

— LETTERS
on LIBERTY



BEYOND THE CULTURE WARS

Jacob Reynolds

— LETTERS
on LIBERTY

Welcome to *Letters on Liberty* from the Academy of Ideas. *Letters On Liberty* is a modest attempt to reinvigorate the public sphere and argue for a freer society.

academyofideas.org.uk/letters



Since its foundation in 2000, the Academy of Ideas has hosted thousands of public debates, festivals, forums and salons where people from all walks of life come together to debate often-controversial topics and to challenge contemporary knee-jerk orthodoxies.

We always hold on to one defining principle:
free speech allowed.

academyofideas.org.uk

What are Letters on Liberty?

It's not always easy to defend freedom. Public life may have been locked down recently, but it has been in bad health for some time.

Open debate has been suffocated by today's censorious climate and there is little cultural support for freedom as a foundational value. What we need is rowdy, good-natured disagreement and people prepared to experiment with what freedom might mean today.

We stand on the shoulders of giants, but we shouldn't be complacent. We can't simply rely on the thinkers of the past to work out what liberty means today, and how to argue for it.

Drawing on the tradition of radical pamphlets from the seventeenth century onwards - designed to be argued over in the pub as much as parliament - *Letters on Liberty* promises to make you think twice. Each *Letter* stakes a claim for how to forge a freer society in the here and now.

We hope that, armed with these *Letters*, you take on the challenge of fighting for liberty.

Academy of Ideas team

BEYOND THE CULTURE WARS

'In this disintegration, culture, even more than other realities, had become what only then people began to call "value", i.e., a social commodity which could be circulated and cashed in in exchange for all other values, social and individual... In this process, cultural values were treated like any other values, they were what values have always been, exchange values; in passing from hand to hand they were worn down like old coins.'

Hannah Arendt ⁱ

Many commentators presumed that the coronavirus pandemic would bring an end to culture-war style conflicts. There was a remarkable unity of purpose displayed in the worldwide response and the seriousness of the issue seemed to cast a poor light on the previous obsessions with marginal, often laughably ridiculous, culture-war confrontations. We now know, in the light of Black Lives Matter and the culture war over the use of masks (and the provision of vaccines) that the pandemic has intensified many of these existing tendencies. Exploring why this is so can help clarify many aspects of the culture wars.

What are the culture wars?

It is frequently noted that what makes culture-war issues seem particularly intractable, bitter and divisive is that they often involve debates about values with one right answer. What happens when we disagree if there is only one answer? Compromise has a wishy-washy reputation ill-suited to our strident times - some things are not worth compromising on. But compromise means both sides accepting that there is not 'only one right answer'.

Culture-war issues typically make compromise impossible. For example, in the ideology underpinning the most radical transgender claims, what is challenged is not simply sex or gender roles, but sex and gender themselves. (I do not know a single person who denies the 'validity' of a trans person's wish to live as a member of the opposite sex, but plenty who resist the claim that therefore sex differences do not exist.) Or in the case of polyamory, many are happy to let polyamorists go about their lives, but resist the claim that there is something morally better about it. To many, it seems that the proselytisers of polyamory will not be happy until everyone is a swinger. In both cases, the political compromise - to accept trans identities but preserve sex differences, or to accept

polyamorous relations, but refuse to engage in them - is ruled out.

Compromise is a fundamentally political act, and in the culture wars what is rejected is politics. Political language - opinions, compromises, points of view - is rejected in favour of an intolerant application of moral language - right and wrong, justice and injustice - that we can call moralised language. This may be the signal feature of the culture wars: political language is replaced by moralised language.

This world of values is also in contrast to a world of virtues. Virtues, unlike values, do not necessarily conflict with each other. In the world of the virtues, courage complements fidelity which complements magnanimity - and so on. This is an observation about a qualitative element of moral discourse, not a traditionalist longing for a previous age. Values can be picked up, put down, exchanged and traded off. Values, in the philosopher Hannah Arendt's words, are always, in the end, exchange values; just see how easily the corporate world embraces all talk of values. In today's world, one can value employment protections, like being a member of a union, at the same time as campaigning for people to lose their jobs for saying something 'offensive'. Virtues, by contrast, require effort, time and habituation. In short, they cannot be exchanged.

