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Power—not Knowledge—is Power: A Tale of Two Naïvetés and the Depredations of First Amendment Fundamentalism

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Donald J. Trump, still very much deep in the throes and the long bloom of his psychopathic narcissism, late in life as his full-on flowering may be taking place, has taught me, and continues to teach me, several very important lessons. Here are some of those lessons.

### Lessons Learned

First is that in politics, as in any other endeavor in life, there is no such thing as a task that is so dirty and so demeaning that one can't find someone who is willing to do it for hire. If you are full of fight, you will always find foot soldiers. I have come to understand at long last, like never before, Hamlet's despairing exclamation, "What a piece of work is a man!" and just how much damage a quintessence of dust can wreck upon the innocent.

Second, he has also taught me that democracy — and I don't believe that this is unique to early 21st century America — is held together by unspoken norms, loose rules, bureaucracies and bureaucrats, much more than by the application of the law. Something along the lines of a common *nomos*, akin to Zeno's herd grazing a common open field, rather than Plato's arboreal, upside down *logos*.<sup>1</sup>

Crucially, he has taught me that the very mechanisms that are supposed to deliver justice — the laws and the courts—are no bulwark of any sort against determined assault, but in fact can be effectively used and abused to deliver exactly the opposite: not only rank injustice, not only the undermining of specific laws, but *the negation of the concept of the rule of law itself*. Kant, from what I have been able to learn, never stooped low enough to bother with detecting the always active forces of the rough and tumble of life in the polis and how such "details" decide everything. Commanding "Let there be Trial!" is not the same as commanding, "Let there be Justice!"

I have also learned from that indecent man —Trump that is—that although there is such a thing as common decency, by itself, decency can do nothing. It cannot embarrass those who cannot be embarrassed, and it cannot shame those who cannot be shamed. Decency is nothing without those who respect it, and Nothing comes from Nothing.

More than that, I have learned that when facing bullies and liars at a hollering gargantuan scale, contrasting one's chastity against such bullying and lying, and strutting one's own purity of intention and honesty of action, are not only absurdly ineffective milquetoast strategies, but in fact, ineluctably self-defeating. Outraged by our inability to embarrass and shame, we turn our mortifications upon those who *can* be embarrassed, who *can* be shamed. And so, we ferociously turn on our own children and we eat their flesh and we drink their blood. To state the obvious: it is no coincidence that the #MeToo movement was born right after the ascension to power of Donald Trump. Stories of the rampant depravities of Harvey

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<sup>1</sup> Sellars, John. 2007. "[Deleuze and Cosmopolitanism.](#)" *Radical Philosophy* (March/April).

Weinstein were no closely held secrets.<sup>2</sup> Very much akin to the Bernie Madoff scandal,<sup>3</sup> the evidence was all there, all along available for the picking: the accusers were accusing and yet nothing was happening. As it were: the scandals needed their time, and, like any idea whose time has come, no one can stop a scandal whose time has come.

In our righteous rampage, we did slay the occasional villain (Harvey Weinstein, Jeffrey Epstein), but mostly, we gleefully destroyed those who were destroyable, the ones who had the capacity to be shamed. And so we ended up destroying those whose infraction in outrage was infinitesimal, vaporous—Michelle Wolf, Al Franken, J.K. Rowling, Kevin Spacey, Sharon Osbourne, Louis C. K., Kathy Griffin, Andrew Cuomo and, reaching way, way back (just to show you that shaming 2.0 is not a new phenomenon) Sinead O'Connor, who committed the grave sin of tearing up a picture of the Pope (Joe Pesci famously declared that he would have “smacked her”).<sup>4</sup> Compare these canceled fiends to some real ghastly ghouls: Michael Flynn, Lauren Boebert, Roger Stone, Marjorie Taylor Greene, Paul Manafort, Sarah Huckabee, Rudi Giuliani and Sidney Powell, many of whom are convicted and sentenced criminals,<sup>5</sup> the rest face serious charges of treason and find themselves in legal jeopardy, and all of whom we can call liars if we wish to keep that word in our dictionary.

But most importantly, I have learned from the Inveterate Liar himself that truth has no force of its own and that it needs people who believe in its possibility in the first place and who are willing to fight hard for it to keep it alive, let alone for it to have any bite. A better and more edifying experiment to once and for all dispose of the correspondence theory of Truth and to assert instead the indisputable fact that the Epistemic cannot exist out of the Social, could not possibly have been imagined, let alone devised and then successfully carried out. In other words, “Knowledge is Power” is no longer to be understood as a Baconian causality statement (those who know will as a result acquire power), but a commutative identity statement: if you have power, you can assert whatever reality you wish to assert, so that also *Power is Knowledge*. Some have called this *The Post-Truth condition* and have asserted that we are witnessing nothing new under the sun: it has always been thus.<sup>6</sup> In either case, the rejection of this facile cherished piece of dogma—acquire knowledge (the cause) and you will ineluctably acquire power (the effect)—brings Hume to mind. He was clearly right on this score at least: it is an illusion to think that just because you know, you will be able to do or that your truth will be heard above the din.

