

The silenced majority

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In red America and blue America, an epidemic of self-censorship is threatening democracy

I know a lot of people who live in fear of saying what they really think. In red America and in blue America — and, perhaps more so, on the red internet and the blue internet — we are in the grip of an epidemic of self-silencing. What you censor, of course, depends on where you sit.

My liberal friends who live in red America confess to avoiding discussions of masks, Dominion, Ted Cruz, Josh Hawley, the 2020 election and Donald Trump, to name just a few. When those who disagree with the surrounding majority speak their mind, they suffer the consequences. I think here of my friend, the conservative writer David French, who for four years endured an avalanche of horrific attacks against himself and his family for criticizing the Trump administration that ultimately required the intervention of the FBI.

But there are two illiberal cultures swallowing up the country. I know because I live in blue America, in a world awash in NPR tote bags and front lawn signs proclaiming the social justice bonafides of the family inside.

In my America, the people who keep quiet don't fear the wrath of Trump supporters. They fear the illiberal left.

They are feminists who believe there are biological differences between men and women. Journalists who believe their job is to tell the truth about the world, even when it's inconvenient. Doctors whose only creed is science. Lawyers who will not compromise on the principle of equal treatment under the law. Professors who seek the freedom to write and research without fear of being smeared. In short, they are centrists, libertarians, liberals and progressives who do not ascribe to every single aspect of the new far-left orthodoxy.

After I resigned from The New York Times over the summer for their hostility to free speech and open inquiry, I began to hear almost daily from such people. Their notes to me sound like missives smuggled out of a totalitarian society.

I realize that may sound hysterical. So I'd ask you to consider a few recent examples from my inbox:

"I never thought I'd practice the kind of self-censorship I now do when pitching editors, but these days I have almost no power to do otherwise," a young journalist writes. "For woke-skeptical young writers, banishment and rejection awaits if you attempt to depart, even in minor ways, from the sacred ideology of wokeness."

"Self-censorship is the norm, not the exception," a student at one of the top law schools in the country wrote from his personal email because he was worried about sending it from his official school account. "I self-censor even when talking to some of my best friends for fear of word

getting around.” Practically all of the faculty subscribe to the same ideology, the student went on. And so, he confessed, “I try to write exam answers that mirror their world view rather than presenting the best arguments I see.”

We live in the freest society in the history of the world. There is no gulag here, as there was in the Soviet Union. There is no formal social credit system, as there is today in China. And yet the words that we associate with closed societies — dissidents, double thinkers, blacklists — are exactly the ones that come to mind when I read the notes above.

“In red America and in blue America — and, perhaps more so, on the red internet and the blue internet — we are in the grip of an epidemic of self-silencing.”

The liberal worldview that we took for granted in the West from the end of the Cold War until only a few years ago is under siege. It is under siege on the right by the rapid spread of internet cults and conspiracy theories. One need look no further than Rep. Majorie Taylor Greene, an unabashed QAnon believer just elected to Congress.

On the left, liberalism is under siege by a new, illiberal orthodoxy that has taken root all around, including in the very institutions meant to uphold the liberal order. And cancellation is this ideology’s most effective weapon. It uses cancellation the way ancient societies used witch burnings: to strike fear into the hearts of everyone watching. The point is the assertion of power. By showing the rest of us that we could be next, it compels us to conform and obey, either by remaining silent, or, perhaps, offering up our own kindling.

Maybe you are among this self-silencing majority. There is a good chance that you are if the biologist Bret Weinstein is right when he observes that the population is composed of four groups: the few who actually hunt witches, a large group that goes along and a larger group that remains silent. There’s also a tiny group that opposes the hunt. And that “final group — as if by magic — become witches.”

I speak on behalf of this latter category. In this essay, allow me the opportunity to try to convince you that everything that makes America exceptional, everything that makes civilization worthy of that name, depends on your willingness to pick up a broomstick.

I was born in 1984, which puts me among the last generation born into America before the phrase “cancel culture” existed. That world I was born into was liberal. I don’t mean that in the partisan sense, but in the classical and therefore the most capacious sense of that word. It was a liberal consensus shared by liberals and conservatives, Republicans and Democrats.

