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What Debates About Free Speech Miss

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Given the multiple cataclysms that the United States has experienced within the last three or four months, it might seem puzzling that one of the most hotly discussed topics recently has been that of free speech and whether it is under threat by the bugbear of cancel culture. What could be objectionable about open debate? What is there even to discuss about the importance of free speech?

Apparently, a great deal. A recent Cato Institute [poll](#), for example, found that “Nearly two-thirds—62%—of Americans say the political climate these days prevents them from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive.”

Furthermore, within the past few weeks alone, the *New York Times* columnist Bari Weiss announced her resignation by means of [a fiery letter](#) to Arthur Sulzburger, claiming that she was subjected to a hostile work environment because she championed open debate. Within hours, [Andrew Sullivan announced his departure from *New York Magazine* on twitter](#).

Prior to the resignations by Weiss and Sullivan, the previous controversy around free speech was sparked by the *Harper's* [“Letter on Justice and Open Debate”](#), in which more than one hundred prominent intellectuals and writers pledged a commitment to open debate in a statement larded with vague platitudes.

As with the *Harper's* letter, people were quick to point to the resignations of Weiss and Sullivan as proof that the present state of open debate in the United States is one that demands vigilant and active defense. If people can be criticized even for calling for open debate in such innocuous terms, then surely the attack on the free exchange of ideas has reached crisis proportions!

Those who objected to the initial letter have responded to this latest defense in the same way that they responded to the letter itself. They point out that criticism — even harsh criticism on social media — IS open debate. They point out that it is hypocritical of the *Harper's* letter writers to complain, in a letter supposedly prizing the free exchange of ideas, when those ideas are criticized. The critics suggest that what the *Harper's* letter writers are really after is “Free exchange of ideas for me, but not for thee”.

There are further problems with the *Harper's* letter — and the underlying narrative that suggests that “cancel culture” has reached crisis proportions.

Take that Cato Institute survey, for example. As [Kevin Drum pointed out](#), the 62% figure cited in the poll sounds dramatic — until you realize that the figure was 58% in 2017. A 4% jump in 3 years hardly indicates a recent and dramatic crisis.

Furthermore, as Drum also noted, the poll fails to specify what it is that the respondents feel uncomfortable expressing. If, to quote Drum, “it’s something like ‘Black people are lazy’ then I’d say the increase to 62 percent means that Americans are increasingly wary of expressing racist ideas in public, and that’s a good thing.”

Indeed, as Zack Beauchamp observed on *Vox*, we would do better to understand the uproar over “cancel culture” as a dispute over what boundaries we should set for what counts as reasoned debate, not over whether there should be such boundaries at all.

That’s because a moment’s reflection should indicate that reasoned debate *requires* boundaries. To take a recent example, you shouldn’t expect someone to debate reasonably with a person who calls their views “disgusting” or maligns them as a “f*cking b*tch”. The dispute over cancellation, then, just involves a dispute over which views will count as “beyond the pale” and which ones will count as worthy of rational disagreement.

These all strike me as worthwhile points. I think, however, that there is a deeper problem with the sentiments expressed by the *Harper’s* letter writers. In fact, this deeper problem might go some way to explaining a few of the questionable judgments displayed by a number of the signatories of that letter.

The deeper problem is this: if you’re an editor at a distinguished publication, or an opinion writer with a large public platform, how is it that you can truly demonstrate your support for open debate, and to do so in a way that goes beyond the sorts of harmless phrases contained in the *Harper’s* letter?

If you’re REALLY going to lay it on the line for free speech, then it’s not enough to publish the sorts of views that won’t incite people, or to discuss those views in your opinion pieces. What you would need to do, if you wanted to publicize your personal commitment to free speech, is to give a platform to something genuinely offensive, or to express such offensive views in your own opinion pieces.

This is the deeper problem with the public posturing by the *Harper’s* letter writers. They think that they must *demonstrate* a personal commitment to free expression. And as any conservative critic of so-called “purity spirals” knows, the drive to demonstrate a personal commitment to some ideal results in increasingly extreme public behavior in service of that ideal. This is how you get magazines like *New York Magazine* lending legitimacy to people wondering whether Blacks are intellectually inferior to whites, or the *New York Times* giving room on their opinion page for the idea that it might be time for the United States military to be deployed on US soil against US citizens.

Indeed, in an opinion piece published the same day as Weiss’s resignation, the *New York Times* opinion writer Ross Douthat explicitly acknowledges that defense of free speech requires not merely defending the principle of free speech itself, but actually endorsing controversial ideas. “General principles are well and good,” he notes, “but if you can’t champion controversial ideas on their own merits, no merely procedural argument for granting them a platform will sustain itself against a passionate, morally confident attack.”

What the *Harper’s* letter writers fail to understand is that free speech requires societal guardrails, not personal purity oaths. It requires a system of government in which the leader of the country can’t use his bully pulpit to intimidate private citizens. It requires a media landscape in which

control over news sources isn't concentrated in the hands of two or three private equity firms. It requires that various thinkers are able to express their views openly and without government retribution, but it *doesn't require* that those thinkers will have a platform in *The Atlantic Monthly* or the *New York Times*.

In other words, what free speech doesn't require is that powerful writers and editors lend their platforms to vile and despicable views just as a way to virtue-signal their support for free speech. There are plenty of expressions of racist views in the world; we don't need to read them in *New York Magazine*. And we don't need the *New York Times* to give a voice to fascist posturing against protestors; for that, we have whitehouse.gov.