

## Editorial

# A Call for Civility in Public Dialogue

The public square was a particular, open, physical place in the heart of many traditional cities where citizens would gather freely to exchange their ideas about their life together. The public square today is supposedly a similar, though now social space at the heart of civil society, the metaphorical common ground where citizens in a democracy are welcome to dialogue considerately and even debate earnestly about their political and moral issues.

Originally an expression of mutual respect and egalitarian virtue, the public square has suffered serious erosion of attitude and decorum in our day. Sadly, we've lost the civil middle ground due to the increasing polarization of left-wing versus right-wing political, social, and theological beliefs. We've hunkered down behind barricades across from each other, firing lethal volleys at our ideological enemies that make survival as a moderate caught in the cross-fire all but impossible. Even moderate ideas now draw deadly fire from the radical blockades. Now it's either us or them, with partisan tribal loyalty, not principled conciliatory reflection, the only virtue that seemingly really matters. Too much of our public commentary is so unabashedly and unapologetically one-sided that it has no hope of achieving truth and reconciliation.

America, they say, is now more polarized than it has been since their Civil War, as are many other nation-states in the global north. The culture wars detailed by James Davison Hunter in 1991 are clearly far from over, as the values of traditionalists/conservatives are in ever greater conflict with progressives/liberals. Some, such as Andrew Hartman (2015), have argued that the logic of the culture wars had by the middle of this decade been exhausted, that the metaphor had run its course. But in a follow-up study 25 years after its articulation, Hunter and Bowman (2016) found that Americans were even more divided, disputatious, and at daggers drawn. And then Donald Trump was elected president.

Several factors of the current socio-political milieu have escalated the combat. For one, the rise of social media, whose algorithms feed biases, has only intensified the battle, enabling it to rage more furiously than ever. One characteristic of social media is its online disinhibition effect, brought about by a combination of dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and minimization of authority (Suler 2004).

For another, the rise of populism on both the right and the left has also contributed to the war of words. As a form of anti-establishment politics, populism pits the "morally good, united people" against the "corrupt, condescending, self-serving, insider elites." It proposes simplistic and divisive solutions to problems that require complex thinking and increased

cooperation. And it gravitates to anti-democratic, authoritarian leadership that appeals to emotions (Berman 2017). It is no surprise then that we are now locked in a full-scale rhetorical arms race in which liberals accuse conservatives of weaponizing free speech (Scott 2018) and the First Amendment (Liptak 2018), and conservatives return fire (Tobin 2018).

But words and speech launched at ideological enemies in the public square are only verbal expressions of deeper thoughts and feelings. And it is those more profound internalities that are being weaponized as much as the tone their communication takes. Several commentators have suggested that the most common, core sentiment being expressed in the public square today is *ressentiment*, “a deep-seated resentment, frustration, and hostility accompanied by a sense of being powerless to express those feelings” (Merriam-Webster). “This weaponizing of *ressentiment* — a term borrowed from German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, capturing the deep grievance produced by feelings of both envy and humiliation — is possibly the defining theme in global politics right now” (Tharoor 2018).

Nor is it merely a product of the current historical moment. At the most macro, globalized, historical level, the return of *ressentiment* is a manifestation of the *Age of Anger* (Mishra 2017) wrought by the costs of liberal capitalist modernity in general, reaching back to the eighteenth century. Yet changes in the early twenty-first century, as Pankaj Mishra writes, quoting Hannah Arendt, have resulted in

a “tremendous increase in mutual hatred and a somewhat universal irritability of everybody against everybody else,” or *ressentiment*. An existential resentment of other people’s being, caused by an intense mix of envy and sense of humiliation and powerlessness, *ressentiment*, as it lingers and deepens, poisons civil society and undermines political liberty, and is presently making for a global turn to authoritarianism and toxic forms of chauvinism. (Mishra 2017:14)

Healing our pervasive, core *ressentiment* is a much greater challenge, but at least our public discourse would be healthier and more constructive if the standards of rhetoric and tone of engagement were more respectful of opponents, regardless of the stances taken. Regrettably, most participants in public dialogue are not actually addressing those with whom they disagree, and therefore feel no moral obligation to show such respect. Too often it is painfully evident that speakers and/or writers are addressing only those who already agree with them, not those who disagree. They’re preaching to the choir instead of preaching to the pews. They’re talking to fellow believers inside their own bubble, silo, or echo chamber. They’re bonding, not bridging.

