

A Time for Civic Courage

On the morning of Wednesday, November 8, 2018, students, faculty, and staff arrived at Herter Hall to find that a white nationalist organization had hung posters on its walls linking “European roots” with “American greatness.” We believe that Herter was chosen because it houses the European and Asian languages, classics, and history programs and because the organization responsible would like to claim those fields as its own. We, the undersigned, would like to make it clear that we reject the premise that “European roots” are the innate cause of any notion of “American greatness.” We would furthermore like to point out that the linguistic and cultural areas that are the focus of our scholarship are far from exclusively European in nature and that, whatever one might mean by these vague concepts of “roots” or “greatness,” neither Europe nor America have ever been the sole preserve of “white” people.

This incident makes UMass one of the latest in a long line of academic institutions in the United States that have been targeted for intimidation and recruitment by a generation of white nationalist organizations that has come of age in recent years. Their worldview embraces racism, misogyny, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, homophobia, transphobia, and Islamophobia. It also supports the view that such ideas are both natural and inherently beneficial to Europeans and people with European ancestry. We do acknowledge that Western civilization has a long history of violent colonialism, one that has embraced all of these ideas at different times and in different places; however, we absolutely reject the notion that such misguided ideas represent inherent European traits, or that they will ever produce a better future for anyone. As researchers and educators in fields that white nationalists have attempted to co-opt in recent years, we reject their anti-intellectualism, their selective and reductive readings of otherwise important scholarship, their willful ignorance of the diversity of both European and American history, and their belief in the putative superiority of European culture.

Moreover, we must also acknowledge that the fascistic worldview represented by contemporary white nationalism has also produced a substantial heritage of resistance to it. That proud tradition includes the Italian anti-fascist partisans, the Spanish anarchists who fought against Franco, Germany’s White Rose, and the Polish, French, and Czech underground movements, along with many other equally heroic figures. European history may be littered with moments of tyranny and repression, but it never succeeded in erasing or intimidating those who resist its darkest tendencies. Nor will it. To imagine European identity otherwise requires a particularly blinkered and myopic view of its history.

To state the obvious: such ignorance has no place on our campus. We pledge, instead, to teach a full, open, and inclusive view of our diverse histories and cultures. Our fields, our majors, and our classes welcome all students, regardless of their linguistic, social, or ethnic identity, without exception. To do less would not honor the universalist spirit at the basis of every truly educational institution.

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- David Mednicoff, Chair, Department of Judaic and Near Eastern Studies
- Brian W. Ogilvie, Chair, Department of History
- Robert Sullivan, Chair, Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures