

Statement from the Senior Members of the Department

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In light of a recent public controversy involving one of our colleagues in medieval history, the undersigned, all senior members of the Department of History at the University of Chicago, issue the following statement:

Individual faculty members are entitled to express and publish their opinions on any public issues of concern to them, and when they do so they speak only for themselves. As a faculty body, the Department of History does not endorse or defend the scholarly, political or personal views expressed by any of its members. Nor as a collectivity does it take critical positions on matters of individual faculty opinion, be they personal or political. Other faculty members are, of course, also free to express their own countering points of view, to criticize or repudiate publicly whatever they disagree with or find offensive, and when they do so they likewise speak only for themselves.

The current debate about race and medieval history is playing out, as it should, in the public arena, and it is up to the participants to make their arguments and draw their own conclusions. It is essential to uphold the value of free speech in that context, especially when it is controversial or unpopular.

But it is also clear that with the power of free speech come certain responsibilities, especially among those professionally committed as scholars to the primacy of reasoned argument and the use of evidence. When other parties use one's arguments as grounds for online threats, intimidation, harassment, or verbal violence in general, it is one's firm responsibility to denounce those actions and to mark a clear and public distance from them, even (or especially) if those aggressive or extremist forms of speech misconstrue one's stated points of view. History shows us that silence in the face of such virulent speech acts is neither prudent nor defensible. We condemn the many forms of hate speech rippling out from this debate, and invite both participants and observers to do the same.

Universities are built explicitly around the idea that the growth of knowledge and critical understanding requires vigorous debates based on reason and evidence, and that these debates are most fruitful when they observe some basic rules of civility and professional respect. As scholars, we are committed to these values; if attack we must, we should attack ideas, not individuals.

More broadly, we are fully committed to fostering an inclusive and diverse environment for teaching, learning, and reasoned intellectual discussion.

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