

“The Tongue is Also a Fire”: The Left, Madness, and Manners

by James Como (May 2015)

“Wait, hold on here. Is this a barbershop? If we can’t talk straight in a barbershop, then where can we talk straight? We can’t talk straight no where else. You know, this ain’t nothin’ but healthy conversation, that’s all. . . . nobody is exempt in the barbershop.”

– Eddie the Barber, *Barbershop*

First, the disease.

On June 23, 1987, the late Senator Edward Kennedy said the following about Robert Bork, a nominee to the United States Supreme Court:

Robert Bork’s America is a land in which women would be forced into back-alley abortions, blacks would sit at segregated lunch counters, rogue police could break down citizens’ doors in midnight raids, schoolchildren could not be taught about evolution, writers and artists would be censored at the whim of government . . .

The *ad hominem* burst like a giant pustule, and yet no one asked him, as Joseph Welch famously asked of Sen. Joe McCarthy, “have you no decency, sir?”

I am not here arguing that Kennedy is the one who pulled the cork out of the bottle of rhetorical toxins, which have been circulating in the Republic since its founding. His rant was merely a particularly venomous instance of invective, which no amount of “compartmentalizing” as “politics as usual” can excuse. Rather I do claim that, in public places both high and low, *diseased speech* has never been more rampant, and never has the Left owned it more than it does now. It is where Neo-McCarthyism – in both toxicity and falsehood – has pitched its tent. Now, I do not claim the Right is a non-practitioner of eristic – from Eris, the goddess of strife – or fraudulent speech but that it does not come close – in frequency, malice, prominence of the practitioner, or indulgence – to the Left. (When anti-Semitism rattled its forked tongue within the precincts of *National Review* it was *its* editor,

William Buckley, who decapitated that snake. Now on the Left we do not have snake hunters but snake handlers, and just who is handling whom remains an open question.)

There she was, a lovely little girl, picking daisies, until a nuclear bomb blew her to bits. That was LBJ's contribution some fifty years ago against Barry Goldwater, part of a "vast Right Wing conspiracy" *avant la lettre*. (*La lettre* proper came with the First Lady's attribution of the plight of her philandering and rapist husband – Juanita Broderick was his victim – to a "vast Right Wing conspiracy." By the way, in her mendacity does not Hillary remind you, as she does me, of Lillian Hellman, though not as pretty?)

More than thirty years ago Janet Cook cooked up "Jimmy's World," a report for the *Washington Post* on a life of inner city misery. It was all fabricated. Jayson Blair perpetrated similar falsehoods for the *New York Times*. Recently a horrific campus gang rape by Duke athletes was reported, with the Left jumping through hoops to condemn it fastest and most furiously: it, too, was pure fiction, as was a second rape "reported" in *Rolling Stone* (for which enormity no one has been fired). Decades ago Rigoberta Menchu won a Nobel Prize for her harrowing and inspiring Third World autobiography, which turned out to be largely an invention.

An anchorman for MSNBC suggested a fecal diet for Sarah Palin; Whoopi Goldberg grabbed her crotch and punned on "bush" during a presidential election cycle; a former Secretary of State actually suggested that a sitting president already had Osama bin Laden captive but was waiting for the politically opportune time to release the news. (Madeline Albright would later claim she was joking, but her charge is on video – *no* one believed that. Where to stop?

Peter Arnett of CNN cuts a deal with Saddam Hussein: in exchange for favorable reporting Arnett gets a privileged position from which to view the Allied attack on Iraq as well as unique access to high-ranking Iraqi officials. (He was fired.) The Democrat Senate Majority leader ridicules a sitting Republican president as dumb, repeatedly excoriates (by name) citizen-donors to the opposition party, and lies (along with his president) about policy consequences. When he is caught in a lie about a presidential nominee his answer is, "he lost, didn't he?" "Hands up, don't shoot," which was all lie, becomes an anthem of the Newest Left. (Not-so-by-the-way, I have failed to find any such enormities on Fox News.)