Yes, one can of course point a straight finger at patent truths: COVID vaccines do work, the 2020 Elections were not stolen, the Russians did interfere with the 2016 elections, Trump did openly ask Zelensky to dig out dirt on then potential-presidential candidate Joe Biden in exchange for releasing a shipment of Javelins that Ukraine badly needed and that had been authorized by Congress months earlier, and so on. *One can go on forever* pointing at the most obvious truths, facts, whatever one wishes to call them, and one can underline them,

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<sup>2</sup> Williams, Zoe 2017. [“Why Did No One Speak Out about Harvey Weinstein?”](#) *The Guardian*. October 10.

<sup>3</sup> Markopolos, Harry, 2011. [No One Would Listen: A True Financial Thriller](#). Wiley.

<sup>4</sup> Shatto, Rachel. 2022. [“Nothing Compares Is A Moving Portrayal Of A Misunderstood Artist.”](#) *Advocate* April 20.

<sup>5</sup> [“List of people granted executive clemency by Donald Trump.”](#) *Wikipedia*.

<sup>6</sup> Fuller, Steve. 2018. *Post-Truth: Knowledge As A Power Game*. Anthem Press.

highlight them, repeat them over and over again with increasing (and inexhaustible, it seems) exasperation, and yet nothing will come out of it, nothing will happen if there is no one who can take such truths and facts and convert them to weaponry and fight back. Nothing comes from Nothing. (Regular watchers of the MSNBC evening talk show lineup know exactly what I mean.)

### **Acceding to Demands**

But here is the most important lesson that I have learned: You win by firmly holding and asserting *naive beliefs*, and where possible, by taking advantage of the wide open space that will enable you to operate freely. The space is wide open if you will yourself to consider it wide open. Imagination helps open up whole vistas un-imagined before. And where constraining *logos* comes in the way to interfere with the will of *nomos*, no worries: Natives from the Logos tribe—dogmatic believers in the superiority of their way of advancing the ball of civilization—will spring into action to “defend your right” to maraud and willfully act upon the world without interference. They will, they insist proudly, “defend your right to the death.” So the ACLU will fight bitterly to protect your right to say awful things,<sup>7</sup> and learned scholars will defend your right to have creationism be taught on par with the theory of evolution.<sup>8</sup> Those among us who may demur are accused by these Logos puritans of being naive and of risking a precipitous slide down a dangerous slippery slope if we do not tightly hold firm to our principles. Lest we wish to collapse into a pit of chaos and nihilism, we are told, we cannot ban hate speech that we hate (speech that demeans others—i.e., calls for hurting others, at times destroying them<sup>9</sup>) and we must welcome into our schools as equal fellow grazers in the open field those who reject science and the assertion of truth based on reason, evidence, and open inquiry.

But who is naive in all of this, really? Or, let us say, who is the naive whose naivete is self-defeating, and who is the naive whose naivete is self-empowering? The answers are obvious.

I find it interesting and telling that those who demand to be given the space they need to express their hatred openly have never worried much about the dangers of their own slippery slopes: ‘Where do we draw the line beyond the point of obvious moral disaster?’ is not a question that has preoccupied them much. The fire-in-the-movie-theater metaphor-cum red line, it is now clear, is not, and has never been, a useful device. The January 6th committee is still “investigating,” collecting evidence and parsing laws, even though not only did we hear the former President and his co-conspirators yell “Fire!” on National TV that day, but over months before and after the elections, we watched him gather the wood and the gasoline for the bonfire that he personally lit and relished beholding on that fateful day.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Cole, David. 2022. [“Defending Speech We Hate.”](#) *The ACLU*. June 6, 2021; updated Feb. 2

<sup>8</sup> The National Center for Science Education. 2006. [“Closing Statement for the Plaintiffs in \*Kitzmiller v Dover.\*”](#) *Reports of the National Center for Science Education* 26 (1-2): January-April.

<sup>9</sup> Beinart, Peter. 2017 [“The Right’s Islamophobia Has Nothing to Do With National Security.”](#) *The Atlantic*. November 20,

<sup>10</sup> Seddiq, Oma. 2022. [“Trump was ‘Gleefully Watching’ the January 6 Riot on TV and ‘Hitting Rewind.’”](#) *Business Insider*. January 6

To borrow from Justice Potter Stewart, an Eisenhower Republican, we should know obscenity when we see it, and we saw it on January 6th.<sup>11</sup>

As for those whose right to teach creationism on par with evolution: They have impressively walked a long distance in a very short time, since the time when they humbly asked for nothing much more than a little place, a little space, a seat, so that they can share “their perspective” (which is what their zealot First Amendment defenders called it, but which they themselves called simply: “The Gospel Truth”). And once their place as equals was secured and the notion that people who push nonsense have a right to participate, they have taken over and are now banning by the bushel books that they don’t like.<sup>12</sup> They too have not worried too much about any slippery slopes.

