

We Must Fight the Totalitarian Tendency Within Ourselves



by Theodore Dalrymple

A weekly columnist for the left-wing British Sunday newspaper *The Observer*, by the name of Nick Cohen, has been suspended by the newspaper while investigation of his alleged misconduct is carried out.

The details of his alleged misconduct have not been revealed, but it's unlikely that it's merely financial. I know nothing of Cohen, either in his favor or to his discredit, except that he has written against the cancel culture in which those who deny that a transgender woman is straightforwardly a woman are consigned to a moral black hole from which they never emerge, at least not without the utmost self-abasement.

I have no idea whether the allegations against Cohen are true or false, serious or trivial, but I suspect that they might

not have been made, or if made attended with such consequences for him, if he had not written against one of the most sacred pieties of our time. It seems not to be true that, absent religion, there can be no heresy: for pieties can be secular, and the sniffing out of heresy is one of the most delightful of all intellectual pastimes.

The journalist certainly has enemies, among them a prominent lawyer by the name of Jolyon Maugham, who last year [tweeted](#) the following:

“I see Nick Cohen is again complaining in one of his newspaper columns about the cancellation of transphobes. Barely a day passes in which one national newspaper or another does not carry a piece decrying how trans people have rendered voiceless the writer or their friends.”

Then, in a sentence whose menace can hardly be missed, Maugham continues:

“I’d be very happy to hear from women who have worked with Nick whether he is the champion they would choose for women’s rights in the workplace.”

In other words, he called for denunciations, true or false, avowed or anonymous, in order to destroy the reputation and career of someone with whose views he strongly disagrees. And he would be “very happy” to do so. Perhaps he would then sing and dance.

I have no idea of whether Cohen is a saint or a monster of depravity, but a culture of denunciation is an important step in the direction of [totalitarianism](#). Is there anyone whose life is such that the discreditable things done or said by him or her could not be woven into a reason for public execration or worse? The habit of denunciation was a powerful weapon in the hands of every totalitarian dictator.

In the Soviet Union, for example, the story of Pavel

Morozov—little Pavlik—was used to inculcate the habit of denunciation as a social duty into Soviet children. Little Pavlik denounced his own parents and grandparents as kulaks, that is to say as rich and exploitative peasants, to the Soviet authorities, and was thereafter “martyred” for his truthfulness. Soviet children were encouraged to emulate lovely little Pavlik by snitching on all around them. There were posters in school of heroic children denouncing their fellows for something that they had done wrong. This was the Soviet version of truth-telling.

We should not complacently suppose that it couldn’t happen here—wherever here is. In Britain recently, which is suffering from a shortage of water because of unusually hot weather, residents of some areas have been prohibited from using hosepipes to water their garden—and have been encouraged to denounce neighbors or others to the authorities who flout the prohibition.

One can just hear the arguments in favor of such denunciations. It’s only fair and right, for example, that everyone should share the hardship caused by the shortage of water. It’s almost psychopathic of some not to obey the rules while most do so: Who do they think they are, that they are not obliged to obey? Moreover, we live in such times that, if you approach such a person directly, he’s likely to become furious and violent. It’s safer to call the authorities and let them deal with him.

This overlooks how easily the culture of denunciation can establish itself, and lead to a society in which everyone fears everyone else. Such is the way in which people are constituted that for many, at least, it’s a pleasure to bring harm to others in the name of doing good for society. That was the justification of denunciation in Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, and Maoist China, as well as in a host of other totalitarian fiefdoms. And Maugham—he who actively solicits denunciations of Nick Cohen—even admits, perhaps without

really meaning to, the pleasure he would derive from passing on any denunciations he receives in a kind of meta-denunciation, as it were.

This is authentically disgusting, but it has the merit of reminding us that totalitarianism did not land on earth like an asteroid but had its origins in the human heart, and that no society can be immune from the temptations of totalitarianism once and for all. Totalitarianism has its pleasures, chief of which is doing harm to others, albeit that today's denouncer tends to become tomorrow's denounced.

Raised ideological temperature inevitably brings with it the temptation to denounce. Where someone who doesn't agree with you isn't merely mistaken, but wicked or even evil, either in favor of your ideology or against it, there ceases to be any reason to argue against his point of view: it's more a matter of denouncing him, of revealing him to be an enemy of the people to be exiled or excommunicated from decent society, or otherwise punished.

Our society, if Maugham is anything to go by, seems to be moving in that direction, in which case it will be a question of which ideology imposes itself on the other, eventually by force, and who denounces whom. If this comes to pass, we shall none of us be safe, at least not for long, and we will not trust even the other members of our own household. The only way to be safe will be to wield absolute power, and to do so is not only notoriously difficult but also possible only for one person, whom we are most unlikely ever to be. We must fight the totalitarian tendency within ourselves.

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