

Guilt by association and “thoughtful politics”

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Writing two years ago in the *London Review of Books*, the philosopher Arianne Shahvisi told the following poignant story:

In *The Tempest*, King Alonso’s adviser Gonzalo attempts to lighten the mood after the shipwreck by describing how he would organise the island. When I was twelve, we read the scene at school and were asked to reflect on the feasibility of his utopia. I argued that it was misguided, because those who worked hard would not be sufficiently rewarded, and those who were lazy would be given things they didn’t deserve. My teacher left the work ungraded, with a single comment in the margin: ‘Are you Margaret Thatcher?’

Did young Shahvisi, or perhaps her parents, protest this teacher’s gross educational malpractice? Did they demand that the teacher address and criticise the *merits* of young Shahvisi’s arguments?

Alas, no. Adult Shahvisi explains what she “learned” from this episode:

I was mortified, but the comparison shocked me into a more thoughtful politics and provided an early lesson: if you don’t like the fact that you share a view with someone objectionable, consider revising that view.

Please forgive me for saying so, but it’s difficult to think of a more *thoughtless* politics than this: a philosopher making a virtue of guilt by association.

I’m no fan of Margaret Thatcher — to put it mildly — but should it really be a surprise that on some issues she might have the same ideas as pinko me? Is it truly so difficult for us lefties to concede that the conservatives might occasionally — OK, *very* occasionally — be right? (And of course vice versa.) Have we all now become so politically tribal that we are unable — or simply unwilling — to evaluate ideas on their merits?

Shahvisi’s recounting of this story did not, of course, come out of the blue. The context was an essay of hers in which she accused “gender critical feminists” (the scare quotes are hers) of “fairy-tale fear-mongering that puts them in league with the far right”. One reader objected to “yet another article belittling gender critical feminists in your pages”:

Many who consider themselves left-leaning progressives are branded as being ‘in league with the far right’ for their opposition to an ideology which they regard as a dangerously regressive move by patriarchal capitalism to seize control of, and profit from, the bodies of children (increasingly young girls) and women.

— adding, astutely, that “it is telling that trans men are relatively invisible in all this: no one is chanting ‘Trans men are men’ ”. Unfazed by this exposure of her conflation of two radically different ideologies, Shahvisi doubled down on guilt-by-association, using her childhood story as “evidence”.

There is, in reality, nothing surprising or objectionable about the fact that people who disagree on issues X, Y and Z might nevertheless find themselves in agreement on issue W. Indeed, it is the contrary — unanimity of views within each tribe, with no overlap between them — that ought to be surprising and disconcerting.

But serious ethical and pragmatic questions nevertheless arise whenever one finds that people with whom one is ordinarily in disagreement — and whose ultimate goals differ radically from one’s own — may be on the same side as oneself on one or more

discrete questions of public policy. Should one cooperate with “the other side” on those particular issues? And if so, to what extent?

Conundrums like these are, of course, far from new. Indeed, they are inevitable for anyone who truly cares about social and political outcomes — who sees politics as a means for improving real people’s lives, not simply an arena for showing off one’s own moral purity. Real-life politics, at least in democratic countries, is all about alliances; only rarely can a majority be built solely out of true believers in one ideology.

These perennial questions become, however, more acute in an era, like ours, of intense political polarisation — when people evaluate ideas according to which tribe seems to like or dislike them, rather than on their merits. In recent years this process has reached its greatest extremes in the USA, but it is also far from unknown here in the UK.

So let’s follow Shahvisi’s example, but first set the facts straight by specifying more accurately what each tribe believes. Gender-critical feminists want to abolish, or at least to weaken, prescriptive gender norms: they want to liberate people of both sexes to pursue their own interests and talents and to follow their predilections, without regard to sex-based stereotypes or statistics. Social conservatives want to strengthen prescriptive gender norms: to reestablish a world in which men are masculine and women are feminine, in the traditional senses of the words, and everyone is at least publicly heterosexual. (These are, it goes without saying, broad-strokes generalizations; there are of course many differences of emphasis and detail within each camp.) The two philosophies are thus diametrically opposed.¹

But, despite this deep overall conflict, can there sometimes exist small points of agreement between the two tribes? Yes, there can; and this gives rise to serious dilemmas.

Should gender-critical feminists cooperate with social conservatives to ensure that post-pubescent people engaged in competitive sports should play in the category of their biological sex, not their self-declared “gender identity”? Or to ensure that puberty blockers should not ordinarily be prescribed to minors as a treatment for gender dysphoria outside of registered clinical trials?

The answer to these questions is far from obvious. But worrying about guilt by association — and worrying, above all, about the opprobrium emanating from those who, like Shahvisi and Judith Butler², wield it as a political weapon — mislocates the

¹In fact, the philosophy of the social conservatives is, ironically, much closer to that of gender-identity theory. Both of these ideologies rely on old-fashioned stereotypes of masculine and feminine (though gender-identity theorists often obscure that fact through the use of ambiguous phraseology and circular definitions); both aim (in one case explicitly, in the other implicitly) to reimpose old-fashioned gender norms. Social conservatives encourage people to modify their behavior so as to conform to the gender norms associated to their body. Gender-identity advocates encourage people to modify their bodies so as to conform to the gender norms associated to their behavior. Both ideologies thus aim, in different ways and with differing degrees of candor, to eradicate, or at least to reduce, gender-norm-nonconformance. Readers are referred to the brilliant book by the Swedish feminist Kajsa Ekis Ekman, *On the Meaning of Sex*, for a detailed elaboration of this analysis, based on extensive quotations from gender-identity advocates.

²Readers who worry (quite sensibly) that a brief interview may not adequately convey the subtlety of Butler’s views on the alignment between “Terfs” and fascism are invited to consult her 320-page screed on the same theme, *Who’s Afraid of Gender?* — in which she accuses gender-critical feminists of being “in a position of woeful complicity with the key aims of new fascism” — and after that the devastating reviews of this book by Alex Byrne, Katha Pollitt, Umut Özkırmı, Abigail Favale and James Kirchick. To the best of my knowledge, neither Butler nor any of her supporters have yet responded to (or

problem. Instead, what is needed is level-headed political analysis. The first and primary question is: What are the merits and demerits of the proposed policy? And if it appears that the merits outweigh the demerits, then the second question is: Do the short-term gains from tactical cooperation with “the opposition” outweigh the potential long-term liabilities? The pros and cons need to be assessed and argued carefully, not assumed *a priori*. People who conclude in good faith that the balance falls on the “pro” side (or, for that matter, on the “con” side) may of course be wrong — and it is perfectly fair to criticise their conclusion and their reasoning — but they should not be tarred as traitors, sell-outs or worse.

By contrast, the whole point of invoking guilt by association is precisely to circumvent this discussion — not only to circumvent the second step, but above all to circumvent the first: to denigrate the proposed policy, and render it anathema to all fair-minded people, *without* having to address its merits and demerits. That approach — need this really be said? — ought to be repugnant to anyone who advocates a *thoughtful* politics.

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even acknowledged the existence of) these reviews, with one exception: a blog by philosopher Shelley Tremain that criticises *one word* (“lunatics”) in Byrne’s long article (one of “the distinctly tendentious ways in which philosophers deploy ableist language to signify allegedly natural defect with respect to a purportedly universal intelligence”).