctors, forbidding them to "make any communication which undermines or could undermine the confidence . . . of the public in U.S. Healthcare. . . ." or even revealing that this clause is in their contract.
- 4 So where are the guardians of free speech when we need them? For the most part, they are off in the sunny glades of academe, defending professors against the slightest infringement of their presumed right to say anything, at any volume, to anyone. Last fall, for example, history professor Jay Bergman was reprimanded by his employer, Central Connecticut State University, for screaming at a student he found tearing down a flyer he had posted. Now the Anti-Defamation League and the National Association of Scholars are rallying to have the reprimand rescinded. Reprimand, mind you, not firing or suspension.
- 5 Or, in 1991, you would have found the New York Civil Liberties Union defending crackpot Afrocentrist professor Leonard Jeffries of New York's City University. Thanks to such support and the fact that CUNY is a public-sector employer, Jeffries still commands a lectern, from which he is free to go on raving about the oppression of blacks by "rich Jews" and how melanin deficiency has warped the white brain.

6 Most workers, especially in the private sector, have no such protections. Unless their contract says otherwise, they can be fired “for any reason or no reason”—except when the firing can be shown to be discriminatory on the basis of race, sex, or religion. In addition, a few forms of “speech,” such as displaying a union logo, are protected by the National Labor Relations Act, and the courts may decide this makes Caterpillar’s crack-down illegal. But the general assumption is, any expansion of workers’ rights would infringe on the apparently far more precious right of the employer to fire “at will.” So the lesson for America’s working people is: If you want to talk, be prepared to walk.

7 Obviously there are reasonable restrictions on an employee’s freedom of speech. A switchboard operator should not break into Tourette’s-like torrents of profanity; likewise, professors *should* be discouraged from screaming at students or presenting their loopier notions as historical fact. But it’s hard to see how a Green Bay Packers T-shirt could interfere with the stocking of Pop-Tarts or how a union sticker would slow the tightening of a tractor’s axle. When employers are free to make arbitrary and humiliating restrictions, we’re saying democracy ends, and dictatorship begins, at the factory gate.

The last sentence suggests a shift from the problem issue to a proposed solution. Start looking carefully for more “reasons” and mark them in your text.

8 So we seem to have a cynical paradox at the heart of our political culture. “Freedom” is our official national rallying cry, but unfreedom is, for many people, the price of economic survival. At best this is deeply confusing. In school we’re taught that liberty is more precious than life itself—then we’re expected to go out and sell that liberty, in eight-hour chunks, in exchange for a livelihood. But if you’d sell your freedom of speech for a few dollars an hour, what else would you sell? Think where we’d be now, as a nation, if Patrick Henry had said, “Give me liberty or give me, uh, how about a few hundred pounds sterling?”

9 Surely no one believes productivity would nose-dive if employees were free to wear team logos of their choice or, for that matter, to raise the occasional question about management priorities. In fact, the economy could only benefit from an increase in democracy—and enthusiasm and creativity—on the shop floor. Or does the “free” in “free market” apply just to people at the top?

10 When employers have rights and employees don’t, democracy itself is at risk. It isn’t easy to spend the day in a state of servile subjugation and then emerge, at 5 p.m., as Mr. or Ms. Citizen–Activist. Unfreedom undermines the critical spirit, and suck-ups make lousy citizens.

Questions for Writing/Small-Group Discussion

1. The author paints a negative picture about the unfairness of “defending professors against the slightest infringement of their presumed right to say anything, at any volume, to anyone.” What do you think the proper definition of “academic freedom” should be? How did you react to Ehrenreich’s examples? Should academic freedom be limited? How and when?