The exchangeability of values is part of what gives the culture wars its shrillness. If you have the ‘wrong’ values, there can be no excuse for failing to immediately swap them for the ‘correct’ ones. If it takes time and effort to habituate the right virtues, it does not take time or effort to adopt different values – merely lip-service. For example, the fascination with ‘white privilege’ and the desire to examine oneself does not mean ‘living better’ but merely ‘staying up to date’. When virtues are replaced by values, we call it virtue-signalling. This has nothing to do with virtue in and of itself, but is simply the public broadcasting of values.

Compromise is a fundamentally political act, and in the culture wars what is rejected is politics.

One further, and often noted, characteristic of the culture wars is the inversion of public and private. Rather than the stated public position of a person, we seek out their private actions, we obsess over what is on their bookshelves or we seek to invade their thoughts. A public figure is nothing other than a publicly known embodiment of the right private behaviour. What goes on in the bedroom, the restaurant or the WhatsApp chat is open to public scrutiny. It doesn’t stop at ourselves, either.

Increasingly we find it argued that the sins of the father are the sins of the son. The family and the school - quintessential private institutions - are often the battlegrounds in this war on private life.

In politics there are no absolute truths or clear rules.

The key characteristic of the culture wars is a forced replacement - of political language by moralised language, of virtues by values, and of public by private. We have seen that politics becomes highly moralised when an intolerant set of values enters the public realm. If there is one right answer, there is no need to disagree. We have also noted that virtues are replaced by values, and so virtue-signalling becomes the norm. In another reversal, the inversion of the public-private divide leads to the politicisation of private life and the privatisation of politics. Politics becomes obsessed with sexual and identity issues at the same moment as the public square is sold off.

One final reversal is that the political act of judgement has been replaced by judgementalism. Judgement is the art of offering opinions in the absence of clear rules or maxims - it is thoroughly political because in politics there are no absolute truths or clear rules. But judgement nonetheless is a way of searching for agreement. In terms borrowed from Immanuel Kant,

a judgement is a ‘subjective universal’ - subjective because there are no absolute grounds for it (it cannot be proven decisively), but universal because my judgement wants to be shared, universally, by others. When judgement forgets its subjective basis, and we pretend that an opinion is an absolute truth, it turns into judgementalism. The very shrillness of today’s judgementalism betrays the repressed knowledge that it is based ultimately on nothing more than opinion. They are shrill because they know they have no real ground to stand on.

The culture wars and the pandemic

In a time where social disagreement has become so intractable and fractious, how was it possible for almost every political party, newspaper columnist and Twitter personality to come together in unity on a single correct response to the coronavirus pandemic? And how, just after having done so, did the culture wars seem to return so voraciously in the guise of Black Lives Matter and the debate about ‘cancel culture’?

With regards to the lockdown, some lone voices disagreed. Boris Johnson and Donald Trump may have toyed momentarily with less onerous policies,

but overall there was a near-universal agreement on the need for immediate and strict lockdown. Sweden - an outlier - disagreed only on the level of restriction necessary to achieve the same objective.

But this question of miraculous unity is in fact much more straightforward than it appears. A society obsessed by the private would naturally find it hard to give weight to public concerns such as sociability instead of private concerns of safety and individual well-being. For the private society, the slogan is: stay at home, save lives.

A society animated by values instead of virtues will tend to drop values like hats, exchanging them for new ones. Overnight, concerns about the sustainability of single-use plastics were dropped. Virtues such as courage or piety were abandoned, or, at best, left in the hands of experts and delegated to doctors and nurses. A society untrained in practising virtues has little individual or historical resilience: we go with the flow and adopt overnight new values and customs.

And a moralised society is one where only one option can be right. Lockdown, therefore, appears as the right course of action without exception. It is not a political choice by society, but a moral imperative. The lockdown society was a perfect child of the culture wars: it values private life over all else, it readily

exchanges values at a stroke, and it speaks in moralised terms that brook no political dissent.

From pandemic to Black Lives Matter

This perspective, enriched by our understanding of what the lockdown entailed, also explains the accelerated form that the culture wars have taken since the initial lockdown.

What else is Black Lives Matter other than a deeply moralised crusade about which dissent is simply not permitted? The Black Lives Matter movement created new values that were adopted almost overnight by the vast majority of institutions and corporations in the Western world. It privileged private concerns, most importantly identity, above public ones such as universal, equal treatment.

