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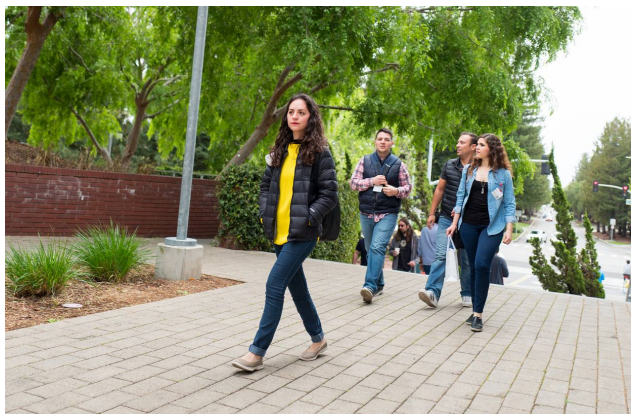
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OPINION | BUSINESS WORLD

# Of Furies and Fascism at Google

The company lets politics in the door and discovers it only breeds intolerance.



Google employees and visitors walk through the company headquarters in Mountain View, Calif., Apr. 7, 2017. PHOTO: SMITH COLLECTION/GADO/GETTY IMAGES



By

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Do read James Damore's lawsuit. Get past the absurdity of his framing his grievance in terms of identity politics—he's a victim of Google's failure to honor "viewpoint diversity." Apparently under California law this is a legitimate claim.

Last year's firing episode at first seemed a case of Google clumsily suppressing dissent over race and gender policies adopted after the company's workforce was found to be overwhelmingly white and male. Now it seems like something else.

If the postings and emails cited in Mr. Damore's lawsuit are a reliable indication, founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page have lost control of the culture. Google's leaders may even be a little afraid of their employees.

Mr. Damore's firing last year by CEO Sundar Pichai certainly rang of panic at the time. Google explicitly invites freewheeling discussion and provides internal forums for it. Mr. Damore did not, in his famous memo, object to Google's diversity goals. His ruminations on biology may be jejune, but unwelcome facts are still facts. Witness the work of David Lubinski at

Vanderbilt, which goes a long way toward explaining the recruiting frustrations of many a tech and engineering-based company. Prof. Lubinski and colleagues find that women who are gifted in math and science tend to be broadly gifted, and consequently have lots of opportunities in a wide range of fields, whereas men with math talents tend to be narrowly gifted, and all end up in math-science-engineering fields.

Not that Mr. Damore's lawsuit, in which he is joined by another recently fired male engineer, turns on the validity of his Darwinian musings. In the postings and emails he quotes, colleagues spew hate at Mr. Damore, apparently without consequence.

We see them giving each other employee-awarded "peer bonuses," supported by Google's "Recognition Team," for denouncing him. We see Google employees explicitly reject talking to, listening to or working with colleagues whose politics they don't share.

We see them proposing blacklists. One paints as incapable of coming up with anything "creative or innovative" any meeting consisting of "40-something white men," and Google HR approves the sentiment. An employee asks if "men" were changed to "women," would the post still be approved? No response.

Another posting calls on Googlers to decline to participate in industry panels alongside "cheesy white males."

One Googler who says he refuses to "tolerate" broad categories of people (e.g., Trump voters) might seem regrettable, especially after it turns out he's German and lives in Switzerland. When it becomes a competition, a cultural disease is at work. Incipient here is a world that people in Google's home state are already familiar with. It's the world of California's maximum-security prison system, where inmates survive only by kneeling to one identity-based gang or another.

If there is a lesson here for other companies—and don't take this the wrong way—it's the value, broadly, of "don't ask, don't tell."

To work together on software, people don't need a company-supplied forum to discuss their politics, their sexual interests, their cultural antipathies. Offering it seems pointlessly divisive.

Perhaps the most symbolically disturbed posting is one demanding that control of Google be wrested from the "horde of racist and sexist people we've already hired."

To be white and male is not to be sexist and racist. The statement "I don't want to be denied an opportunity because of my gender and race" is as valid for a white male as it is for a black, gay, female or furry. (Yes, Google's internal discussion board includes consideration of the "furry" lifestyle, which involves dressing up in animal costumes.)

Some predict Google will quickly settle to avoid discovery of more emails and postings, including from top management. What seems worse, from a public-relations perspective, is a culture inveterately hostile to the liberal principle “I may disagree with what you say but defend your right to say it.” This can’t be good in a business whose mission is to organize the world’s information.

Messrs. Brin, Page and Pichai likely feel a tad helpless. The U.S. legal system imposes a need to be race-aware, gender-aware, etc.—to require quotas in all but name, since quotas are illegal. Google simultaneously faces lawsuits and regulatory investigations directed at its alleged shortchanging of women on pay and promotions.

Its internal mood may also partly be a victim of self-esteem run amok. It’s a wonder many Googlers don’t worship Donald Trump—he also can’t tolerate to be disagreed with. A good, old-fashioned Presbyterian horror of self-righteousness, once a feature of American life, is nowhere to be seen.

Part of growing up is learning to live with your emotions; today’s shortcut is to believe whatever your feelings are, they’re justified. Humanity never met a dictator or demagogue who said, “I’m a bad person. I want to do bad things.” The worst among us always feel justified.

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