

A Letter on Justice and Open Debate

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The below letter will be appearing in the Letters section of the magazine's October issue. We welcome responses at letters@harpers.org

Our cultural institutions are facing a moment of trial. Powerful protests for racial and social justice are leading to overdue demands for police reform, along with wider calls for greater equality and inclusion across our society, not least in higher education, journalism, philanthropy, and the arts. But this needed reckoning has also intensified a new set of moral attitudes and political commitments that tend to weaken our norms of open debate and toleration of differences in favor of ideological conformity. As we applaud the first development, we also raise our voices against the second. The forces of illiberalism are gaining strength throughout the world and have a powerful ally in Donald Trump, who represents a real threat to democracy. But resistance must not be allowed to harden into its own brand of dogma or coercion—which right-wing demagogues are already exploiting. The democratic inclusion we want can be achieved only if we speak out against the intolerant climate that has set in on all sides.

The free exchange of information and ideas, the lifeblood of a liberal society, is daily becoming more constricted. While we have come to expect this on the radical right, censoriousness is also spreading more widely in our culture: an intolerance of opposing views, a vogue for public shaming and ostracism, and the tendency to dissolve complex policy issues in a blinding moral certainty. We uphold the value of robust and even caustic

counter-speech from all quarters. But it is now all too common to hear calls for swift and severe retribution in response to perceived transgressions of speech and thought. More troubling still, institutional leaders, in a spirit of panicked damage control, are delivering hasty and disproportionate punishments instead of considered reforms. Editors are fired for running controversial pieces; books are withdrawn for alleged inauthenticity; journalists are barred from writing on certain topics; professors are investigated for quoting works of literature in class; a researcher is fired for circulating a peer-reviewed academic study; and the heads of organizations are ousted for what are sometimes just clumsy mistakes. Whatever the arguments around each particular incident, the result has been to steadily narrow the boundaries of what can be said without the threat of reprisal. We are already paying the price in greater risk aversion among writers, artists, and journalists who fear for their livelihoods if they depart from the consensus, or even lack sufficient zeal in agreement.

This stifling atmosphere will ultimately harm the most vital causes of our time. The restriction of debate, whether by a repressive government or an intolerant society, invariably hurts those who lack power and makes everyone less capable of democratic participation. The way to defeat bad ideas is by exposure, argument, and persuasion, not by trying to silence or wish them away. We refuse any false choice between justice and freedom, which cannot exist without each other. As writers we need a culture that leaves us room for experimentation, risk taking, and even mistakes. We need to preserve the possibility of good-faith disagreement without dire professional consequences. If we won't defend the very thing on which our work depends, we shouldn't expect the public or the state to defend it for us.

Elliot Ackerman

Saladin Ambar, Rutgers University

Martin Amis

Anne Applebaum

Marie Arana, author

Susan Madrak, writer

Phoebe Maltz Bovy, writer

Greil Marcus

Wynton Marsalis, Jazz at Lincoln

Center

Margaret Atwood
John Banville
Mia Bay, historian
Louis Begley, writer
Roger Berkowitz, Bard College
Paul Berman, writer
Sheri Berman, Barnard College
Reginald Dwayne Betts, poet
Neil Blair, agent
David W. Blight, Yale University
Jennifer Finney Boylan, author
David Bromwich
David Brooks, columnist
Ian Buruma, Bard College
Lea Carpenter
Noam Chomsky, MIT (emeritus)
Nicholas A. Christakis, Yale University
Roger Cohen, writer
Ambassador Frances D. Cook, ret.
Drucilla Cornell, Founder, uBuntu Project
Kamel Daoud
Meghan Daum, writer
Gerald Early, Washington University-St. Louis
Jeffrey Eugenides, writer
Dexter Filkins
Federico Finchelstein, The New School
Caitlin Flanagan
Richard T. Ford, Stanford Law School
Kmele Foster
David Frum, journalist
Francis Fukuyama, Stanford

