



Last Gasp of the Mensheviks?

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Some note has been taken of a letter appearing in *Harper's* titled "A Letter on Justice and Open Debate." Signed by an impressive array of eminent left-leaning literary and academic figures, it challenges the intolerance of the new radical Left. While denouncing "right-wing demagogues" and, of course, Donald Trump, its main focus is to call out the broader "intolerance of opposing views, a vogue for public shaming and ostracism, and the tendency to dissolve complex policy issues in a blinding moral certainty."

The letter points generally to recent incidents where researchers and writers have lost positions and platforms for routine actions which aired even small deviations from the new orthodoxy of the radical Left. It concludes by refusing "any false choice between justice and freedom," and calls for a culture that preserves "the possibility of good-faith disagreement without dire professional consequences."

The letter has not been well-received by the woke Left. Nonetheless, close on the heels of the *Harper's* letter came a poll from the Cato Institute revealing that 62 percent of all American respondents say that the current political climate inhibits them from expressing their honest views.

Pertinent to the *Harper's* Letter, 37 percent of those under 30 and 44 percent of those with postgraduate degrees feel that their careers could be harmed by expressing their sincere political beliefs. Even centrist liberals feel the increasing hostility to open expression, with 52 percent feeling the need to self-censor, an increase from 45 percent only a few years ago. Only those with strongly held liberal views showed a majority who did not feel inhibited.

This is not the first time that luminaries of the Left have found themselves outflanked by intolerant radicals even further to the Left. Examples from the last century suggest three possible approaches for dealing with this dilemma.

After the turn of the last century, Russian socialism had divided into two main factions, the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks. Although the name "Menshevik" means minority, ironically by 1918 the Mensheviks were more numerous and influential than the more extremist Bolsheviks, who were led by Vladimir Lenin in exile from Switzerland. When the czar was overthrown in February, most Mensheviks joined with liberals and agrarian socialists in a democratic government. It is this government, not the czar's, that Lenin's Bolsheviks overthrew that October.

Resistance to the radical Bolshevik regime began almost immediately, leading to a civil war. The anti-Bolshevik forces included many former supporters of the czarist government, but pragmatically they generally recognized that a tsarist restoration was now out of the question.

Nonetheless, antipathy toward the czar led the Mensheviks to support the Bolsheviks. Lenin accepted this support until Bolshevik rule was secured. He then quickly turned on the Mensheviks. Those who were not imprisoned or killed fled into permanent exile.

The next approach comes from 1948. During the 1930s many on the American Left became enamored with the Soviet Union. When the United States allied with the Soviets in World War II, many of these came into the Democratic Party.

By 1948, they looked to take over many state parties. In Minnesota, centrist Democrats led by a young mayor of Minneapolis named Hubert Humphrey succeeded in pushing the socialists and Communists out of the state party. (What a contrast with Minneapolis' current municipal leadership!) Having purged his state party of radical leftists, Humphrey was then able to go on to the national convention that year free of their baggage, and make a historic speech calling on the Democratic Party to take up the cause of civil rights.

This became the Democratic Party that would nominate John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and then Humphrey for president—men who would champion both civil rights and opposition to leftist totalitarianism.

The last example does not fit in one year, but decades. By the 1970s, the McGovern/Ted Kennedy wing of the Democratic Party was in ascendance. They accepted that the Soviet Union was never going away, and urged a foreign policy of appeasement toward the Communist state. This disturbed many liberal Democrats. In addition, many of these began to question the efficacy of the expensive social programs which had been put in place in response to the civil turmoil of the 1960s.

No longer finding any home in the Democratic Party, and finding in the Republican Party of Ronald Reagan compatriots willing to stand against leftist radicalism, these liberals took the dramatic step of becoming Republicans. Dubbed “neoconservatives,” they were described as liberals who had been mugged by reality. Although this element's ties to the GOP have been frayed by Donald Trump and his insistence that the United States can no longer afford to be the world's policeman, the neocons gained great influence in, and made many contributions to, the conservative movement over many decades.

Now, historical analogies are never exact. The times and people will always differ. For example, the *Harper's* letter was written by literary, not political people. Also, dangerous as they are, Antifa is not known to have nuclear weapons.

And personalities are key. No one expects Noam Chomsky to become Irving Kristol. Nonetheless, if the old liberals who signed the letter don't want to become forgotten footnotes to our current revolutionary moment, they may consider the choices faced by their predecessors in fighting for an open and civil society.

First, it can safely be said that the 1948 option is already gone. The contemporary Democratic Party has fully surrendered to the divisive and intolerant cancel culture and identity politics of the radicals. In doing so, and in sharp contrast to the liberal Humphrey Democrats of the 1950s and 1960s, modern Democrats have forfeited any possibility of constructive and productive engagement with racial issues which persist in our society.

Second, given their visceral antipathy to Donald Trump, the neocon “1980” option also seems unlikely.

This leaves them in a position similar to that of the Mensheviks after 1918. After they overthrew the democratic government in October, the Bolshevik hold was initially very uncertain. Had the Mensheviks joined with the anti-Bolshevik forces, there might have been some chance that Russia could have gained the democratic government that it still lacks a century later. Instead, however, their antipathy to the czar, like modern leftists’ antipathy to Trump, led the Mensheviks into the embrace of the radicals who despised and would destroy them.

Is there a happier 2020 option? On their side, the signers of the *Harper’s* letter might recognize that decades of being on the receiving end of the radicals’ cancel culture vehemence have massively increased conservatives’ appreciation for the preciousness and precariousness of free speech.

The Cato poll showed that 60 percent of Republicans (and 49 percent of independents) with postgraduate education fear that letting their political views be known could harm their careers. If the signers could look past the radical-dominated media’s demonization of conservatives, they would see that the modern Right is not the one they think they know from their youth.

For their part, conservatives need a coherent program to promote open and civil society. This could include encouraging corporate neutrality on political matters (isn’t the Left always decrying corporate influence on politics?), aligning academic financial incentives to encourage free speech and, most importantly perhaps, standing with the letter’s signers in favor of open and civil debate.