So: Where to stop? With the savaging of Dick Cheney, or of President Bush? Or of Sarah Palin, who for a while was held indirectly responsible for the shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords – until, of course, the news of her shooter's Leftist leanings came out? And – of course – no apologies. There never are. But there remain the plagiarists: Martin Luther King, Junior, Joe Biden . . . but by comparison with their siblings they seem almost innocent in

their fraudulence.

I believe any reader not only gets the point but could add to the list amply: the instances of diseased speech proliferate, and as they do such depredations – like cheap currency – matter less and less. Here is an example of what I mean. Two White House guests of President Obama pose in front of the portrait of Ronald Reagan and give him the middle-finger salute; they photograph themselves; they post the picture online, and they go on to say, “that’s right, f**k Reagan.” Nary a peep from the press. (Of course Al Sharpton is a one-man neo-McCarthyite bobblehead doll, with nary a peep from the press.) Now, just do the Reversal Test: here come members of the Tea Party movement, and here is a portrait of, say, FDR, and here are you, honestly answering this question: Can you in you in the most hallucinatory pipe dream imagine the same gesture being made? And, if you can, could we not write the *New York Times* editorial the next day? This license extends even to its own (sort of): see Juan Williams’ *Muzzled*, the trials of a center-left black man persecuted by PBS, abuse still less than that suffered by Sharyl Attkisson, a prize-winning journalist who names the names of CBS bosses who stifled reliable reports damaging to Obama. (Obviously for the Left black lists work in one direction only.)

At work, apparently, is belief in some greater Cause (as the incomparable Charles McCarry dissects it in his *Shelly’s Heart*). It matters more than both truth and American interests. When not too long ago Edward Koch, a quintessential public servant, a Democrat (among my all-time favorites), a patriot, and a Jew, died, a number of New York Jews mourned qualifiedly, because “he had betrayed the [C]ause.”[\[1\]](#)

The Cause comes first, and so the use of means damnably disproportionate to the ends sought is not only permissible but obligatory for those whose troth is pledged to it, such is the self-righteousness of the crypto-religious True Believer. Of course, in this carnival of fraudulence the *New York Times* plays its role. It has yet to return a Pulitzer Prize given to Walter Duranty, one of its reporters, who lied about the Stalin regime, and it prints – on the front page – an entirely false story about the adultery of a presidential candidate from the party it disfavors. But rather than cherry-pick from that amply-stocked basket I’ll take the higher road.

How the *Times* is trending has been shown by its own advertising. One TV ad depicted a couple trading sections of the Sunday edition – e.g. the Arts, the Book review – but not the Main (that is, the news) Section; in other words, the paper confesses to being a feature rag rather than a newspaper. The second ad sold the paper because, in the words of a voice-over, “it makes me feel like I’m in the know.” Bad grammar aside, note the claim is not “puts me in the

know” but rather to *feel* that way. It reminds me of an old TV ad for the Barbizon School for Modeling, which taught its pupils to be models “or just look like one,” as though models did more than “look like.” It’s what happens when you check your brain at the door on behalf of the Cause.

I’ve heard one political operative speak for many in both political parties: if your guy is behind and the election is close, anything goes, as long as it’s legal – ethics and morality be damned. This view, extended well beyond the electoral season, is, I think, why some time ago *New York Times* columnist Matt Miller asked “Is Persuasion Dead?” He was not complaining that persuasion does not work; in fact he cited an instance when (lamentably in his opinion) it had worked on him. Instead he regretted its abandonment in favor of the snipe and that demonizing smear that dominate public discourse. These noxious irruptions have become not only commonplace but wanton, like *trolling*, “the act [as Julie Zhuo has put it in another *New York Times* article] of posting inflammatory, derogatory, or provocative messages in public forums.”

Second, a cure.

