



## What is the Value of Value Neutrality? Exploring the Tension Between Objective Scholarship and Activist Scholarship

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### Recommended Citation

Newman, Julia C. () "What is the Value of Value Neutrality? Exploring the Tension Between Objective Scholarship and Activist Scholarship," *Gettysburg Social Sciences Review*. Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 4. Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/gssr/vol7/iss1/4>

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### Abstract

In recent decades there has been an increase in activist scholarship, a specific type of work where scholars seek to generate knowledge and pedagogies that aim to solve issues of inequality through political change. The emergence of activist scholarship poses a challenge to the long-standing ideal of value neutral scholarship and, as a result, universities and academics are grappling with these competing visions of scholarship. Complete value neutrality within scholarship is impossible yet remains a desirable ideal. But in seeking value neutrality the voices of those who have been historically undermined should not have their thoughts dismissed simply because their work might be classified as too activist. This paper argues, after careful engagement with social science literature, that activist scholarship has a place within academia, but only if people are ready to discuss and engage in constructive discourse. The paper concludes by acknowledging the inherent politicization of academia in today's society and argues for a nuanced approach that recognizes the role of activism within scholarly discourse with a focus on using factual information in conjunction with constructive dialogue that allows all perspectives to be heard.

### Keywords

Activist scholarship, neutrality, academic freedom, education, constructive discourse, Max Weber, Ibram X. Kendi

### Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank St. Olaf College and the Institute for Freedom and Community for giving me the opportunity to write this paper. I would also like to extend a heartfelt thank you to Professor Brendon Westler who took the time to work with me on this paper and edit all my grammatical mistakes.

## What is the Value of Value Neutrality?

### Exploring the Tension Between Objective Scholarship and Activist Scholarship

**Julia C. Newman**

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In recent decades there has been an increase in activist scholarship, a specific type of work where scholars seek to generate knowledge and pedagogies that aim to solve issues of inequality through political change. The emergence of activist scholarship poses a challenge to the long-standing ideal of value neutral scholarship and, as a result, universities and academics are grappling with these competing visions of scholarship. Complete value neutrality within scholarship is impossible yet remains a desirable ideal. But in seeking value neutrality the voices of those who have been historically undermined should not have their thoughts dismissed simply because their work might be classified as too activist. This paper argues, after careful engagement with social science literature, that activist scholarship has a place within academia, but only if people are ready to discuss and engage in constructive discourse. The paper concludes by acknowledging the inherent politicization of academia in today's society and argues for a nuanced approach that recognizes the role of activism within scholarly discourse with a focus on using factual information in conjunction with constructive dialogue that allows all perspectives to be heard.<sup>4</sup>

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### *Introduction*

In August 2019, the New York Times Magazine announced an ongoing initiative titled the 1619 Project, a collection of essays that seek to reframe United States history by placing the contributions of Black Americans and the effects of slavery at the core of the national narrative. Since its publication, the 1619 Project has received both praise from supporters and backlash from critics. The opposition is frustrated that activism presented within the text is aiming to change curriculums in schools while those in support praise its forward thinking and emphasis on social justice.

This is a contemporary example of the tensions between scholarship and activism. When asked if you can be both a journalist and an activist, the lead author of the 1619 Project, Nikole Hannah-Jones said “All journalism is activism. When you look at the model of The Washington Post, ‘Democracy Dies in Darkness,’ that’s not a neutral position. But our methods of reporting have to be objective. We have to try to be fair and accurate” (CBS News 2021). However, former speaker of the United States House of Representatives, Newt Gingrich, called the 1619 Project a “propaganda campaign on race” (Koberg 2022). His argument is typical of those disagreeing with the 1619 Project, suggesting that the New York Times does not care about truth and hires reporters who are politically “woke,” thus focusing on topics like race and gender in an activist manner, instead of factual information (Morris 2021).

