

Harper's Letter: Is This a 'Decent Left'?

by [Stephen Baskerville](#) (August 2020)



In “[universities](#) or other commanding heights of the culture for years. Only when matters get so out-of-hand as to threaten leftists themselves does it come time to speak out.

It all resembles Grigore Alexandrescu’s [false criminal ones](#)) to destroy people’s livelihoods, lives, and homes and inflict legal punishments amounting to plunder and extending to incarceration. (The statement explicitly puts “a repressive government” and “an intolerant society” on the same moral plane—as if moral disapproval, even misguided, is equivalent to physical repression.)

But you will not hear this in the trite clichés of the elite left. The best they can provide is a short litany of media-salient but relatively minor atrocities:

Editors are fired for running controversial pieces; books are withdrawn for alleged inauthenticity; journalists are barred from writing on certain topics; professors are investigated for quoting works of literature in class; a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.

Any of these injustices could be quickly righted, provided influential people showed courage enough to risk their own positions. But that is precisely what these people do not do, preferring generalizations that risk nothing.

What comes across glaringly in this pitifully brief missive (addressed to no one) is the cowardice of people who want to be seen as moral so long as it does not cost them anything. It is written by people who have—by posing as

defenders of “those who lack power” –ensconced themselves in positions of considerable power and privilege that they do not want to expend on defending the great unwashed.

For if they start defending particular individuals, they might have to defend people like Robert Lopez, [falsely accused](#) of rape. Or fathers [most repressive governmental machinery ever created in the US](#), before being released on the street, where they constitute the bulk of the homeless. All are the left’s creations and connected to the undeniable fact that the adolescents’ rage, like the self-destructive violence in the African-American community that sparked all this, has little to do with racism or other pre-packaged “isms” and everything to do with the systematic [critique](#) of one in the title, though others have participated in the purges.) For it confirms the suspicion we all harbor about intellectuals employed in the academies or other state-protected sinecures: not that they sometimes fail to abide by their own principles, but that the principles themselves are empty, if not mercenary. The apparently noble ideals must themselves be protected from any real scrutiny lest they be exposed as optical illusions whose real purpose is to justify mobilizing state power to prey on ordinary people who have no platform to defend themselves. Those of us who have been among their ranks then realize that our own paid positions that we thought were platforms to speak out were really the opposite: bribes to hold our tongues. Vaclav Havel says that “There’s always something suspect about an intellectual on the winning side.” But it may have become worse than that. Given how easily any of us can now lose our paid public platforms for ideological heresy (along with corollary suspicions about how we might have acquired them in the first place), what credibility or authority stands behind anything we say?

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