Indeed, the slogan itself communicates very clearly the private, value-oriented and moralised character of the protests. They are about 'black' people - 'white' people are only there to acknowledge and foreground their whiteness. This casts everything in the identity-characteristics of private life and the concepts that belong there: hierarchy, guilt, difference. The focus on 'lives' is the final statement of value when society has

given up on everything else. Life - bare life - is the value. The virtue-oriented conception of the human person does not enter the conversation and, therefore, there is no discussion of what kind of lives we want people to live. And, lastly, these lives 'matter', which is not a political programme nor even a political statement. It is an empty statement designed to moralise and brook no dissent. No one would say that black lives don't matter - and so the wider programme of Black Lives Matter goes unquestioned.

Instead of trying to live virtuously, one must adopt whatever values one needs to survive.

A new system of values is erected almost overnight. And hard as it is to define what these values are, it is clear how to deviate from them. In the manner of totalitarian regimes, silence is not permitted - it is violence. It is not enough to simply accept the new values; they must be shouted gratefully from the rooftops. In fact, one does not need to accept the values, simply shout them from the rooftops. As the support for Kamala Harris has shown, it is possible to support the call to defund the police while working to elect a cop.

After witnessing the speed with which an entire social order could be upended in lockdown, are we really

surprised that a similar upheaval could happen under the banner of Black Lives Matter? The ease with which lockdown was implemented confirmed to everyone the new order: moralism over politics, value over virtue, private over public. As soon as the Black Lives Matter protests exhausted any radical potential - as soon as black anger was replaced by white guilt and it became clear that police forces taking the knee would assuage it - it was obvious that Black Lives Matter, too, would fit the new mould.

What this should suggest is that there is no serious contest of worldviews contained in the culture wars. Threats to the memory of Winston Churchill, one of Britain's most highly regarded political figures, received no serious backlash - at best, a few isolated protests. The only defence of America's supposed belief in 'liberty and the pursuit of happiness' during lockdown came from a handful of isolated protesters and rogue business owners. What seemed to be features of a cultural battle are now simply the characteristics of a new culture.

This new culture mirrors the 'war of all against all' said to characterise the state of nature. In the state of nature, public life does not exist, and individuals or families are preoccupied with their own private concerns. Instead of trying to live virtuously, one must adopt whatever values one needs to survive. In the

state of nature, any conflict beyond simple violence would have an abstract, moralised quality - my 'natural' moral rights against yours - and be unmediated by collective, political institutions.

We must replace talk of the culture wars with the idea of a culture of war. This at least has the virtue of capturing the feeling that our culture is at war with something, hazily understood as traditional, backward values, that it moves from battleground to battleground and does not want reconciliation or even material gains, but a decisive victory.

The culture of war and the new class

The culture of war has a great number of causes. Our particular form of capitalism, which displaces the solidarity on which politics depends, knows only value as it cannot put a price on virtue. It corresponds to the dominance of private appropriation over public good. In fact, unrestrained capitalism has often been compared to war, specifically to the 'war of all against all' of the state of nature. At a fundamental level, the culture of war seems to coincide too neatly with the interests of a 'new class' to be dismissed as a purely cultural phenomenon.ⁱⁱ One cannot divorce the emergence of the culture of war from the material

conditions of an increasingly unproductive, immiserating economic system. The culture of war offers, perhaps, just enough circus to mask the increasing lack of bread.

That being said, this is not a purely socio-economic phenomenon, either. Capitalism has in many more brutal stages of its history been able to sustain a political language, cultivate virtues and affect something of a distinction between public and private. There is some truth to the worry that the culture of war is going about undermining the foundations of capitalist order. The police - crucial to capitalist relations of production - no longer seem interested in defending private property. In turn, the culture of war promises to abolish or defund them. The culture of war also has little time for work ethic; the delay of gratification it demands perhaps smells too strongly of the old virtues.

Perhaps most fundamentally, the collapse of the distinction between public and private seems intimately related to the persistently low birth rate. A culture unable or unwilling to defend the private sphere will at some point have to face being unable to replace the working-age population. For some time, the ethical foundations of the current order have been eroding and elites have lost the ability and willingness to defend and articulate it. The new cultural regime in

many ways serves as a distraction or a replacement for this failure.