My purpose here is more diagnostic than prescriptive. Still, I offer these suggestions for conversation down the road. Consider the Nobel Laureate in Physics William Shockley, co-inventor of the transistor – probably a genius. In the sixties he went about claiming, quite calmly and benignly, just like your gramps, that black people are genetically inferior to white people with respect to intelligence and should be subjected to selective eugenic procedures (a program long-held by such figures of the Left as G.B. Shaw, H.G. Wells, and Margaret Sanger). He had a mountain of evidence, almost all of it based on the results of IQ tests. He got quite a play, this genius and Nobel Laureate in Physics. You noticed, I’m sure, that the word is “physics,” not “genetics” or “psychometrics.” In short, he had *no* expertise in the field he was now plowing.

Alas, despite his tranquil, respectful, and slightly avuncular manner, he was so odious to most audiences that, most of the time, he wasn’t allowed to speak when he was invited to do so. And then the great public communicator Tony Brown had him on his PBS *Black Journal* to debate the psychiatrist Frances Cress Welsing (an extremist of a different stripe.) Brown’s mediation was key: Welsing stuck to the topic – Shockley’s theory – and avoided her own broader program, while Shockley was allowed, temperately and thoroughly, to expound. The winner was open, rational debate (as well as Tony Brown), and Truth, as Shockley’s views were exposed as pre-baked, half-baked, and finally utterly unbaked.

Protagoras was the great fifth century B.C. sophist and the subject of one of Plato’s greatest

dialogues. He set exercises for his students emphasizing eristic oratory, de-emphasized righteousness, and often encouraged a design that would make the weaker case seem the stronger. Debate is one antidote to all the Protagorases of the world.

There are others. I've touched upon one old one, an instrument of ethical diagnosis whereby the propriety of means is determined by (among other elements) its proportionality to the moral worth of the end sought. Another is the application of a fallacy inventory. One can easily learn the informal fallacies (e.g. *ad hominem*, red-herring, smokescreen, composition and division, and perhaps ten others): recognizing them becomes easy, the practice becomes compulsive; the destruction of the falsehood is immediate. Yet another is more demanding: the Toulmin analysis of argument, from the philosopher Stephen Toulmin's *The Uses of Argument*. It requires some command of a very natural, logical paradigm and the application to a truth-claim of a sequence of words – therefore, since, unless, after all – in the light of that schemata. As with the use of fallacy inventory, this too becomes second nature once the practitioner pays some dues. What matter most, however, is that *the enormities be called out in the first place* and tallies kept. And let us remember: the devil cannot stand to be mocked.

Finally, an appeal.

What follows is my personal favorite way of thinking about ethics, especially the ethics of communication, because it has boundaries, and even barbershops need those. It has served me well during the nearly forty years I taught Ethics and the Freedom of Speech. In July, 1924, "Law and Manners" by John Fletcher, Lord Moulton, parliamentarian and judge, appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*. He provides a second way, and he gets right down to business:

. . . follow me in examining the three great domains of Human Action. First comes the domain of Positive Law, where our actions are prescribed by laws binding upon us which must be obeyed. Next comes the domain of Free Choice, which includes all those actions as to which we . . . enjoy complete freedom. But between these two there is a third . . . important domain in which there rules neither Positive Law nor Absolute Freedom. In that domain there is no law which inexorably determines our course of action, and yet we feel that we are not free to choose as we would.

He continues, "the degree of this sense of a lack of complete freedom in this domain varies in every case. It grades from a consciousness of a Duty nearly as strong as Positive Law, to a feeling that the matter is all but a question of personal choice."

Then Moulton gives us a phrase for the ages. This Middle Domain, he wrote, "is the domain of *Obedience to the Unenforceable* . . . the obedience . . . of a man to that which he cannot be

forced to obey. *He is the enforcer of the law upon himself.*" He then expands on the idea:

[The] country which lies between Law and Free Choice I always think of as the domain of Manners. To me, Manners in this broad sense signifies the doing that which you should do although you are not obliged to do it. I do not wish to call it Duty, for that is too narrow to describe it, nor would I call it Morals for the same reason. It might include both, but it extends beyond them. . . . the real greatness of a nation, its true civilization, is measured by the extent of this land.

