

Jerusalem Letters

Liberals' Only Hope Against Neo-Marxists is an Alliance with the Right

By Yoram Hazony, July 22, 2020

[A version](#) of this essay appeared on Twitter on July 9, and in a [revised form](#) at The Federalist on July 10.

People have been asking me what I think of the Harper's ["Letter on Justice and Open Debate,"](#) a short statement opposing the "cancel culture" and signed by 153 prominent liberal intellectuals and cultural figures. Here are my thoughts after reading the letter.

First and most important, in the current atmosphere, anyone defending free speech and viewpoint diversity deserves support. We are living through a time of persecution, in which it is common for individuals to be publicly disgraced and to lose their jobs because they've said something not in step with the latest theory of what constitutes "social justice," or because they wrote something foolish decades ago.

So I support the general message of the Harper's letter. Still, I have to say that this statement is pretty messed up.

The most obvious way it's messed up is that too many of the signatories have spent years systematically trying to stifle reasonable public debate by delegitimizing conservative voices

and creating a context in which it's too costly to engage with them in a public way.

I'm not talking about those signatories who have strongly disagreed with conservatives, nationalists, Christians, populists, and so on. Vigorous disagreement is all fine and good and welcome, of course. I'm talking about those who have accused conservatives of being authoritarian and anti-democracy; who have compared our views to Nazism, fascism, or Stalinism; who've said we're theocrats, racists, sexists, and Islamophobes; who've said that we're "enabling" and "collaborating."

This campaign to delegitimize conservative views has been going on for years. It's been effective, too: A generation ago, conservatives were a minority in the mainstream media, academia, and other cultural settings. But we were considered legitimate participants representing a legitimate point of view.

Today this has changed entirely. Conservatism has been driven out or underground in one institution after another. And far too many of the signatories to this letter kept quiet or have actively taken part in bringing this about. But now that it's *liberals* whose standing is in danger, suddenly they've realized they care immensely about free speech and viewpoint diversity!

Okay, so that's human nature. People tend to defend their own in-group and interests. It's easier for a liberal to worry about whether

we're all free to be liberals than to worry about whether we're free to be conservatives. I get it.

But now liberals are being persecuted and deplatformed. Now liberals thinking over the mistakes they've made in the past. And they *still* don't get how messed up it is to collect 153 signatures in support of free speech and viewpoint diversity but to exclude conservatives from that as well.

That brings us to the heart of what's wrong with the Harper's letter: Even after all that's happened, the liberals who cooked this up still don't understand the most basic thing about democracy, which is that you need to have *two legitimate* political parties for democracy to work—one liberal and one conservative.

This means that to have a democracy liberals need to grant legitimacy to conservatives (even when they don't like them much) and conservatives need to grant legitimacy to liberals (even when they don't like them much). Nothing else is going to work.

Here's what is *not* going to work: Liberals trying to exclude conservatives from every kind of legitimate discourse (because conservatives are "the real threat"), while granting ever more influence to the very neo-Marxists who are working to bring them down. It's not going to work because neo-Marxists aren't like conservatives: They don't believe in democracy. They don't believe in compromise. And they don't share power.

Nevertheless, that's what this letter is about, isn't it? It's about excluding conservatives from even the most elementary declaration of civic principles in order to throw a bone to the left in the hope that they'll take it.

Now, I know that not all the signatories are on the same page on this. Jonathan Haidt, for example, has risked much over the last few years trying to persuade liberals that the effective ban of conservatives in many universities is wrong-headed and self-destructive. Other liberals have stood with him, of course.

But far too many of the Harper's letter signatories have been toeing the line with, for example, Yascha Mounk, who on July 2 announced a new organization whose purpose is to ramp up the delegitimization campaign against conservatives, whom he says are the real threat to democracy. In his own words: "The most pressing threat to liberal democracy comes from the populist right. From Brasilia to Washington, authoritarian populists are muzzling dissent, stoking racism, and concentrating power in their own hands. We're facing the fight of a lifetime."

So according to Mounk, the "fight of his lifetime" isn't against the neo-Marxists who are poised to take over the principal liberal institutions in America, but against conservatives, who are "the most pressing threat to liberal democracy." And he said this *five days* before appearing as a signatory on the Harper's letter, in an [announcement](#) that showcased the names of a dozen other Harper's signatories.

No big surprise, then, that the Harper's letter on free speech and viewpoint diversity includes no fewer than three (!) side comments aimed at delegitimizing conservatives. The reason for these asinine anti-conservative swipes is that the liberals behind the Harper's letter still think they're going to get an alliance with the very same neo-Marxists who are out to destroy them. And they truly believe the way they're going to get there is by putting conservatives down.

That leads us to the final reason this Harper's letter is so messed up: Its signatories don't seem to have a clue what time it is. They don't understand that the terrain has shifted beneath their feet.

The left has just scored dozens of victories, from taking down Opinions Editor James Bennet at The New York Times to taking out Woodrow Wilson at Princeton. There's blood in the water and no one on the left is stupid enough to go for these little liberal bribes now.

Liberals only have two choices: Either they'll submit to the neo-Marxists or they'll try to put together a pro-democracy alliance with conservatives. There aren't any other choices.

To be clear, I don't mean an alliance with the "NeverTrumpers" that liberal outfits keep on their platforms so they can pretend to be dialoguing with the "other." Most of them aren't conservatives and they certainly don't bring the conservative public with them.

I'm talking about rebuilding a stable public sphere constructed around two legitimate political parties, one liberal and one consisting of actual conservatives—meaning people that the broad conservative public would recognize as their own.

Maybe liberals just aren't smart enough to see that this is what they've got to do. Maybe they don't have the guts to do it. Maybe most liberal intellectuals are just going to keep hoping for love from the neo-Marxists until it's all over. Could be.

But for now, two cheers for the Harper's letter on free speech and viewpoint diversity. Anyone defending free speech and viewpoint diversity at this time deserves support. So I support the general point of the thing. Even if it is pretty messed up.