While capitalism, and the material interests of the new class, are a clear factor in the creation of a culture of war, socio-economic concerns are never decisive. We have to face the causal power of the culture of war on its own terms. It is only in the absence of resistance that socio-economic factors achieve predominance; the tendencies of capitalism are just that - tendencies. We can decide to adhere to a culture that frames public, political matters in the hyper-individualised terms of morality, encourages the adoption of an ever-rotating set of values instead of building the virtues on which common life depends, and inverts the relationship between public and private, robbing us both of the joys of the public and the safety of the private. We also can decide not to.

The values and morality of the culture of war are extraordinary fragile and cannot be a solid basis for re-forming institutions.

It is nonetheless true that many of the institutions built to check such tendencies are, at best, deeply atrophied. The family, once understood as an oasis of private sanctuary (the 'haven in a heartless world'), finds much of its role usurped by society; the virtues

on which it depends, most notably the idea of sacrifice, have little public support. The institutions of education and culture no longer seek to transmit a shared inheritance that provides people with the intellectual resources of the past so that they can make sense of and act in the present. Without these institutions, the distinction between public and private is ever more disrupted, leaving individuals at the mercy of 'natural' market forces. It becomes harder to cultivate the virtues necessary to project a measure of moral stability onto an otherwise chaotic world.

Whether such institutions continue to atrophy or whether we are approaching a moment of re-founding remains an open question. Certainly, the culture of war sees an opening to reconstitute the old institutions in its image. This has been going on for some time - most noticeably in education, which, in a parody of 'critical thinking', has become a vehicle for creating young people always ready to 'challenge' what remains of our inheritance. But the values and morality of the culture of war are extraordinarily fragile and cannot be a solid basis for re-forming institutions. Instead, it seems more likely that the culture of war continues, like the market, to undermine its own foundations, and life looks set to become increasingly fragmented.

Some, such as John Gray, insist that in this time we can only aim at 'maintaining a fragile peace in a culture

of fragments'. This pessimism looks like realism because it has the virtue of staring reality in the face. We do live in a 'culture of fragments'.ⁱⁱⁱ But that in itself does not mean we can only hope to keep the peace. We should insist, like Hegel, that reality is never only 'what is' but is also 'what can be'. There are many fragments awaiting their moment. Arguing that the only value worth preserving is 'peace' is simply to smuggle in the value of stability - a Hobbesian value shared by the market - through the back door. The pessimists of this period end up mirroring the neoliberals of whom they are ostensibly the fiercest critics.

Others would suggest that these worries are merely a pining for a lost and dead culture. It is true that any articulation of what we are in danger of losing has a conservative quality. But all funeral orations are as much exercises in imagination as they are in history - they aim at the future perhaps more than the past. Make no mistake: no hitherto existing society has forged an authentic distinction between public and private life, given genuine space to the virtues or constructed a properly political order for forging common life. But these ideas are promissory notes to which we, as inheritors of this culture, all fall heir. The promise of politics has yet to be fulfilled. It is not, then, a conservative task before us but a radical one -

to build a society in which these foundational ideas can live and grow.

The thing to remember is that these foundational principles, virtues and aspirations are widely held and those who would replace them have extraordinarily tenuous legitimacy. Their very shrillness is a sign of their fragility. For those of us willing to take ideas of liberty and universalism seriously, the job is to shoulder our inheritance and set its radical potential in motion. This is no easy task. But it begins by living by these set of principles, and that requires nothing more than a very small amount of courage. The current dissolution is not the end, but merely a new beginning. Therein, as ever, lies our hope.

References

- ⁱ Arendt, Hannah ‘The Crisis in Culture’, *Between Past and Future*, Penguin Classics, 2006, p. 201
- ⁱⁱ Gouldner, Alvin W *The Future of the Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class*, Palgrave, 1979
- ⁱⁱⁱ Gray, John ‘State of the nation’, *New Statesman*, 8 July 2020

Author

Jacob Reynolds is partnerships manager at the Academy of Ideas. He read the BPhil in philosophy at St Cross College, Oxford, developing an interest in political and continental philosophy, especially the work of Hannah Arendt. Before that, Jacob read politics and philosophy at the University of Sheffield and co-ran the Sheffield Salon, modelled on the salons of Enlightenment Europe. He spends his spare time drinking coffee, writing and arguing about philosophy.



Illustrations

Jan Bowman is an artist and author of *This is Birmingham*. See her work at janbow.com

Letters on Liberty identity

Alex Dale

Pamphlet and website design

Martyn Perks

— LETTERS on LIBERTY

academyofideas.org.uk/letters

