

Articles 

Times Jumps on Arcane Debate About Closed-Minded Conservatives

By: Clay Waters

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The Times, ever sensitive to internecine squabbles among conservatives, jumped on the latest one, in an odd place, an Arts section story by Patricia Cohen, "[Epistemic Closure? Those Are Fighting Words, Friend.](#)" The text box: "Conservatives' spat over closed-mindedness is very much in the open." Well, now it is, anyway.

Cohen set up the arcane argument:

It is hard to believe that a phrase as dry as "epistemic closure" could get anyone excited, but the term has sparked a heated argument among conservatives in recent weeks about their movement's intellectual health.

The phrase is being used as shorthand by some **prominent conservatives** for a kind of closed-mindedness in the movement, a development they see as debasing modern conservatism's proud intellectual history. **First used in this context by Julian Sanchez of the libertarian Cato Institute**, the phrase "epistemic closure" has been ricocheting among conservative publications and blogs as a high-toned abbreviation for ideological intolerance and misinformation.

The Times didn't make as big a deal about an actual example of debate-squelching on the left, when [MSNBC suspended Donny Deutsch's week-long anchoring stint](#) for the sin of offending its eternally fulminating host Keith Olbermann.

Conservative media, Mr. Sanchez wrote at [juliansanchez.com](#) -- referring to outlets like Fox News and National Review and to talk-show stars like Rush Limbaugh, Mark R. Levin and Glenn Beck -- have "become worryingly untethered from reality as the impetus to satisfy the demand for red meat overtakes any motivation to report accurately." (Mr. Sanchez said he probably fished "epistemic closure" out of his subconscious from an undergraduate course in philosophy, where it has a technical meaning in the realm of logic.)

As a result, he complained, many conservatives have developed a distorted sense of priorities and a tendency to engage in fantasy, like the belief that President Obama was not born in the United States or that the health care bill proposed establishing "death panels."

Soon conservatives across the board jumped into the debate. Jim Manzi, a contributing editor at National Review, wrote that [Mark] Levin's best seller, "Liberty and Tyranny: A Conservative Manifesto" (Threshold Editions) was "awful," and called the section on global warming a case for "willful ignorance," and "an almost perfect example of epistemic closure." Megan McArdle, an editor at The Atlantic, conceded that "conservatives are often voluntarily putting themselves in the same cocoon."

Bruce Bartlett, a veteran of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush's administrations, wrote that in the last few years, "epistemic closure" had become much worse among "the intelligentsia of the conservative movement." He later added that the cream of the conservative research institutes, including the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation, had gone from presenting informed policy analyses to pumping out propaganda.

Cohen's list of "prominent conservatives" is debatable at best. Sanchez is an enjoyable libertarian writer, but he's...a libertarian writer. Blogger Megan McArdle is a self-proclaimed libertarian. And if the alienated Bartlett provided evidence for his incendiary charge, Cohen left it out.

She eventually quoted "conservative defenders" from National Review, like Mark Levin, Jonah Goldberg, and Rich Lowry, before heeding the wisdom of the ever-popular David Frum, who complained about modern-day conservatives' lack of ideas:

Ever since Richard M. Weaver wrote his bracing conservative manifesto in 1948, "Ideas Have Consequences," the title phrase has been a guiding maxim for the movement. But conservatives like Mr. Frum worry that the type of ideas Weaver was referring to are in short supply these days.

Frum's own "ideas" these days revolve mostly around calling [Rush Limbaugh a menace](#) and accusing his former colleagues at National Review of [resembling Chinese Communists](#) -- to liberal media acclaim.

Cohen wrote:

At the moment, the people leading the way on the right are disparate grass-roots Tea Party activists who are operating without a leader or shared ideology.

Of course, if there was a leader of the Tea Party movement, the media would be ganging up on him and suggesting his followers were mindless puppets.

In March 2009, Cohen found the one academic discipline (economics) not overwhelmingly liberal, [and criticized it for lack of balance](#).

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