This raises a question at the heart of the controversy surrounding the 1619 Project: is it scholarship? While the 1619 Project was originally published as print journalism, and the debate surrounding it largely centers around news organizations, this is a question that is currently coursing through academia. Universities and academics are grappling with the complexity of facts and values that are at odds with each other, specifically in the social science fields. Whether

society likes it or not, politics invades almost all subject areas and solidifies the personal and political values people hold. Activist scholarship, scholarship that aims to solve inequality problems through policy goals, has increased in the past few decades leading to a debate on what constitutes as objective scholarship. The idea of value neutrality within scholarship is impossible, yet is a desirable thing to strive for, but in seeking value neutrality the voices of those who have been historically undermined should not have their ideas dismissed simply because their work is classified as activist scholarship. In academia people should not be pure activists, but value neutrality should not be an absolute because there are scholars who believe that through publishing activist scholarship, they can make substantial policy or social changes.

This paper argues that the ideal of value neutrality should not be absolute, yet at the same time argues that value neutrality is a good ideal to aim towards when discussing complicated and contested topics. First, I will present varying opinions from scholars who have discussed activist scholarship at length and assess the claims they make about the political implications of said scholarship. Following this, I will conduct an analysis of Ibram X. Kendi's anti-racist constitutional amendment proposal and the controversy surrounding it. The proposal allows us to weigh arguments made within the literature review because some see this specific constitutional proposal as harmful performative work stemming from a broken academic system whereas others see the constitutional amendment proposal as a necessary conclusion to much of Kendi's previous scholarship on racism. Ultimately, the constitutional amendment proposal will act as a singular case study to allow for a careful analysis of the political tensions surrounding activist scholarship.

### ***Literature Review: Understanding Competing Definitions***

The literature in this paper analyzes the facts and political values<sup>5</sup> that people think about every day to try to understand the combined effects that these values have in scholarship and research. There are some who believe that when engaging in the study of politics, one must separate their own opinions and values to clearly distinguish the issue at hand. When scholarship is placed in the service of advancing social justice this combination compromises the complexity of scholarship and its intellectual rigor could harm career advancement within academia. Others<sup>6</sup> would disagree and argue that politics and research should blend together because it can offer a range of interdisciplinary perspectives and confront contradictions within scholarship head on. With these two perspectives on opposite sides of a scholarly spectrum, the question becomes; is scholarship stuck in an endless cycle of political values driving research?

A definition of what exactly activist scholarship is has been difficult to pinpoint. The definition appears to have evolved over time with each side of this ‘spectrum’ having their own definitions based on what works best for their research goals. Shannon Speed, a professor of anthropology at UCLA defines activist scholarship through research. She writes that activist scholarship is the “overt commitment to an engagement with our research subjects that is directed towards a shared political goal” (Couture 2017). Another definition posed by Charles R. Hale says activist scholarship is a practice that “helps one to better understand the cause of inequality, oppression, violence...is carried out, at each phase, in direct cooperation with an organized collective of people who themselves are subject to these conditions...and is used together with the people in question to transform these conditions” (Speed 2006). These two ‘definitions’ of activist scholarship will help frame the arguments outlined throughout the rest of the literature review as well as the discussion presented at the end of this paper. I should note that

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<sup>5</sup> Values surrounding social justice, economic inequality, LGBTQ rights, healthcare access and racism.

<sup>6</sup> Famous political scholars and professors such as Daniel J. O’Connell, Robin DiAngelo, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and Marilyn Gittell to name a few.

activist scholarship is still fact-based scholarship, but for the sake of simplicity within my paper, the two categories of scholarship will be “activist scholarship” and “value-neutral scholarship or objective scholarship.”