### Recalling Marcuse ... and Goldwater

Along with Zeno’s *nomos* contra Plato’s *logos*, and Hume’s rejection of facile causality statements contra Kant’s reactionary worship of step-wise Reason, Herbert Marcuse comes to mind on two scores.

First is the proposition that real change is fueled by the socially marginalized: by the substratum of the outcasts and the outsiders.<sup>13</sup> The fact that a small minority of citizens, Hillary’s Deplorables, who believe in stripping women of their right to choose, have been able to accomplish this un-imaginable feat, should not come as a shock and should not be considered an aberration of any sort. It is those who have little to lose, those who are not invested in the status quo, those who can take risks, because the risks are not that costly, or are almost without cost, that will act boldly. This the elite ruling class on the Right finally fully grasped once and for all when Donald Trump won the 2016 elections (though for a moment, they wavered on January 6th, but are now back, vision refocused) and have been acting successfully on it since then. It is a winning formula, and history has, time and again, provided ample evidence of its efficacy.

Second is Marcuse’s rejection of “pure tolerance,” or tolerance for the sake of tolerance, or, what one might call, “First Amendment Fundamentalism.” Instead, Marcuse calls for “discriminating tolerance” or, more accurately and more honestly, “Repressive Tolerance.”<sup>14</sup> Marcuse was of course fighting to move the entrenched Establishment, the majority, which relied on a form of “pure tolerance” to perpetuate its hegemony. His problem, in other words, was the upside down version of our current problem. His problem was: Can a minority (“the Left”) influence an immovable overwhelming majority. As Marcuse (1969) put it towards the end of his essay:

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<sup>11</sup> “I Know it When I see It.” *Wikipedia*.

<sup>12</sup> Lewis, Michael. 2022. “Florida Bans 54 Math Books to Keep Our Schools Mediocre.” *Miami Today News*. April 19.

<sup>13</sup> Sim, Stuart and Noel Parker. 1997. *A-Z Guide to Modern Social and Political Theorists*. Routledge.

<sup>14</sup> Wolff, Paul, Barrington Moore Jr., and Herbert Marcuse. 1969. “Repressive Tolerance.” In *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, 95-137. Boston: Beacon Press. The full text of the essay can be found [here](#).

The chance of influencing, in any effective way, this majority is at a price, in dollars, totally out of reach of the radical opposition. Here too, free competition and exchange of ideas have become a farce. The Left has no equal voice, no equal access to the mass media and their public facilities - not because a conspiracy excludes it, but because, in good old capitalist fashion, it does not have the required purchasing power. And the Left does not have the purchasing power because it is the Left.

The farce in our case is the ability of a minority within a minority to gain power while engaging in blatant prevarication, demolition of norms, decimation of the democratic apparatus, and the repeated outright violation of laws, in the open, publicly, loudly, without equivocation, without hesitation, without remorse.

Barry Goldwater declared during his acceptance speech at the 1964 Republican Convention: “I would remind you that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice! And let me remind you also that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue!” Goldwater of course went on to lose to Lyndon Johnson by a landslide partly as a result of having enabled his opposition to cast him as a “dangerous extremist” at a time when the cold war was at its peak and precaution was the order of the day.<sup>15</sup>

The order of *our* day is clearly no longer precaution but extremism, except that while precaution by a majority in power once was a good cure against the perceived extremism of a minority out of power, what is one to do when a minority in power is bent on maintaining and expanding that power by stifling speech and dismantling the democratic apparatus (because that is their only way to power)? The answer is clearly not moderation and tolerance of the intolerant destroyers, but something less dogmatic, less naive, more strategic, and much more focused on action and results and winning. And this is not anywhere near where the Progressive movement stands today. They continue to point to facts, they continue to trot out experts, and they continue to wax earnest indignation when they suffer an outrage. But as for doing, they do nothing.<sup>16</sup> And Nothing comes from Nothing.

Goldwater was right when he said, “moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue!” He would have also been right had he also said: “Extremism in the defense of *democracy* is no vice!” Instead, he chose his word carefully—“liberty”—and launched a revolution that has been yielding its fruits since the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> White, Theodore Harold. 1965. *The Making of the President, 1964*. Atheneum Publishers.

<sup>16</sup> Mascaro, Lisa. 2022. "[Senate Vows Vote on Abortion, but not Filibuster Changes.](#)" *ABC News*. May 3

<sup>17</sup> Not that anything near “justice” has been delivered by the movement that Barry Goldwater unleashed. On the economic front, where one can measure and quantify and put together charts, read the *Economic Policy Institute's* 2021 report titled, "[Growing Inequalities, Reflecting Growing Employer Power, Have Generated a Productivity–Pay Gap Since 1979.](#)" September 2, 2021.

*A. Bouzid*

With the imminent reversal of *Roe v. Wade*, Progressives need a Goldwater moment: a reckoning that tells a simple tale of how no rights can be protected and no truths can be declared self-evident, if the democratic system that we need to render them is no more.