In other words, "between 'can do' and 'may do' ought to exist the whole realm which recognizes the sway of duty, fairness, sympathy, taste, and all the other things that make life beautiful and society possible . . . in some form or other . . . strong in the hearts of all except the most depraved"

Mouton's conclusion deserves quotation-in-full:

It must be evident to you that Manners must include all things which a man should impose upon himself, from duty to good taste. I have borne in mind the great motto of William of Wykeham – "Manners makyth Man." It is in this sense – loyalty to the rule of Obedience to the Unenforceable, throughout the whole realm of personal action – that we should use the word 'Manners' if we would truly say that 'Manners makyth Man.'

Of course the question is, How do we bring people into the Middle Domain *intellectually*?

Simple mutual respect (more of which would prevent the proliferation of speech codes, most of them silly – though, alas, not all of them) often suffices: occupancy of the Middle Domain becomes natural. Consider this, on the wall of a gym I used to frequent. The owner clearly occupies the Middle Domain and asks others to do the same:

To our valued members: Use of the "F" word & the "N" word. We, at Powerhouse, have always encouraged our members to support each other during their workouts – by this we mean that we have never had a problem with members yelling and shouting to motivate each other, on which many other facilities do have these restriction. We have noticed recently, however, that this practice has begun to include derogatory words such as "F" word and "N" word (your all know what we mean). Many members find it insulting. This is not acceptable and we would appreciate it if you would respect your fellow members by refraining from the use of this language.

Whether in the barbershop, the gym, or in the public square certain lines should not be crossed.

That is, either we obey the unenforceable – yes, that’s right, some self-censorship – or we continue to navigate the diatribe, calumny, demagoguery, contumely, vituperation, and sheer rhetorical treachery now commonly midwived by those for whom eristic is what flames were for Torquemada. In that light note the epiphany (and its date) of Imam Anwar Al-Awlaki who, in a *New York Times* Article headlined “Influential American Muslims Temper Their Tone” (the date: October 19, 2001), is reported to have said “now we realize that talk can be taken seriously.” Indeed.

In his *Speaking Into the Air*, John Durham Peters suggests how we might fill the Domain once we decide to occupy it. “‘Communication’,” he writes, “is . . . from the Latin *communicare*, meaning to impart, share or to make common.” . . . The key root is *mun-* (not *uni-*) related to . . . ‘munificent’, ‘community’, ‘meaning’. . . . *munus* has to do with gifts or duties offered publicly”: freely, yet obediently. Or we can try this, from Stephen L. Carter, quoting the legal scholar Michael Perry, in his superb *Civility*: “conversation that admits the possibility of error is the only kind of conversation that love for others allows.”

And yet the Middle Domain is elusive, certainly for elements of the Left, *who simply do not care*. Near the end of his “August 1968” W. H. Auden shows us what that Ogre looks like. It “cannot master speech,” he writes, and “stalks with hands on hips/ While drivel gushes from his lips.” The stalking undead walk among us now more than ever. Thus the admonitory importance of St. James’ Letter in the New Testament. “Consider,” he tells us, “how small a fire can set a huge forest ablaze. *The tongue is also a fire.*”

[\[i\]](#) This Jihadist approach, epitomized by LGBT fanaticism, must have roots deep in a person’s psyche: as Freud said somewhere, everybody needs a religion, it’s merely a matter of which one a person chooses. Culturally, however, I believe the roots of this Jihad go back fifty years to Tom Hayden’s Port Huron statement and, of course, to Alinsky’s *Rules for Radicals*. Together they called forth and gave license to the New Left, which exercised that license at the 1968 Democrat National Convention in Chicago and has never looked back. Since then the movement, its current, muted, avatar being the president himself, has hijacked most of the Party, at least for now.

James Como is professor emeritus of rhetoric and public communication at York College (CUNY). Biographical and contact information is at www.jamescomo.com.

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