

Brad DeLong's Grasping Reality

A Semi-Daily Journal. Trying to grasp reality with both hands since 1999...

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Brad DeLong's Grasping Reality
Market Made for Man...

Archives
Note to Self: Slavery Course Topics...

Highlighted

Previously Featured
Grand Narrative: The 20th Century...

Edit Posts
Reading Big, Difficult Books...

Coronavirus

Why Are University of Chicago Professional Republicans so Stupid?...

Holbo: 'This Maxim Is Patently, Grossly Inadequate for Governing a Blog Comment Box... Let Alone... Public Reason & a Public Sphere'—Noted

There is good-faith speech that is heated and provocative "discussion of the issues" that advances public reason and the public sphere. There is bad-faith speech that aims to undermine and destroy public reason and the public sphere—trolling, sealioning, discursive monkeywrenching, or simple grifting.

There is consensus that such a line exists. There is consensus that the public sphere and public reason require that that line be enforced—that those who violate it be "cancelled", that there be consequences. And in this real world there will be consequences, if only because people whose public face is that of a troll—or a sealion, a monkeywrencher, or a grifter—is unlikely to add to the quality of an employment or a social circle.

There is a problem that good-faith speakers will and do have good-faith disagreements as to where the line is between heated and provocative but productive contributions on the one hand and trolling, sealioning, monkey wrenching, and simple grifting on the other. There is also a problem that bad-faith speakers always and everywhere will and do attempt to fly under false flags to claim that some speech that advances public reason is in fact beyond the line. There is a tendency to wish the problem away by pretending not to see it

Thus the claim that it is always and everywhere the case that "the way to defeat bad ideas is by exposure, argument, and persuasion, not by trying to silence or wish them away. We refuse any false choice between justice and freedom, which cannot exist without each other" is itself bad speech: destructive of and aiming to undermine public reason and the public sphere. And so I reach the *Harpers'* letter (no, I am not going to give it a link).

But John Holbo gets there fastest with the mostest (yes, I do know who coined the phrase; I am confiscating it):

John Holbo: *'This Maxim Is Patently, Grossly Inadequate for Governing a Blog Comment Box... Let Alone... Public Reason & a Public Sphere'*
<https://www.bradford-delong.com/2020/07/holbo-this-maxim-is-patently-grossly-inadequate-for-governing-a-blog-comment-box-let-alone-public-reason-a-public.html>: [The Harpers letter says:] "The way to defeat bad ideas is by exposure, argument, and persuasion, not by trying to silence or wish them away. We refuse any false choice between justice and freedom, which cannot exist without each other"
<https://twitter.com/jholbo1/status/1280678001395372032>. Some thoughts on 2nd-best solutions: This maxim is patently, grossly inadequate for governing a blog comment box... let alone a social media platform, let alone Public Reason and a Public Sphere...

[Second Best]: Ideally, the world contains no trolls, bots, bad faith actors—or few enough they can be dealt with retail not wholesale in the Marketplace of Ideas. In a world in which everyone were exchanging more or less in open-faced good faith, this rule would be good. In our actual world, however, it is not good. No, not really, sadly. Hence a dilemma.... There isn't really an obvious, simple 2nd best rule for our 2nd best world....

Partisanship is... a thing that should be damped in debate. The whole point of arguing is to consider changing your mind, via trying to change others' minds. So... partisans should—not disarm, that isn't it—but observe exacting dueling protocols when entering the debate arena. But this is hard to articulate and enforce....

[Vaccination Against Nazis]: Nazis are bad. In a politically liberal world in which there are only a few Nazis, you can argue with them. It's like a vaccine. You are inoculating the discourse by injecting it with small amounts of moribund evil, to build antibodies. Unfortunately, it is a fallacy that, if vaccines are good, virulent diseases must be good, too.

Republicans whine that they get called 'evil', but they support a President who tweets out 'White Power' and they are, no kidding, working to dismantle or hobble democracy.... Unless and until conservatism crawls out of its deplorable basket there isn't much realistic prospect of normalizing its tenets as non-deplorable, in discourse terms. It is not reasonable to ask the left to pretend things stand otherwise than they do....

[Downstream Worries]: A lot of bad faith sewage seep[s] in... all... [of] the same form... 'downstream worries'.... If 'trans rights are human rights', we have pronoun trouble, or need new norms for bathrooms or women's sports or in womens' shelters. Or philosophical ideas about the metaphysics of gender will be problematized. All this is true and some of it may get bumpy. But there's really no point arguing about it without a high baseline of initial acceptance.... But the bad faith arguers are not willing to debate the antecedent honestly. They have a sense they'll lose, and they are right.... So they fuss about bathrooms to pollute discourse with issues that can only be reasonably discussed after we accept something they don't, but aren't willing to argue about honestly. There is no reason to put up with the debate being rendered nonsensical.

[Cancel Culture]: It's fine to 'cancel' those who monkey wrench liberal discourse, rather than engage in honest debate. Unfortunately, that means those who are adjacent to bad faith actors, but in good faith, get cancelled-by-association. That's unfortunate but hard to rule out, with a rule...

.#noted #publicsphere #2020-07-11

Posted on July 12, 2020 at 11:12 in #noted, #publicsphere | [🔗 Permalink](#) | [💬 Comments \(3\)](#)

Comments

JEC said...

...an entreaty to their own institutions not to fire people or cancel projects because the loud little handful on Twitter got a hashtag trending.

If true, it's a bit odd that this collection of quite notable, and in some cases truly excellent, writers couldn't manage to spell that out. It takes fewer words, for one thing. Personally, I conclude that the letter means what it says. (That's why we write things down.)

Unfortunately, what it says is, roughly, nothing. It is by turns, glib, self-righteous, pretentious, vacuous, nebulous, and overwrought. I don't think we have any obligation to take seriously an piece of writing that grandly declares, "We refuse any false choice between justice and freedom...." (Notice that this bit of piety is either (a) vacuous; (b) tautological; or (c) false... and it is not actually possible to determine which. In its own way, it's a tour-de-force.)

Let us speak of it no further.

Reply

July 11, 2020 at 20:30

AndrewG said in reply to JEC...

I agree, but the spirit of the poorly written letter is clear and hard to argue with, and its sins (what I call freshman year libertarianism) are minor irritants compared to firing a young liberal data analyst for tweeting about a paper by a black political scientist at Princeton – for, of all things, "anti-blackness." That is the kind of nonsense you expect in a political culture under an authoritarian regime. I can forgive the letter writers and the excellent writers who didn't offer to fix the wording.

Reply

July 12, 2020 at 09:11

AndrewG said...

"It's fine to 'cancel' those who monkey wrench liberal discourse, rather than engage in honest debate. Unfortunately, that means those who are adjacent to bad faith actors, but in good faith, get cancelled-by-association. That's unfortunate but hard to rule out, with a rule..."

This is the thing for me. Both bad faith and good faith commenters can be noise machines that actually degrade the quality of the discussion. In the case of the bad faith actors, that's the whole point. It takes actual engagement with the subject at hand to decide what is worth "canceling" and what is not. Lazy platitudes about choices between "freedom and justice" pretend like we don't have to do the hard work of actually evaluating claims in their merits.

Reply

July 12, 2020 at 09:15

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