

1-25-2018

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Aldemaro Romero Jr.
CUNY Bernard M Baruch College

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Recommended Citation

Romero, A. 2017. Gander thinks we need more civility in public discourse. *College Talk* (54):1-1. 25 January 2018.

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Gander Thinks We Need More Civility in Public Discourse

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

“I became a professor of communication studies because I like talking about public arguments.” That’s how Dr. Eric Gander explains why he is what he is today. And in this era of public discussions of free speech and the First Amendment, his interests seem more relevant than ever.

Gander is a native of Tallahassee, Florida. He received a bachelor’s in economics a master’s in communication from the University of Virginia, and a doctorate in communication studies from Northwestern University. Today he is an associate professor in the Department of Communication Studies of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York.

One public argument that has been going on for years in both professional circles and the public arena is nature versus nurture—that is, how much of our behavior is influenced by our genes and how much by our environment—and it’s a discussion that Gander studied early on.

“I’ve written a book entitled ‘On Our Minds’ about evolutionary psychology and, more broadly, the nature versus nurture debate. To answer the question, both nature and nurture influence who we are. I think the debate is not about what percentage of your genes makes you a certain type of person, because that’s an unanswerable question. I think the nature versus nurture debate really comes down to the question of what boundaries, if any, our evolved human nature puts on the types of cultures that we can create as human beings,” he says.

Gander shares the concern of many that science in general is not well explained to the lay public. “I’m concerned with how we get the public to understand science. Science is the court for which there is no appeal, so you have to be on the right side of it. The question is: Can people really understand that? There are some great popular science writers today, who I think are doing an excellent job of trying to make it understandable.”

The problem is not only that some people don’t understand science but that they ignore it for personal reasons. “It’s either you ignore it or you try



Photo by Amanda Becker

Dr. Gander (at the right) being interviewed for the podcast “College Talk”.

to present evidence from ‘your’ scientists. Again, the question is: How does the public understand this? How does the public understand what is really going on with global warming when I don’t know if they can even tell you what a CO2 molecule is? They go to the scientists, and they ask them and try to figure out what the majority of them think,” says he.

One famous example of how the public understands science is the issue of whether vaccines are dangerous or not to children’s health. Gander is quite unequivocal on this issue. “The vaccine controversy is extremely serious. This is a case where political ideologies get confused. Some people who don’t vaccinate their children think that the vaccines are harmful, and they have religious motives for their beliefs. But, increasingly, you find more left-of-center people who think that vaccines are not natural and want only natural things in their bodies. That’s somewhat disturbing because you want to make sure you are open to the scientific

evidence. The scientific evidence, to be honest with you, is very clear.”

Another area in which Gander has worked is free speech, and some wonder whether we can exclude hate speech without violating that principle. “If you are using a racial epithet, it’s obviously hate speech. Virtually nobody disagrees with that. The difficulty is you can say that you can’t use certain words, but laws are not that specific. You have to write a law that is general enough to capture the set of hate speech, but is also not so broad that it captures all speech. That’s the problem with hate speech: you can’t write that law.”

But does this mean that protections under the First Amendment are absolute? Gander thinks that’s not the case. “The First Amendment is not absolute. Libel, for example—if it’s an actual false statement about somebody, that seems to be a clear exception. What are called true threats would be another exception. In the history of the U. S., we’ve never

had a hate speech exception to the First Amendment. The Supreme Court has been very clear in the last twenty to thirty years that there is no hate speech. You can burn the flag, you can protest at funerals of service personnel by using all manner of derogatory language.”

Gander points out that another exception to free speech in the First Amendment are words aimed at inciting violence. “There is an exception on the First Amendment to incitement to imminent lawless action. The courts have interpreted this going back to the 1950s in such a way that you have to be a speaker to a crowd of people and be directly telling that crowd to go out and hurt this person over here. The courts have tried to narrow that interpretation.”

It’s also interesting to know that even democratic countries such as Germany curtail certain types of speech. In that country, for example, to deny the Holocaust is against the law. How is this issue handled in the U.S.? Gander explains it with an example. “There is a famous case from the late 1970s in Skokie, Illinois, where at the time a large number of actual Holocaust survivors lived. A Neo-Nazi put on a Nazi uniform and marched through the center of town. It went to the courts, and Skokie said you cannot do that, but the courts said, well, you can have time, place, and manner restrictions, but if you have other parades and other marches on your street, sorry but you’ve got to allow this one. We do have a very broad understanding of Free Speech in America.”

Does this mean we have lost civility? Gander thinks so. “In his last presidential speech, President Obama said that now we live in a time when you can shut out any voices you don’t want to hear. People just basically hear what they want to hear. As soon as there’s a counterargument, they become uncivil because they are not used to hearing opposing views.”

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York. The radio show on which these articles are based can be watched at: <https://vimeo.com/252564192> He can be contacted via Aldemaro.Romero@baruch.cuny.edu