Considered to be one of the fathers of sociology, the German political scholar Max Weber wrote extensively on academic freedom and what free speech looks like in universities. In his famous lecture *Science as a Vocation*, Weber takes great care to separate fact from value within the classroom, writing that the professor should teach students how to identify and clarify issues, but that the professor should never use the classroom to indoctrinate. In one passage, Weber writes,

One cannot demonstrate scientifically what the duty of an academic teacher is. One can only demand of the teacher that he [sic] have the intellectual integrity to see that it is one thing to state facts, to determine mathematical or logical relations or the internal structure of cultural values, while it is another thing to answer questions of the value of culture and its individual contents and the question of how one should act in the cultural community and in policy associations. These are quite heterogenous problems. If he [sic] asks further why he [sic] should not deal with both types of problems in the lecture-room, the answer is: because the prophet and the demagogue do not belong on the academic platform (Weber 1958).

For Weber the goal of teaching is to help the student establish a position where they can identify their value and then take a stand. Weber expands on this and says “to take a practical political stand is one thing, and to analyze political structures and party positions is another. When speaking in a political meaning about democracy, one does not hide one’s personal standpoint; indeed, to come out clearly and take a stand is one’s damned duty” (Weber 1958). The very ethos of a politician is to take clear and measured stances, but Weber argues that one must be wary of forcing these values upon other people, especially within academia.

In the book *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything About Race, Gender, and Identity*, the authors Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay argue that activist

scholarship is not only unethical but also forms an authoritarian orthodoxy (Pluckrose and Lindsay 2020). Pluckrose and Lindsay take a stance similar to Weber, but they add that a scholar used to be expected to put their own beliefs and biases aside in order to approach a subject of research with objectivity (Pluckrose and Lindsay 2020). Instead, teaching has now become a political act with the main theory being centered around identity politics. They write that “While scholars can, of course, be activists and activists can be scholars, combining these two roles is liable to create problems and, when a political stance is taught at university, it is apt to become an orthodoxy, which cannot be questioned. Activism and education exist in a fundamental tension – activism presumes to know the truth with enough certainty to act upon it, while education is conscious that it does not know for certain what is true and therefore seeks to learn more” (Pluckrose and Lindsay 2020). Pluckrose and Lindsay are concerned that the emergence of social justice scholarship is creating a new narrative focused on controlling political and historical power structures by problematizing language, imagery, and concepts that are deemed to be theoretically harmful. While this is a valid point, the authors fail to recognize the irony in their argument. While they critique concepts like critical race theory, queer theory, gender studies, and disability studies for inherently being too political, they themselves are adopting a politically ‘right’ perspective while critiquing the doctrine of the ‘left’ (Cole 2021). This is what makes this book such a valuable source because at its outset, Pluckrose and Lindsay write a sort of disclaimer saying that they “seek to defend rigorous, evidence-based scholarship and the essential function of the university as a center of knowledge production against anti-empirical, anti-rational, and illiberal currents on the left that threaten to give power to anti-intellectual, anti-equality, and illiberal currents on the right” (Pluckrose and Lindsay 2020). In their quest to document and create a counter argument to many of the social activist trends seen recently in



society, Pluckrose and Lindsay write in a political manner (the very trend they criticize), thus exemplifying the difficulties for scholars to write in a political way. Weber and Pluckrose and Lindsay identify the problem of teachers preaching to their students. The purpose of a teacher is to guide their students through historical and political facts objectively, thus allowing the student to form their own conclusions and seek out their own answers.

The notion that activist scholarship is damaging has been countered by other scholars who view the role of activist scholarship in a positive way that leads to real change through one's values. In the book introduction of the book *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*, Charles R. Hale writes about the purpose of activist scholarship on campuses in relation to criticism often received of the discipline. He writes that

By naming and confronting the contradictions from the outset, we deflect the common objection that activist scholars seek reductive, politically instrumental truths at the expense of social complexity. Another principal reason that activist scholarship of the type documented here has made only small inroads in our universities is that the institutional powers that we find it threatening. Such conflicts are real and at times daunting. Yet the essays here in general emphasize a different scenario, in which modest institutionalization of activist scholarship, as one option among many, can help universities resolve specific problems and can enrich the entire spectrum of scholarly and pedagogic goals that universities encompass (Hale 2008).

