

## The Dignity of the Individual: An Ode to Radical Heterodoxy

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In 1912, writer Marie Jenney Howe founded a feminist debating club in New York City called Heterodoxy. She specified only one requirement for membership: The applicant could not be “orthodox in her opinion.” Howe wanted to prove a pivotal feminist notion that was considered radical at the time: All women don’t think alike.

I discovered the club while researching my book “The Lipstick Proviso” in the late 1990s. When my book was published in 1997, I had my first glimpse at what now is called cancel culture. Some women’s studies professors were angry about my book because I dared to show the origin of the word feminism — that it meant freedom; that anyone who believed that women had the right to decide their fate and their opinions was a feminist.

In reviews and on (pre-internet) radio shows, these professors denounced the book as heresy. The attacks were so ugly I stopped writing about political philosophy for nearly a decade.

What brought me back led to my second encounter. In 2014, while Hamas was bombing Israel, I defended Israel publicly on Facebook. Some people found this, too, unacceptable. Friends of 20 years stopped talking to me. I was bullied and harassed by people who call themselves liberals. For many, it wasn’t that they disagreed with what I was posting. It was that they knew they publicly couldn’t be friends with someone who espoused something that went against the growing orthodoxy of opinion. And the orthodoxy had declared that anti-Zionism was central to its existence.

This time, I didn’t back down. The more they bullied me, the more I posted. I also kept trying to tell them that what they were doing was illiberal — that free speech and dissent are essential to liberalism. I refused to cede the word liberal and began using the term that British Muslim activist Maajid Nawaz coined in 2012 after he was similarly bullied for daring to say that terrorism is bad: regressive leftist.

We now have liberal writers, editors and professors being fired for expressing opinions that go against the ever-widening leftist orthodoxy. We now have Twitter mobs, speech police, thought crimes, public shaming and ostracism — all against liberals.

Fortunately, we also now have the beginnings of a liberal backlash against the leftist orthodoxy. Much is being written about how free speech is a key principle of liberalism. My goal here is to take a step back and understand that many of those participating in cancel culture were never

taught the real essence of liberalism. As a result, we have lost not just the sanctity of free speech but the very foundation of liberalism: the dignity of the individual.

### **What is liberalism?**

“Classical liberalism is a political philosophy that emphasizes the freedom of the individual as the central political value,” David Boaz, executive director of the libertarian Cato Institute, told the Journal. (Libertarianism is often considered the direct descendent of classical liberalism.)

Through writers such as John Locke and John Stuart Mill, liberalism blossomed in the 18th and 19th centuries, becoming the foundation of the Enlightenment and perhaps its greatest project: the United States of America. “We hold these truths to be self-evident,” asserts our Declaration of Independence, “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Perhaps the greatest misconception about liberalism is that it is a set of specific policy stances. It is not. Liberalism is a moral and political philosophy, resting on a set of key principles including individual rights; free trade and markets; freedom of speech, press and religion; and international peace.

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Liberal scholars believe these principles are essential to create a tolerant, pluralistic society in which intellectual and economic progress are the norm. “Freedom of expression, which affords every person the right to voice his or her own opinion, fearlessly and publicly, ensures that no good idea goes unheard and that no bad idea goes unchallenged,” Emily Chamlee-Wright, president of the Institute for Humane Studies at George Mason University in Virginia, wrote on the institute’s website.

Underlying all of this is the concept of individualism, the dignity of the individual. “Human dignity is the foundational principle that every person possesses dignity simply by virtue of the fact that they are human beings,” Chamlee-Wright wrote on the institute’s website.

And because every human possesses inherent dignity, every person is deserving of freedom and justice.

Not coincidentally, the dignity of the individual can be found in nature — every leaf, branch and tree is unique — and in many ancient texts and religions, including Judaism. Early liberal thinkers believed that their inherent freedom as unique individuals came from above — that all are equal before God.

Of course, U.S. society did not initially live up to the words in the declaration. “The straight white men who created and ran the country established legal discrimination against particular groups, including black people, women and gay people,” Boaz told the Journal. “As African Americans, women and gays gradually received their civil rights — their equality under the law — some wanted to go further and insist on full social acceptance and proportionality in all aspects of life. Individualists should oppose intolerance and what’s known as ‘cancel culture.’ But I think the topic is more nuanced than most commentators seem to realize,” he continued. “First, there were real horrors done to people in the history of the world and the history of the United States, and they shape the way people see the world today. Second, some ideas really are

reprehensible, and those who express them ought to be ostracized. So we're always going to have arguments about where to draw those lines."

The problem is that in drawing those lines, we slipped from the individualism of classical liberalism to the groupthink of identity politics. Intentionally or not, identity politics ended up undermining even the broadest definition of individualism. Before cancel culture, there was a reflexive equation of identity with sameness: all women think alike; all blacks think alike; all LGBT people think alike, and so on. Today that has been deliberately taken to another level: We have an acceptance of an identity-based orthodoxy of opinion on nearly every subject, giving rise to the authoritarian intolerance of cancel culture.

### **Why individuality matters**

None of this is to say that our broader identities don't matter. In fact, they matter very much. I think we should all fully understand — and take pride in — our group identities. I am a female, olive-skinned Israelite, born in the United States. I wish I had strengthened myself as a child and teen through my Israelite heritage.