Which is fine, if that’s all it was. But more egregiously, they’re also often trying to rile up and radicalize those within their own camp and put more distance between themselves and the other. They’re not actually trying to find common ground. They’re not trying to win anyone over. They’re not leading horses to water. Why else would they revert to sarcasm, mockery, derision, and inflammatory language unless they had no regard for the other side, and were

simply trying to make them look childish and silly, if not immoral or downright evil? Time and time again, history has shown that the best way to rally troops to mount the attack is to demonize the enemy. And on those rare occasions when they do appear to be addressing the other, they too often sound like they're casting their pearls before swine.

For the last decade, Richard Mouw has been calling especially Christians to *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World* (2010), civility toward both other Christians with whom we disagree (Mouw 2016) as well as non-Christians. Drawing on Martin Marty's observation that "one of the real problems in modern life is that people who are good at being civil often lack strong conviction, and people who have strong convictions often lack civility" (2010:12), Mouw calls for a "convicted civility." He notes that the apostle Peter instructs us to "honor everyone" (1 Pet. 2:17), yet in the next chapter also tells us to "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you" before immediately adding "yet do it with gentleness and reverence" (1 Pet. 3:15-16 NRSV).

Attention to four practices of profitable dialogue may help, if the goal is actually to build and mobilize positive consensus, and not just divide and conquer. First, we should critically evaluate our own motivations and spirit. Is our sense of self at stake in the disagreement? Do we really just want to bolster our self-esteem by lessening the other's social esteem? Do we really just want to win the argument? Do we really just want to control the thoughts and actions of the other? When we do, we are disinclined to respect them by really listening to them. When we are merely trying to correct or evangelize them, we are not in true dialogue. We are then in a duologue, talking at, or more likely "shouting" at, each other, not conversing with each other. Such arguments are not authentic, much less positive relationships.

Second, before we criticize someone else's view, we should demonstrate that we understand their view sufficiently well to state it in terms they themselves would use and own, not in terms of some straw facsimile or caricature we have constructed for the purpose of blowing it away, effortlessly. If we cannot or do not do so, we've already lost them. They have no reason to listen to us, and we have no reason to be heard by them. Mouw also draws on G. K. Chesterton's observation that, "we risk engaging in idolatry, not only when we worship false gods but also when we set up false devils! God is not honored when we are unfair to people with whom we disagree" (2010:140).

Third, when critiquing someone else's view, we should not begin by pronouncing our judgment on it as mistaken, false, wrong, or fallacious, and then putting forward our reasons for our conclusion. Doing so may adhere to certain formalities of argumentation or judicial protocol, but in public discourse, it comes across as patronizing and condescending at best, pompous at worst. We are not court-appointed judges empowered to render authoritative verdicts, though even in the courts "[t]he indispensable judicial requisite is intellectual humility," as Felix Frankfurter, Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court observed (1949). Let

the listener or reader come to their own conclusion based on whether they find our contention even partially convincing, much less compelling.

Fourth, we should “learn to have nuance and avoid thinking there is always only one right position on an issue” (Beverley 2018). Black or white, all or nothing thinking is frequently the counter-productive consequence of shallow thinking, of not truly understanding with much depth what we’re talking about. Reality and even morality is frequently ambiguous, complex, contingent, emergent, paradoxical, and simply not reducible to the absolutist or relativist thinking that itself is characteristic of the cultural divide. We should not imply that we or our side are the only ones who are thinking well, thinking correctly, or thinking at all. More often than not, that’s simply arrogant and insulting.

The distinguished twentieth century psychologist Gordon Allport acknowledged that “Although much of my writing is polemic in tone, I know in my bones that my opponents are partly right” (1968:405). That’s probably true for all of us. Can we please at least implicitly acknowledge as much in our public dialogue? It just might help us find some common ground, and avoid some collateral damage.

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Dennis Hiebert, PhD  
JSC Editor  
Professor of Sociology  
Providence University College  
CANADA  
Email: [dennis.hiebert@prov.ca](mailto:dennis.hiebert@prov.ca)