

POLITICAL SCIENCE

Talking Politics in an Age of Division

A professor promotes agreeable disagreement—and says undergraduates have risen to the occasion.

By Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

When Donald Trump won the presidential election last November, David Primo struggled over whether, and how, to discuss the election with his political science students. Emotions were raw. But shouldn't a university be precisely the place to parse through the issues that have generated such stark political divisions?

The emotions elicited by politics are “very genuine,” says Primo, the Ani and Mark Gabrellian Professor and associate professor of political science and business administration. But along with civil society, he adds, comes “the need to separate out emotions and look analytically” at the affairs that divide us.

There's no shortage of forums in American higher education dedicated to discussions about contentious issues. The problem, according to Primo, is that often such forums present a limited spectrum of viewpoints. In turn, they tend to attract

audiences of people who share many of the same assumptions about the issues under examination.

Primo has made freer discussion of controversial political topics something of a personal mission. In 2014, he founded the Politics and Markets Project “to foster education, research, and discussion about the appropriate relationship between business and government in the 21st century.” But the initiative, which receives support from the Paul E. Singer '66 Foundation, serves a second, equally important purpose: to establish a forum in which proponents of diverse viewpoints can share a stage and discuss critical and controversial issues thoughtfully.

Over the past three years, Primo has organized panels of policy experts around such hot-button issues as immigration, financial regulations, health care, and free speech. He's been pleased with the response from students.

“These are really charged issues, and students have risen to the occasion in that

they've asked good questions, they've been courteous, there's been nothing like what we've seen at some other universities,” he says. “I think that's a testament to the fact that if you treat students like adults, if you take them seriously and give them an opportunity to learn, they'll rise to the occasion.”

In April, Primo put together a panel for the project called “The Trump Presidency: Promise or Peril?” He invited a guest each from the liberal Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the conservative Heritage Foundation, and the libertarian Cato Institute. During an hour-and-a-half discussion moderated by Primo, the guests sparred on occasion, and reached agreement at times, in a wide-ranging conversation touching on trade, immigration, education, economic inequality, and presidential powers. Primo says the purpose of the event, which also included a half-hour period for questions, was “to model for students civil political discourse in the Trump era.”

Students who have worked with Primo

on the project say its format encourages the exploration of ideas. Emily Trapani '14, now a policy analyst at a governmental affairs firm in Washington, D.C., says she found it provided a platform “that’s not directed by one teacher, or one professor, who may disseminate information through their personal lens.” Sharing a stage in a moderated discussion also meant that guests had to “engage in a productive conversation, rather than a shut-down conversation.”

Shalin Nohria '14, now a second-year law student at the University of Virginia, says he found that Politics and Markets Project panels were useful in “getting past the sound bites and into conversations that were more nuanced.”

Notably, those nuanced conversations continue to take place among guests who arrive with well established points of view. There’s a value, Primo says, in listening to experts—including professors—who consider issues through a particular lens.

“There’s this idea that students shouldn’t know anything about our views,” says Primo. “But that sort of treats us like automata. We do have perspectives. And I think it’s useful for students to see how we came to those perspectives, and to see how we evaluate those perspectives.”

In books, journal articles, op-eds, and testimony before the United States Congress, Primo has argued against various forms of regulation and for spending restraint. A consistent theme in his research is the unintended consequences of government regulations in diverse arenas, from transportation to campaign finance.

At a time when the prospect for civil debate on college campuses has become a national issue, there’s renewed appreciation on the River Campus of the need for students across the political spectrum to have their ideas and assumptions challenged. On the day after the Politics and Markets Project panel, Richard Feldman, dean of the College, shared a platform with Primo and guests from Rochester Institute for Technology and the University of Pennsylvania on the current affairs program “Connections,” aired locally on the National Public Radio affiliate, WXXI.

“College campuses should be the home for free speech, investigation of ideas, [and] students should be willing to listen to views that they disagree with and argue back,” Feldman said. In fact, he added in a nod to Primo, there had been an event featuring this kind of exchange just the previous evening. “It was a respectful, intelligent, rational discussion—just the kind of thing we want.”

LITERARY TRANSLATION


Open Letter Novels Win Translated Book Awards

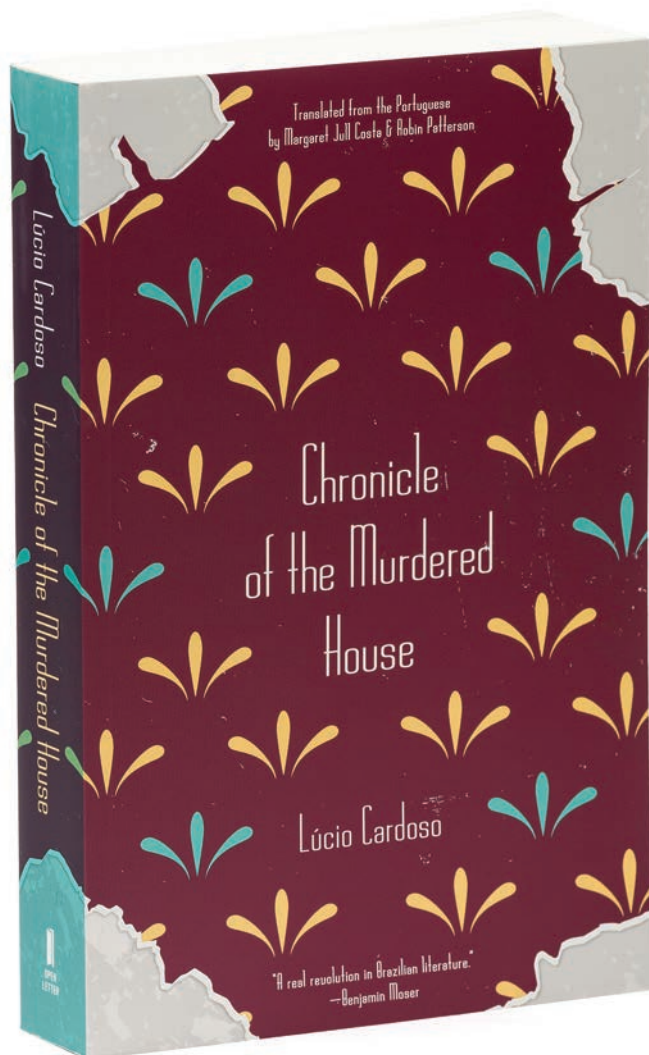
Brazilian novel *Chronicle of the Murdered House*, written by Lúcio Cardoso and translated from the Portuguese by Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson, has earned the 2017 Best Translated Book Award for Fiction.

The book was published by Open Letter, the University’s translation press. The award is the first for Open Letter in the competition founded by Open Letter’s Three Percent online journal to highlight literary excellence from around the world.

In the poetry category, Alejandra Pizarnik’s collection *Extracting the Stone of Madness*, translated from the Spanish

by Yvette Siegert and published by New Directions, won the top award.

And Open Letter’s novel *Bardo or Not Bardo*, by Antoine Volodine and translated from the French by J. T. Mahany '13 (MA), received the inaugural Albertine Prize in May. A reader’s choice award presented by Van Cleef & Arpels and by the Cultural Services of the French Embassy, the prize recognizes American readers’ favorite work of contemporary French fiction. Mahany is a graduate of the University’s program in literary translation, an academic program that works closely with Open Letter. 



WON IN TRANSLATION: The translation of a highly regarded Brazilian novel published by the University’s literary press was selected for the 2017 Best Translated Book Award for Fiction.