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Name Calling

By SAM BENEVELLI
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

The last year has not been kind to our language. Students throw “racist, homophobic, Islamophobic,” etc. around to end a conversation on a virtue signal instead of engaging in a challenging discussion. While the necessity to use these words may be more frequent, their meanings, and thus the arguments stemming from them, lose their punch without proper definition. John McWhorter, a distinguished linguist at Columbia University, observes: “The anthropologist would recognize no difference between the way those accused of being witches were treated in 17th-century Salem, Mass., and the way many innocent people are being accused of ‘racism’ today.”

This year, Enquiry will focus on definition – the literal definitions of words, the definitions of personal beliefs, and the clarity that students can bring to conversations that we may not have the opportunity to hold outside of a college campus.

The fact that Americans are conducting race-based and other sensitive discussions without proper definitions is by no means a new phenomenon. Historically, the progressive left has used political correctness and language policing to shape the definitions of political terms. A non-ideological example of poor definition is “welfare.” It includes so many different temporary aid programs that even the most politically aware citizens have trouble defining it. Defining the term “welfare” is not a widespread topic of conversation, however. Race and racism is a different story -- it is now fashionable to discuss how little anyone wants to talk about race. This observation is often made by young adults and college students who are privileged enough to have time to devote to extensive media consumption. Race is a topic for discussion, not an integral part of their daily lives. People who have typical jobs and families don’t spend their precious free time discussing race and class relations. College students, on the other hand, have ample free time.

One would think that the free time to experiment with new ideas and definitions would lead to more clarity, or at least consensus, about what words like “racist” mean. As we can see from protests at the University of Missouri, UC Berkeley, and Middlebury, we are far from a consensus on the definition, let alone a good discussion

of the topic. There is a need among college students to fit in on campus, and rarely does it matter what the majority opinion is. What matters is who is the loudest. As a college student, I understand this. In an environment with so many friends, peers, and activities, there is substantial social pressure to mold your opinions to comport with “acceptable” standards. This fear propagates through student bodies across the country and paralyzes any potential genuine conversation about our beliefs or even language. This year, as Editor of Enquiry, I am hoping to change some of these conversations. I honestly do not expect to change many people’s

opinions – since I trust that as a student body, we have reasons for our beliefs. What I will try to do, however, is change the way we have these discussions. Students founded Enquiry in 2013 to elevate debate on campus and to amplify silenced perspectives. These perspectives were conservative. Now, I see a somewhat different need for us to fill in the current campus environment. I want us, as a student body, to work on defining our language and thus our thoughts before jumping to insults. I want us to critically analyze our beliefs and disagree with each other. Often.

So here is my proposal: write for us. Simple, right? You have opinions and we will pay you to publish them here. That’s not quite the full answer. It can be nerve-racking to publish opinion pieces on a small campus – it took me months of hemming and hawing before I published my first article. But even if you do not write for us, argue with what we publish.

This year, Enquiry will focus on definition – the literal definitions of words, the definitions of personal beliefs, and the clarity that students can bring to conversations that we may not have the opportunity to hold outside of a college campus. As John McWhorter put it, we want to discourage the use of language as “a mere angry bludgeon used by a certain set of people committed to moral condemnation and comfortable with shutting down exchange.”

The American Right Today

By DR. DAVID FRISK
GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

The divided quality of American conservatism is among its major features, but the exact nature of its divisions can change with the times. American conservatism may be in a new political era which began with the 2016 election cycle. Although it’s too soon to know for sure, it’s possible that we really are in new times—and have been since the end of 2015, when it was clear that Donald Trump’s candidacy for the Republican nomination had not only survived but flourished despite both its strangeness and its seemingly formidable adversaries. Trump’s capture of the nomination made clear how strongly a relatively non-ideological (albeit rancorous) candidate could appeal to many Republican voters who had been assumed to hold more ideological views.

Ever since, pundits have wondered whether their commentary over the years has overestimated the strength of small-government principles, in particular, among conservatives. It probably has: suspicion of big government, and regret that it’s so expensive and powerful, doesn’t necessarily mean a vast, eager political market for cutting government, or one that worries about its size and scope more than about other things. Cutting government isn’t really Trump’s priority (although some of this has begun to happen on his watch). And his de-prioritization of the small-government cause seems unlikely to hurt him with his base.

A good classification of ideological groups among conservative leaders and voters was offered more than 20 years ago by neoconservative pundit David Frum, in a book starkly titled *Dead Right*. The point of his title was that none of the three major groups he identified had a program for public policy that was, in his judgment, either sufficiently realistic or a political winner. Frum, who is today one of the right’s strong and especially thoughtful critics of Trump, saw American conservatives in the immediate post-Reagan years as divided into “Optimists,” “Moralists,” and “Nationalists.” His analysis has, I think, shown more than a little staying power.

The first group could loosely be defined as “economic conservatives.” By the time Frum wrote, Republican

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economic policy had long since abandoned concern about out-of-control government spending and deficits as its highest priorities. Tax cuts, especially as means of stimulating growth, were really the centerpiece—partly because they were politically more popular and partly because conservatives from President Reagan right down to many average citizens among conservatives had embraced the “supply-side economics” belief that tax cuts are the best way to grow the economy. Two related beliefs among the Optimists were that sufficient economic growth would, if sustained long enough, provide enough jobs and also go a long way toward solving social problems. Thus Frum’s (skeptically intended) term for them.

