

Our Age of Character Assassination

I am not one for romanticizing the past because in every alleged golden age you find grumblers looking longingly to some earlier alleged golden age. Nevertheless, our own time has earned its share of criticism. For example, we live in a time when, for many, character assassination is the preferred way to rebut the people they disagree with. Why bother to painstakingly refute positions you dislike when instead you can accuse their advocates of one vice or another?

It's not only easier; it's also a twofer: you (seem to) discredit the position *and* you perhaps ruin its advocate. So if he speaks again, he'll have less and maybe no credibility.

To be sure, the ad hominem argument has long been recognized as illegitimate. No matter how vicious an advocate might be, merely pointing that out was regarded as a poor substitute for refuting what he had to say. At least most people once thought so. If there was a golden age, it must have been when you couldn't say to your debate opponent, in effect, "Your mother wears army boots." But that age is gone. It probably has something to do with social media because everything somehow does. But how do we get back to a more reasonable form of discourse?

Today the leading form of ad hominem attack is to accuse a person of bigotry. What packs more punch than branding someone as intolerant or prejudiced? No one wants to be thought a bigot — not even bigots. We all at least intuit the injustice of judging individuals by incidental memberships like race, ethnicity, or sex because individualism is so morally appealing.

Let's remember that being accused of bigotry does not simply mean disliking an entire category of people. For many who level the charge, it also means favoring — whether the alleged bigot knows it or not — legal disabilities, prison, or even death for every member of the category. It's as though every alleged bigot is, psychologically, a coiled spring ready to pounce when circumstances permit. It's apparently logically impossible to be a prejudiced pacifist, although I can't think why. You don't have to like a person or his group to see that he has rights and that collective guilt and punishment are wrong.

Examples of ad hominem attacks are familiar to anyone who pays attention. Note the disconnect between what someone says and what he's therefore said with absolute certainty to be. A critic of affirmative action *must* be a racist or a misogynist. A critic of Israel's atrocious treatment of the Palestinians *must* be an anti-Semite. Someone who says that men can't really become women and women can't really become men *must* be "transphobic," a pseudomedical word for *bigot*. In each case, it simply couldn't be otherwise; no alternative, good-faith explanation for the position is even conceivable. Any

explanation proffered is marked down to guilt-ridden defensiveness. In fact, those who hurl such accusations with promiscuous abandon are likely hoping to force their targets into that unflattering pose.

We're all familiar with the possible consequences of the charge when it sticks: withdrawal of invitations, harassment, confrontational protests that sometimes turned violent, dismissal from jobs and loss of livelihood, and boycotts. The threat of severe retaliation has made many people think it's better to remain silent on sensitive issues, which is part of the accusers' intention. Topics have virtually been declared off-limits to discussion. This is intolerable in a society that lays claim to liberalism in the best old sense. The climate of discourse has become so toxic that even the *New York Times* is worried about it.

It's not only what you say in the present that can get you in trouble. A once-innocuous quip spoken in the distant past can be dug up and used against the speaker in the present. There's no statute of limitations, no forgiveness. This can be especially perilous for comedians, many of whom live on the edge and try to make their audiences uncomfortable. The present is dangerous enough — Jerry Seinfeld and others find college campuses to be as humorless as quicksand — now the past has to be worried about.

Bigotry is not the only charge that can tarnish the innocent. Vying for the top position, at least since 2016, is the charge of being a Russophile. Donald Trump only needed to say, "Why can't we get along with Russia?" to find himself accused of being Vladimir Putin's "puppet" by his Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton, during a presidential debate. Could you have predicted that? (For the record, Trump's log of anti-Russian moves was rather long; unlike Barack Obama's, it included lethal weapons for Ukraine.)

Now, with Russia's deplorable invasion of Ukraine — however provoked it was by U.S. presidents — it may be risky to be seen on the subway reading *Doctor Zhivago* or carrying a Rachmaninoff CD. A Russian orchestra conductor in Germany was fired. The virtue-signaling intended by such culture-canceling is obviously idiotic, just as it was during World War I when school districts stopped teaching German and during Iraq War I when because of France's opposition, French fries became freedom fries. Really.

Another favorite smear is *science denier*. Question the orthodoxy about climate change or the proper response to Covid-19 and that's what you're bound to hear. Somehow it's been forgotten that real science, including public-health science, thrives on challenge and debate. The actual science deniers are those who seek to stifle debate.

The consequence of the indiscriminate use of these disparaging charges is that they are defined down. If everyone you disagree with is a bigot, Russophile, or science denier, then people who actually qualify for those epithets get a free pass. Remember the boy who cried wolf.