But underneath my group identities, I am something much deeper and more intimate. I am an individual: unique, imperfect, heterodox.

On July 24, Sinai Temple Rabbi David Wolpe wrote about this distinction on his synagogue's website in a piece titled, "You Are Not Your Group."

*INDIVIDUALISM DOES NOT MEAN SELFISHNESS. IT MEANS INDEPENDENCE, SELF-RELIANCE, INTEGRITY. WE GAIN STRENGTH FROM BUILDING OUR INTEGRITY, NOT FROM CONFORMING TO WHAT'S TRENDING.*

Wolpe wrote, "The deep premise of identity politics is that your group defines you. While Judaism certainly understands that being a Jew is part of what makes us who we are, it is also true that the quality of goodness stands apart. The line between good and evil does not run between countries, peoples or tribes. It runs through every human decision in every human heart. Those who hate could choose love; those who are cruel could be kind; those who are wicked could be righteous. This Jewish teaching finds its echo in the best of America, a country where each person has the right to be judged on his or her own merits. A human being is never a type or a group, but a unique image of God."

One of the key notions of liberalism is that my rights end where yours begin. I have no right to tell you, for instance, not to wear gender-neutral clothing or not to identify however you wish. But if I like to wear short, flirty skirts, if I prefer men who are chivalrous, if I chose to stay home with my son when he was young, how does that harm you? In a free, liberal society, we can all thrive and respect one another.

I also have no right to punish you for your beliefs any more than you have a right to punish me for mine. I believe in biology, that babies are born male or female, that doctors do not "assign" genders at birth. You believe differently? That's your right. But how does my belief about this harm you? Speech — beliefs — are not violence.

With rights come responsibilities: to ourselves, to society. You have a responsibility to do what's best for you and your children, even if that goes against your political beliefs.

The harm comes when laws are created based on an ideology that subverts liberalism. The 1920 Women's Suffrage Act, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the Supreme Court upholding same-sex marriage in 2015 — legitimate rights gained without harming society or undermining other rights. In fact, each made society stronger. But, for instance, some of the laws being considered or imposed regarding “gender neutrality” can cause harm. Does a biological male have a right to shower with biological females? Not under feminism. His/her rights end where theirs begin. At the very least, it's worth a debate, which is no longer allowed in today's groupthink cancel culture.

As a feminist who knows that a level playing field has been in place for decades, I have no problem with the fact that women are, for example, underrepresented in the sciences. Feminism never meant a 50-50 split in everything. In fact, mandating equality of outcome goes against the very essence of feminism. Women who now have the opportunity to choose and gain skills are not pawns to be shuffled around to appease a reigning ideology.

Moreover, as Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. understood, the only way to create lasting change is through individualism. The best player in my son's tennis program is Black. If anyone were to tell him that he shouldn't be spending his days on the courts, that he should instead be protesting, he would most likely be offended. They would be undermining his individuality. Everyone in the program cheers him on because of his passion, drive for excellence and respect for the other players — because of the content of his character.

*JEWISH TEACHING FINDS ITS ECHO IN THE BEST OF AMERICA, A COUNTRY WHERE EACH PERSON HAS THE RIGHT TO BE JUDGED ON HIS OR HER OWN MERITS. — RABBI DAVID WOLPE*

What's being created today can be called anti-individualism. All of the aspects of individualism — striving for excellence, critical thinking, reason — are now deemed Western and colonial, and therefore racist and anti-equality. Mob justice, thought crimes, public shaming — all were depicted in the various dystopian novels from Ayn Rand's 1938 novella “Anthem” to George Orwell's 1949 novel “1984.”

The concept of individualism is not unique to European culture but Europeans did bring it to the fore. So what? It is a concept that has changed the world for the better and will continue to do so. Individualism is the essence of progress.

Why? “Because of a kind of radical commitment to openness,” Chamlee-Wright wrote on the institute's website.

It is only through treating people as individuals, with rights and responsibilities, that lasting change can be made, that society can help elevate each of us to reach our highest potential.

Toleration of differing viewpoints leads to pluralism, which means that not only will it be OK if people of different backgrounds and beliefs live side by side, but that it actually enhances society. Pluralistic societies tend to be more dynamic and amenable to positive social change. At their best, they lead to the type of harmony found in nature.

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Ultimately, the universal bond of humanity transcends identity, though not individualism.

Civil society depends on our seeing one another as individuals, not as members of a group. Treating your friends and family who have political differences with respect leads to self-respect and dignity. It is only through such dignity that we can begin to rebuild civil society.

### **The beauty of nonconformity**

Conformity feels safe. At a time when nonconformity is not valued, it can be particularly lonely. And social media, where it's all about the 'likes,' tears down natural individualistic instincts.

But on a personal level, the benefits of individualism far outweigh the costs. Individualism does not mean selfishness. It means independence, self-reliance and integrity. We gain strength from building our integrity, not from conforming to what's trending.

Freedom of the mind also leads to innovation and achievement. Progress doesn't come from mob rule or conformity. It comes from allowing unique individual souls to flourish freely. And when souls are free to flourish, that's when we elevate the world.