The second group, the Moralists, were basically the social conservatives or religious right. They tended to agree with tax cuts and, in the economic realm, less government, but were more concerned about what they viewed as America’s moral decline, the weakening of the family, and most sharply abortion. And finally the Nationalists, who worried a lot about maintaining America’s military strength and national sovereignty, often opposed military involvements abroad and what would later be called “wars of choice,” were open to tariffs and doubtful that expanding free-trade agreements made economic sense for most Americans, and wanted to place much greater restrictions on immigration—or at least strictly enforce laws against illegal immigration. When Frum wrote in the early to mid-1990s, Pat Buchanan had recently proved, in a primary campaign against then-president George H.W. Bush, that Nationalists were a substantial constituency on the right. Trump clearly benefited from this group in 2016, and it should surprise no one that Buchanan was sympathetic to his campaign and now supports his presidency. “Optimism”—a view closely associated with Reagan and major Republican donors as well as many officeholders—has waned as an attitude on the grassroots right due partly to the continued hollowing-out of the middle class and the continued decline in manufacturing employment in the free-trade, tax-cutting era despite often-healthy macroeconomic statistics indicating a good overall economy. Meanwhile, many Moralists have lowered their policy goals and become more defensive in orientation, as cultural pressures against them and political and legal defeats of their positions have piled up.

The Optimists and Moralists were, I think, beaten in the 2016 Republican primary contest not only because they didn’t unify behind one candidate—ideally, given

Trump’s obvious strength, it would have been the same person—but also because many voters had become less interested in their policy emphases. (Their candidates were, especially, Marco Rubio, Jeb Bush, and John Kasich for the Optimists and a variety of other hopefuls, including evangelical Christian Ted Cruz, for the Moralists. Cruz also appealed strongly to the small group of voters who are concerned enough about what they view as a decline in constitutional government to try to make it their priority.) The large majority of economic and social conservatives voted for Trump in the general election; indeed, Trump’s support from self-identified Republicans overall was as good as Mitt Romney’s in 2012. But it’s clear to at least the more politically attentive voters in these groups that Trump is more accurately classified as a Nationalist.

In the latter category, there are at least two subgroups—both of them small minorities among the Nationalists—which ought to be mentioned: the racist “alt-right,” whose opposition to, for instance, liberal immigration policy goes far beyond nationalistic and pragmatic concerns to espouse white supremacy and white separatism. The most worrisome things about this noxious but powerless group are that it is young and that its members, as best I can tell from a less-than-expert standpoint, are so alienated from most of American society that they think they have little to lose by openly stating their views—and perhaps by increasingly perpetrating sporadic violence. One of the many bad things about the often-violent street activism of the “antifa” (self-describedly anti-fascist) movement on the left is that it could, although I’m not sure it actually will, help the “alt-right” to grow.

There’s a separate group of anti-system conservatives who are generally believers in small government, social conservatism, and nationalism as Frum defined it, but equally (often, it seems, more) interested in political struggle with other conservatives: the alliance between neoconservatives, what might be called “business conservatives,” and large numbers of right-of-center journalists, policy experts, and major organizational leaders, who are sometimes known as “Conservatism Inc.” It is analytically important, as well as a matter of fairness, to distinguish between the alt-right and this latter anti-system group, sometimes called the “nonaligned” or “independent” right. The nonaligned right is not racist, even though some of its adherents individually seem to be. Despite this difference, both the alt-right and the nonaligned right detest neoconservatives, so many of whom supported the Iraq War and later “nation-building” in that part of the world and who are suspected by many others

on the right of being insufficiently concerned about America’s national interest when it comes to foreign affairs. (Neoconservatives are seen by many on the right, as well as many on the left, unfairly in my opinion, as unpatriotic globalists and war lovers respectively.) The nonaligned right is passionately critical of “Conservatism Inc.” as a smug, status quo force that it insists has accomplished little except to hold jobs in conservative political work of one kind or another, oppose “non-establishment” conservatives, and elect Republicans. It believes, further, that these “establishment conservatives,” including most Republican officeholders, aren’t even very interested in reducing government or in social conservatism, let alone greatly restricting immigration or cracking down on illegal immigration.

In closing, a word about libertarians. It is important to distinguish between extreme or doctrinaire libertarians, whose main goal seems to be to convert more Americans to a complete hostility toward government, and moderate libertarians, who (unlike many Trump enthusiasts and, perhaps, many other conservatives) really do care deeply about reducing government and are much more willing than doctrinaire libertarians to work within the political system toward that end. The general record of the Republican members of Congress and presidents on behalf of small government has long been, to say the least, discouraging to libertarians—so discouraging that they have increasingly moved away from at least open identification with the GOP (for that reason, in addition to the latter’s general social conservatism and, in the libertarians’ view, social and sometimes racial intolerance). Now, with Trump in office and having won last year’s Republican nomination, and with the failure of the supposedly promising Libertarian Party presidential candidate Gary Johnson to catch on with as many voters as his admirers had hoped, moderate libertarians would appear to face the choice between temporarily dropping out of national politics and coalescing behind some Republican challenger to Trump. If they can find one, and only one, who qualifies as something of a libertarian. Trump never had one opponent for the nomination in 2015-2016. In the crucial early and middle phases, he had many. And that’s one of the reasons—I’ve cited others—why he won it and became, in some people’s questionable opinion, the leader of America’s conservatives.

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CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

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