The consensus view relied on a few foundational truths that seemed as obvious as the blue of the sky: the belief that everyone is created in the image of God; the belief that everyone is equal because of it; the presumption of innocence; a revulsion to mob justice; a commitment to pluralism and free speech, and to liberty of thought and of faith.

As I’ve observed elsewhere, this worldview recognized that there were whole realms of human life located outside the province of politics, like friendships, art, music, family and love. It was possible for Supreme Court justices Antonin Scalia and Ruth Bader Ginsburg to be the best of friends, because, as Scalia once said, some things are more important than votes.

Most importantly, this worldview insisted that what bound us together was not blood or soil, but a commitment to a shared set of ideas. Even with all of its failings, the thing that makes America

exceptional is that it is a departure from the notion, still prevalent in so many other places, that biology, birthplace, class, rank, gender, race are destiny. Our second founding fathers, abolitionists like Frederick Douglass, were living testimonies to that truth.

This old consensus — every single aspect of it — has been run over by the new illiberal orthodoxy. Because this ideology cloaks itself in the language of progress, many understandably fall for its self-branding. Don't. It promises revolutionary justice, but it threatens to drag us back into the mean of history, in which we are pitted against one another according to tribe.

The primary mode of this ideological movement is not building or renewing or reforming, but tearing down. Persuasion is replaced with public shaming. Forgiveness is replaced with punishment. Mercy is replaced with vengeance. Pluralism with conformity; debate with de-platforming; facts with feelings; ideas with identity.

According to the new illiberalism, the past cannot be understood on its own terms, but must be judged through the morals and mores of the present. Education, according to this ideology, is not about teaching people how to think, it's about telling them what to think. All of this is why William Peris, a UCLA lecturer and an Air Force veteran, was investigated because he read Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" out loud in class. It is why statues of Ulysses S. Grant and Abraham Lincoln were torn down last summer. It is why a school district in California has banned Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird," Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" and John Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men." It's why the San Francisco School Board just voted to rename 44 schools, including ones named for George Washington, Paul Revere and Dianne Feinstein — you read that right — for various sins.

In this ideology, if you do not tweet the right tweet or share the right slogan or post the right motto and visual on Instagram, your whole life can be ruined. If you think I'm exaggerating, you might look up Tiffany Riley, the Vermont public school principal fired this fall because she said she supports Black lives but not the organization Black Lives Matter.

In this ideology, intent doesn't matter a whit. Just ask Greg Patton. This fall, the professor of business communication at USC was teaching a class on "filler words" — like "um" and "like" and so forth — for his master's-level course. In China, he noted, "the common pause word is 'that that that.' So in China it might be ..." he then went on to pronounce a Chinese word that sounded like an English racial slur.

Some students were offended and they wrote a letter to the dean of the business school accusing their professor of "negligence and disregard." They added: "We should not be made to fight for our sense of peace and mental well-being" at school.

Rather than telling them that their assertions were lunacy, the dean of the school capitulated to the madness: "It is simply unacceptable for faculty to use words in class that can marginalize, hurt and harm the psychological safety of our students." Patton was suspended from teaching the course — and the increasingly elastic notion of "safety" was wielded, once again, into a powerful weapon.

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Victimhood, in this ideology, confers morality. “I think therefore I am” is replaced with: “I am therefore I know,” and “I know therefore I am right.”

In this ideology, you are guilty for the sins of your father. In other words: you are not you. You are only a mere avatar of your race or your religion. And racism is no longer about discrimination based on the color of someone’s skin. Racism is any system that allows for disparate outcomes between racial groups. That is why the cities of Seattle and San Francisco have recast algebra as racist. Or why a Smithsonian institution this summer declared that hard work, individualism and the nuclear family are “white” characteristics.

In this totalizing ideology, you can be guilty by proximity. A Palestinian business owner in Milwaukee, Majdi Wadi, was nearly wiped out this summer because of racist and anti-Semitic tweets his daughter wrote as a teenager. A professional soccer player was fired because of the posts of his wife. There are hundreds of similar examples. The enlightenment, as the critic Ed Rothstein has put it, has been replaced by the exorcism.

Perhaps most importantly, in this ideology, speech — the way that we resolve conflict in a civilized society — can be violence, yet violence, when carried out by the right people in pursuit of a just cause, is not violence at all.