The purpose of activist scholarship, according to Hale, is to create space on the periphery of academia for anyone, but specifically scholars of color, to write on issues pertaining to topics like critical race theory and feminist theory. Hale argues that activist scholarship is a mode for those in academia who cannot claim experience-based connections to create scholarship in service of their own communities (Hale 2008). Additionally, Hale makes an important distinction within the field of activist scholarship. He writes that a review of the literature “yields a large number of works of the ‘container’ variety: attempts first to stake out definitional ground and then to establish rules, procedures, and best practices, often in the tone of a ‘how-to’ manual.

Such texts have their place, but they can also be constraining. In contrast, the challenge here is to provide a general mapping of how people think about and practice activist scholarship, while leaving the research process fully open to contradiction, serendipity, and reflexive critique” (Hale 2008). In the two types of scholarship identified, Pluckrose and Lindsay would have an issue with the first ‘container’ type that aims to preach rather than to seek out and explain a legitimate issue within the field of social sciences. Hale is suggesting that a second category of activist scholarship, while different from the container variety, should be the main form of activist scholarship used at universities because it can be critiqued and is written in a way that invites questions.

The difference outlined above is a key point of contention among those who believe activist scholarship is important. In the article *But is it Activist?: Interpretive Criteria for Activist Scholarship in Higher Education*, the authors write that scholarship is for something, meaning that the people who produce scholarship are being political whether that is their intention or not because they are associating their values with a topic they wish to see change in. In this case, the production of knowledge is inherently political. The authors outline that “activist scholarship seeks to make social contributions and to disrupt knowledge hierarchies as its foremost task. Disruption includes the contestation of researcher objectivity, which has largely served to marginalize counter-hegemonic knowledge production...activist scholarship holds space for researchers with a desire to put their scholarship to work in service of the marginalized (and minoritized) communities to which they feel directly and personally connected” (Davis et al. 2019). Just as Pluckrose and Lindsay’s writing is political, this definition could also be considered to have political leanings, which again exemplifies the difficulties in writing

objectively on social and political issues. But, is the point of activist scholarship, as outlined above, meant to be inherently political so it can serve marginalized communities?

***Analysis: A Contemporary Focus on Ibram X. Kendi***

There are many contemporary examples of the tension between fact-based scholarship and this new form of activist scholarship. This tension can be found on college campuses, in high schools, and even among the public and media. Whether people recognize it or not, the difference between fact based and activist scholarship has manifested its way into people's everyday lives. However, in the case of this paper it would be helpful to investigate one example to understand just how complicated the line between the different types of scholarship is. Dr. Ibram X. Kendi is a world-renowned scholar who has garnered both praise and criticism for some of his published scholarship. He is a professor of humanities and history at Boston University and is a Macarthur 'Genius' Fellow. Kendi's work primarily focuses on the history of anti-Black racism by examining various ideas connected to power structures and US policy, meaning that his body of work generally falls under the classification of activist scholarship because of the focus on the broad category of social justice theory. Many of his publications have exacerbated the political problems behind activist scholarship as well as introducing the public to debates about scholarship. The controversies surrounding his scholarship are worth taking time to consider because Kendi is a well-known scholar who is considered to be changing academic discourse and even the structure of higher education.<sup>7</sup> His work is steeped in political facts,

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<sup>7</sup> Kendi's work has been criticized from many Republican identifying members of Senate and Congress, while Liberal members as well liberal leaning institutions hail his work as transformative. Specifically, Kendi has been the focus of many Fox News articles that discuss critical race theory and during the Senate Committee on the Judiciary hearings for Supreme Court nominee Ketanji Brown Jackson, Senator Ted Cruz (R-Texas) asked Jackson about the content in children's books like *Antiracist Baby* written Kendi even though Jackson has made no legal decisions regarding these books while working as a judge.

narratives, values, and meaning which leads to him using his prominent position to advocate for policy changes, thus blurring the line between activist and scholar.

