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The Future of Nonconformity

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Like other realms, American intellectual life has been marked by a series of exclusions. The oldest and vastest was the exclusion of people of color from the commanding institutions of our culture.

Today, there's the exclusion of conservatives from academic life. Then there's the exclusion of working-class voices from mainstream media. Our profession didn't used to be all coastal yuppies, but now it mostly is. Then there's the marginalization of those with radical critiques — from say, the Marxist left and the theological right.

Intellectual exclusion and segregation have been terrible for America, poisoning both the right and the left.

Conservatives were told their voices didn't matter, and many reacted in a childish way that seemed to justify that exclusion. A corrosive spirit of resentment and victimhood spread across the American right — an intellectual inferiority complex combined with a moral superiority complex.

For many on the right the purpose of thinking changed. Thinking was no longer for understanding. Thinking was for belonging. Right-wing talk radio is the endless repetition of familiar mantras to reassure listeners that they are all on the same team. Thinking was for conquest: Those liberals think they're better than us, but we own the libs.

Thinking itself became suspect. Sarah Palin and Donald Trump reintroduced anti-intellectualism into the American right: a distrust of the media, expertise and facts. A president who dispenses with the pen inevitably takes up the club.

Intellectual segregation has been bad for the left, too. It produced insularity. Progressives are often blindsided by reality — blindsided that Trump won the presidency; blindsided that Joe Biden clinched the Democratic presidential nomination. The second consequence is fragility. When you make politics the core of your religious identity, and you shield yourself from heresy, then any glimpse of that heresy is going to provoke an extreme emotional reaction. The third consequence is conformity. Writers are now expected to write as a representative of a group, in order to affirm the self-esteem of the group. Predictability is the point.

In some ways the left has become even more conformist than the right. The liberal New Republic has less viewpoint diversity than the conservative National Review — a reversal of historical patterns. Christopher Hitchens was one of the great essayists in America. He would be unemployable today because there was no set of priors he wasn't willing to offend.

Now the boundaries of exclusion are shifting again. What we erroneously call “cancel culture” is an attempt to shift the boundaries of the sayable so it excludes not only conservatives but liberals and the heterodox as well. Hence the attacks on, say, Steven Pinker and Andrew Sullivan.

This is not just an elite or rare phenomenon. Sixty-two percent of Americans say they are afraid to share things they believe, according to a poll for the Cato Institute. A majority of staunch progressives say they feel free to share their political views, but majorities of liberals, moderates and conservatives are afraid to.

Happily, there’s a growing rebellion against groupthink and exclusion. A Politico poll found that 49% of Americans say the cancel culture has a negative impact on society and only 27% say it has a positive impact. This month Yascha Mounk started Persuasion, an online community to celebrate viewpoint diversity, and it already has more than 25,000 subscribers.

After being pushed out from New York magazine, Sullivan established his own newsletter, The Weekly Dish, on Substack, a platform that makes it easy for readers to pay writers for their work. He now has 60,000 subscribers, instantly making his venture financially viable.

Other heterodox writers are already on Substack. Matt Taibbi and Judd Legum are iconoclastic left-wing writers with large subscriber bases. The Dispatch is a conservative publication featuring Jonah Goldberg, David French and Stephen F. Hayes, superb writers but too critical of Trump for the orthodox right. The Dispatch is reportedly making about \$2 million a year on Substack.

The first good thing about Substack is there’s no canceling. A young, talented heterodox thinker doesn’t have to worry that less talented conformists in his or her organization will use ideology as an outlet for their resentments. The next good thing is there are no ads, just subscription revenue. Online writers don’t have to chase clicks by writing about whatever Trump tweeted 15 seconds ago. They can build deep relationships with the few rather than trying to affirm or titillate the many.

It’s possible that the debate now going on stupidly on Twitter can migrate to newsletters. It’s possible that writers will bundle, with established writers promoting promising ones. It’s possible that those of us at the great remaining mainstream outlets will be enmeshed in conversations that are more freewheeling and thoughtful.

Mostly I’m hopeful that the long history of intellectual exclusion and segregation will seem disgraceful. It will seem disgraceful if you’re at a university and only 1.5% of the faculty members are conservative. (I’m looking at you, Harvard). A person who ideologically self-segregates will seem pathetic. I’m hoping the definition of a pundit changes — not a foot soldier out for power but a person who argues in order to come closer to understanding.

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