That is how, in June, more than 800 of my former colleagues at The New York Times claimed that an op-ed by Sen. Tom Cotton put them in “danger,” while the most celebrated journalist at the paper — the most recent winner of a Pulitzer Prize — publicly insisted that looting and rioting are “not violence.” That journalist, the creator of the 1619 project, continues to be lionized. In the meantime, the editors who published the op-ed were publicly humiliated and then pushed out of the paper.

One can disagree with the argument waged by Tom Cotton — he advocated for the National Guard to put down violent rioting over the summer — and believe, as I do, that you cannot call yourself the paper of record and ignore the views of half of the country.

I resigned a few weeks after that shameful episode, convinced that it wasn’t possible to take intellectual risks at a newspaper that folded like a tent in the face of a mob. As I wrote in my resignation letter, “All this bodes ill, especially for independent-minded young writers and editors paying close attention to what they’ll have to do to advance in their careers. Rule One: Speak your mind at your own peril. Rule Two: Never risk commissioning a story that goes against the narrative. Rule Three: Never believe an editor or publisher who urges you to go against the grain. Eventually, the publisher will cave to the mob, the editor will get fired or reassigned, and you’ll be hung out to dry.”

The skeptical reader will rightly point out that cultures have always had taboos. That there have always been behaviors or words that put people beyond the pale. Ostracism has been with us since the Hebrew Bible, and public shaming has long been a way for tribes and cultures to maintain important social mores.

All true. But what we call cancel culture is a departure from traditional taboos in two ways.

The first is technology. Sins once confined to the public square or the town hall are now available for the entire world for eternity. In our era of Big Tech there is no possibility of moving

to a new town and starting fresh because the cloud of all of your posts and likes hangs over your head forever.

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The second is that in the past, societal taboos were generally reached through a cultural consensus. Today's taboos, on the other hand, are often fringe ideas pushed by a zealous cabal trying to redefine what is acceptable and what should be shunned. It is a group that has control of nearly all of the institutions that produce American cultural and intellectual life: media, to be sure, but also higher education, museums, publishing houses, marketing and advertising outfits, Hollywood, K-12 education, technology companies and, increasingly, corporate human resource departments.

Thus, it should come as no surprise that a recent national study from the Cato Institute found that 62% of Americans say they self-censor. The more conservative a group is, the more likely they are to hide their views: 52% of Democrats confess to self-censoring compared with 77% of Republicans.

And of course they are afraid. In an era when people are smeared for petty things, small grievances and differences of opinion in a supposedly liberal and tolerant environment, who would dare share that they voted for a Republican?

But no one joins things to make themselves feel bad. People join things that make them feel good, that give them meaning, that provide them with a sense of belonging. Which is why so many people of my generation and younger have been drawn to this ideology. I do not believe it is because they lack intellect or because they are snowflakes.

The rise of this movement has taken place against the backdrop of major changes in American life — the tearing apart of our social fabric; the loss of religion and the decline of civic organizations; the opioid crisis; the collapse of American industries; the rise of big tech; the loss of faith in meritocracy; the arrogance of our elites; successive financial crises; a toxic public discourse; crushing student debt; the death of trust. It has taken place against the backdrop in which the American dream has felt like a punchline, the inequalities of our supposedly fair, liberal meritocracy are clearly rigged in favor of some people and against others.

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“I became converted because I was ripe for it and lived in a disintegrating society thirsting for faith.” That was Arthur Koestler writing in 1949 about his love affair with communism. The same can be said of this new, revolutionary faith.

If we want our bright young minds to reject this worldview, we must face these problems because without these maladies we would have had neither Donald Trump nor the cultural revolutionaries now transforming America's most important institutions from within.

But we must start somewhere, and the only place we can start is an appeal to courage and duty.

It is our duty to resist the crowd in this age of mob thinking. It is our duty to speak truth in an age of lies. It is our duty to think freely in an age of conformity.

Or, as the great American judge Learned Hand once put it so perfectly, “Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can even do much to help it.”

Keeping the spirit of liberty alive in an age of creeping illiberalism is nothing less than our moral obligation. Everything depends on it.

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