Published in 2016, *Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* chronicles the story of anti-Black racist ideas and how these ideas traverse through American history (Ibram X. Kendi 2014). He also published a book titled *How to Be An Antiracist* in 2019 which features as a memoir that weaves in aspects of history, law, and science to understand what antiracism truly means. The publication of *Stamped* came at a time where the US was embroiled in an examination of white supremacy after the ‘Unite the Right’ rally in Charlottesville, and the adjustment to Donald Trump being president of the United States. In a review of the book, a reporter wrote that “As corporate media pundits and elected officials have tried to pivot between righteous condemnation and a desire not to offend white people, the moment has become yet another indictment of US education and what might be described as a willful ignorance of American history” (Neal 2018). Political and racial tensions were skyrocketing and more people began to focus on racial inequalities. In *Stamped*, Kendi seeks to chart the systematic racial disparities and inequalities in American life and ends his book with policy suggestions. He writes that “An anti-racist America can only be guaranteed if principled anti-racists are in power, and anti-racist policies become the law of the land” (Kendi 2017). Recall earlier from the literature review presented by Charles Hale that any writing within the social sciences is going to be political, therefore making it activist. Following this framework, *Stamped* would be considered to be an activist account of history and politics. It earns this classification because it uses a factual narrative framework to recount history while ending with policy suggestions to seek equality concerning a racial problem that Kendi has identified in his research. However, Pluckrose and Lindsay would argue that *Stamped* is predicated on the belief

that society has been structured by an identity-based system of power that stems from privilege. They write that this system “construct[s] knowledge via ways of talking about things is now considered by social justice scholars and activists to be an objectively true statement about the organizing principle of society...Social Justice scholarship and its educators and activists see these principles and conclusions as The Truth According to Social Justice – and they treat it as though they have discovered the analogue of the germ theory of disease, but for bigotry and oppression” (Pluckrose and Lindsay 2020). The narratives surrounding Kendi’s scholarship can help us further understand the controversy that surrounds this tension of the creation of activist scholarship. Specifically, one suggestion proposed by Kendi will provide a case study for us to examine and discuss.

#### ***Discussion: The Constitutional Amendment Proposal***

In 2019, Kendi published an article, a continuation of a thought presented in his previous work, in Politico Magazine that outlines an idea to pass an anti-racist constitutional amendment. According to Kendi the original sin of America is racism, and the only way to fix this sin would be an anti-racist Constitutional amendment. This amendment would “enshrine two guiding anti-racist principles: “Racial inequity is evidence of racist policy and the different racial groups are equals” (Kendi n.d.). This proposed amendment would render racial inequities as well as racist ideas by public officials unconstitutional. The proposal would also establish a Department of Anti-Racism (DOA), made up of employees who are considered experts in identifying racism, and would never consist of political appointees. Kendi writes that the “DOA would be responsible for preclearing all local, state and federal public policies to ensure they won’t yield racial inequity, monitor those policies, investigate private racist policies when racial inequity surfaces, and monitor public officials for expressions of racist ideas. The DOA would be

empowered with disciplinary tools to wield over and against policymakers and public officials who do not voluntarily change their racist policy and ideas” (Kendi n.d.). Kendi holds the belief that a not-racist idea does not exist, leading to the conclusion that there are only racist and antiracist ideas (Kendi 2021). This sentiment holds true to other quotes from Kendi presented earlier that leads to this idea that every political policy in all institutions across communities produces inequality or equity.