Kati Marton, author
Debra Mashek, scholar
Deirdre McCloskey, University of Illinois at Chicago
John McWhorter, Columbia University
Uday Mehta, City University of New York
Andrew Moravcsik, Princeton University
Yascha Mounk, Persuasion
Samuel Moyn, Yale University
Meera Nanda, writer and teacher
Cary Nelson, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Olivia Nuzzi, New York Magazine
Mark Oppenheimer, Yale University
Dael Orlandersmith, writer/performer
George Packer
Nell Irvin Painter, Princeton University (emerita)
Greg Pardlo, Rutgers University - Camden
Orlando Patterson, Harvard University
Steven Pinker, Harvard University
Letty Cottin Pogrebin
Katha Pollitt, writer
Claire Bond Potter, The New School
Taufiq Rahim
Zia Haider Rahman, writer
Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, University of Wisconsin
Jonathan Rauch, Brookings

University

Atul Gawande, Harvard University

Todd Gitlin, Columbia University

Kim Ghattas

Malcolm Gladwell

Michelle Goldberg, columnist

Rebecca Goldstein, writer

Anthony Grafton, Princeton

University

David Greenberg, Rutgers University

Linda Greenhouse

Rinne B. Groff, playwright

Sarah Haider, activist

Jonathan Haidt, NYU-Stern

Roya Hakakian, writer

Shadi Hamid, Brookings Institution

Jeet Heer, The Nation

Katie Herzog, podcast host

Susannah Heschel, Dartmouth

College

Adam Hochschild, author

Arlie Russell Hochschild, author

Eva Hoffman, writer

Coleman Hughes, writer/Manhattan

Institute

Hussein Ibish, Arab Gulf States

Institute

Michael Ignatieff

Zaid Jilani, journalist

Bill T. Jones, New York Live Arts

Wendy Kaminer, writer

Matthew Karp, Princeton University

Garry Kasparov, Renew Democracy

Initiative

Daniel Kehlmann, writer

Institution/The Atlantic

Neil Roberts, political theorist

Melvin Rogers, Brown University

Kat Rosenfield, writer

Loretta J. Ross, Smith College

J.K. Rowling

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Karim Sadjadpour, Carnegie

Endowment

Daryl Michael Scott, Howard

University

Diana Senechal, teacher and writer

Jennifer Senior, columnist

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Anne-Marie Slaughter

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Deborah Solomon, critic and

biographer

Allison Stanger, Middlebury College

Paul Starr, American Prospect/Princeton

University

Wendell Steavenson, writer

Gloria Steinem, writer and activist

Nadine Strossen, New York Law School

Ronald S. Sullivan Jr., Harvard Law

School

Kian Tajbakhsh, Columbia University

Zephyr Teachout, Fordham University

Cynthia Tucker, University of South

Alabama

Adaner Usmani, Harvard University

Chloe Valdary

Helen Vendler, Harvard University

Judy B. Walzer

Randall Kennedy

Khaled Khalifa, writer

Parag Khanna, author

Laura Kipnis, Northwestern University

Frances Kissling, Center for Health,

Ethics, Social Policy

Enrique Krauze, historian

Anthony Kronman, Yale University

Joy Ladin, Yeshiva University

Nicholas Lemann, Columbia

University

Mark Lilla, Columbia University

Susie Linfield, New York University

Damon Linker, writer

Dahlia Lithwick, Slate

Steven Lukes, New York University

John R. MacArthur, publisher, writer

Michael Walzer

Eric K. Washington, historian

Caroline Weber, historian

Randi Weingarten, American

Federation of Teachers

Bari Weiss

Cornel West

Sean Wilentz, Princeton University

Garry Wills

Thomas Chatterton Williams,

writer

Robert F. Worth, journalist and

author

Molly Worthen, University of North

Carolina at Chapel Hill

Matthew Yglesias

Emily Yoffe, journalist

Cathy Young, journalist

Fareed Zakaria

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