Refer back to one of the definitions of activist scholarship presented back in the beginning of the literature review provided by Shannon Speed. Kendi’s constitutional amendment fits within the definition provided by Speed: the “overt commitment to an engagement with our research subjects that is directed towards a shared political goal” (Speed 2006). Much of Kendi’s scholarship leads him to policy change suggestions, like the constitutional amendment. He writes with the purpose of uncovering the deep-rooted problems and perceptions of racism within the United States. Activists within the social justice field of academia have praised his scholarship and people placed comments of support for the amendment on his Twitter account (Montgomery 2019). One article published in GQ Magazine was titled “Preacher of the New Antiracist Gospel”, with the sub header “Professor Ibram X. Kendi’s best-selling book *How To Be An Antiracist* has transformed his life, and now he’s bringing his doctrine to the people” (Packer 2020). Kendi is helping people understand the deeply entrenched prejudices in America through the depiction of a historical narrative that connects to modern day politics.

Kendi’s constitutional amendment proposal has also earned heavy criticism. The first note of criticism falls upon the idea of “original sin.” In his book *Woke Racism*, John McWhorter calls the scholarly social justice warriors “The Elect” because there is a system of

hierarchy and understanding that closely resembles that of some religions. McWhorter compares The Center for Antiracist Research at Boston University to a divinity school where Kendi can preach his research and values, and he goes so far to declare Kendi as a “prophet priest” and writes that his “formal credentials are those of a scholar but whose actual function in society is that of a priest” (McWhorter 2021). In a political opinion piece published in New York Magazine, Andrew Sullivan discusses some of Kendi’s anti-racism proposals, including the constitutional amendment proposal. He writes “There is, of course, no conceivable way such an amendment would succeed in the grueling process that is amending the Constitution. And this amendment is completely incompatible with many other core tenets of the American Constitution. But it really is a revelation to see the goal Kendi sets” (Sullivan 2019). In Sullivan’s view, this proposed amendment is a form of activist scholarship that is performative, and he opines that Kendi and his peers (The Elect) do not believe in liberalism or a liberal democracy nor do they have a clear devotion and foundational understanding of individual rights and freedom of speech. Sullivan continues his critique and writes that Kendi

Wants unelected ‘formally trained experts on racism’ (presumably all from critical race-theory departments) to have unaccountable control over every policy that won’t yield racial equality in every field of life, public or private. They are tasked with investigating ‘private racist policies.’ Any policy change anywhere in the U.S. would have to be precleared by these ‘experts’ who could use ‘disciplinary tools’ if policymakers do not cave to their demands. They would monitor and control public and private speech. What Kendi wants is power to coerce others to accept his worldview and to implement his preferred policies, over and above democratic accountability or political opposition (Sullivan 2019).

These criticisms make it clear that there are people who believe that this new form of activist driven scholarship is creating false narratives that are aiming to indoctrinate people and that these college professors are prophets. But there is also the perspective of scholarship first, activism second. Universities want people to spend their lives dedicating their time to

intellectually rigorous and demanding research, which ultimately gives the professor authority. Scholars have an obligation to produce their best possible scholarship, and after it is produced, the scholarship can enter the public sphere and the public can use it how they would like, or the scholar can engage in activism outside of their position as a scholar. In the case of Kendi, one can argue that he is applying his research to this policy proposal, or they can look at it and say that he used his research and position of scholarly power to put forth a controversial constitutional amendment to the public.

However, there are many who believe that a scholar who incorporates activism into their work can still be a good scholar. In an opinion piece part of a three-part series on faculty roles in higher education, John Wilson defends the activist-scholar. Wilson writes that “I believe that my activism improves my scholarship. It clarifies issues for readers and focuses on what is most important. It provokes people to think for themselves and take a stand in relation to my own...Politics is not a hindrance to my scholarship. Politics is intertwined with what I study...Censoring my political views would be the serious hindrance to my scholarly analysis” (Wilson 2018). Wilson uses this framework to conclude that there is a false presumption that activism is antithetical to scholarly work, and that there should be a space to understand activist scholarship based upon its merits. This is a substantial counter to Sullivan’s argument presented above, to the extent that it is a good thing Kendi presented a radical constitutional amendment proposal because people can then begin the critical process of thinking for themselves. Kendi’s proposal could be seen as a foundational work that gets people to begin focusing their own efforts on social justice initiatives. It could be argued that all social science research is meant to analyze the connections that make up society, political or not, and that this scholarship allow people to engage critically with intellectually rigorous topics.



### *Conclusion*

The spectrum housing the viewpoints of activist scholarship is expansive and while this paper only looks into one specific example of the tension arising in activist scholarship, it is clear that there is immense strain on the academic systems that foster different types of scholarship. Weber, Pluckrose, and Lindsay provided an outline which argues that activist scholarship can be harmful while Hale and Kendi demonstrate that activist scholarship can have positive impacts upon various communities that are oppressed. Weber's view that teachers should not indoctrinate their students is notable, and even those who see the benefits in activist scholarship would agree that indoctrination should never be the outcome. However, Weber is right to express that teachers should be careful while teaching social sciences, so they make sure not to inject their own values and opinions, especially when discussing complicated political topics. This makes sense considering that college campuses and universities should seek to support free speech and should expose their students to various opinions so that the student might learn to develop their own opinions. But, in the developmental process, it is imperative that the student identifies a topic that they are passionate about because this will drive their desire to learn and make notable change within the world. Enter activist scholarship. Activist scholarship provides a unique narrative on niche theoretical and political topics. It allows for the personal values of scholars to enter complicated political conversations, which could culminate in policy suggestions and change. This too is a notable endeavor. It is not a bad thing to define research through an activist lens because this scholarly work will come to fruition through policy change.

At the beginning of this paper, it is noted that the goal is to try to understand the politicization of scholarly papers in recent years, and to see if this is causing a problem in value neutrality and objectivity when discussing political and historical topics. It would be safe to

conclude that everything is inherently political, and that no scholar can truly remove their passions and vocations from their research. Part of the problem comes down to the very basic fact that our lives in general have become increasingly politicized. A politicized life treats politics as a zero-sum game or “a form of total warfare in which the other side must be obliterated” (Friedersdorf 2013). Society is increasingly being forced to place their ideas into a binary system, which is a main critique of Kendi’s antiracism constitutional amendment proposal. Kendi and the historical figures he writes about are incredibly complex people who lived vivid lives. It is difficult to place his research and scholarship into a binary system that takes away from the intricacy of scholarship and the years of research that it takes to discuss controversial political topics in a meaningful and responsible way. While neither this paper nor I are looking to discuss critical race theory and social justice issues (those warrant a different discussion), I am rather trying to highlight and bring forth the fundamental tensions that exist between activist scholarship and a more value neutral based scholarship that isn’t as political. In the first Harvard Kennedy School John F. Kennedy Forum of 2024, five professors came together to discuss the importance constructive disagreement within a democratic society. Danielle Allen, the James Bryant University Professor and Director of the Allen Lab for Democracy Renovation, said that “In a democracy we have this incredible opportunity to tap into the perspective of all of us and the knowledge that we can bring to the table from all of the various places we sit in relationship to a problem. That opportunity brings with it a certain kind of responsibility. We’ve got to actually have to hear what it is that people bring from that incredible manifold of perspectives because if we don’t, we’re shortchanging ourselves...I am always looking for the person who sits very differently from me. ... And I want to know what they know. Because that expands what I have access to for my own ability to think my way

through the world” (Institute for Politics Harvard Kennedy School 2024). Colleges and universities must be able to foster constructive and difficult conversations in the classroom because this is where students learn to think and communicate with each other. It is a space where students can dissect their own beliefs and listen to opposing beliefs. Almost everything in academia is being connected to politics regardless of the topic, that is why I believe that activist scholarship has a place within academia. Activism belongs in a space where students aspiring to become scholars can have conversations that force them to reflect on history and think through difficult issues. However, this can only happen if people are ready to discuss and engage in constructive discourse, and if those who write activist scholarship can work to bring communities together and search for understanding between these difficult topics and policy decisions.

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