On the Exploitation of Outrage

written by John Halle | June 26, 2017

Over the past few years, the following sequence has occurred often enough to have become a familiar pattern.

1) Professor X, a relatively obscure academic (as most academics are), shares an incendiary statement on social media. While recognizable as a left position on racial justice, Palestinian rights or the Trump administration, it is conspicuous for implicitly or explicitly condoning violence. Furthermore, its tone is incendiary, overheated and hectoring. Few regard it as a highly effective statement as it is more likely to antagonize rather than convince those not already inclined to agree.

2) The right seizes on the most extreme interpretation of the statement, calling for X's firing, sometimes being able to recruit elected officials in their support (particularly if X is at a public university). Whatever the subsequent outcome, it is mostly irrelevant as the main purpose is to fan the flames of right wing vitriol. The story is invariably entered into wide circulation at Breitbart, Fox and talk radio, likely (though this can't proven) advancing both the right agenda and the range and intensity of its influence .

3) The left responds (reasonably) by strongly defending X's first amendment rights. Letters are circulated with hundreds of signatures, including from those who have serious reservations about the original statement. For so-called free speech absolutists, the content of the statement is irrelevant as the right to free expression should always be defended. These and other statements of support are widely reported on left wing media such as Democracy Now, the Real News, Jacobin, etc. X is a frequent guest on these and other outlets.

4) As a result of 3), X is no longer obscure, rather the opposite: having made the rounds of left wing media X is now a bona fide left celebrity, a status which is maintained after the commotion resulting from 1) has subsided. They go on to become go to sources for a left perspective on their own areas of expertise, race relations, Middle East politics or Central American liberation movements and sometimes even outside of these.

As should be obvious, 4) should be a matter of some concern. That's because those who should be speaking for us are those who can be counted on not only to faithfully represent a left consensus but to do so effectively. The paradox here is that they are being promoted to this status is for exactly the opposite reason: Having put the left on the defensive and provided the right with an issue to exploit for its own advantage they have not successfully communicated our message but have demonstrably failed to do so.

At this point, it might seem required to mention some of the values for X applicable to the above but I'm not going to. More useful is to note that the most skilled rhetoricians on the left are aware of the

potential for their words or actions to function as weapons in the hands of the right. One of these was Malcolm X who understood the necessity to "be peaceful, be courteous . . . and respect everyone." (1) If we do, the right will need to lie shamelessly and transparently to fan the flames of hatred. Ultimately, their smears will backfire as their base recognizes them for what they are. The tenuous unity of their alliance will begin to fracture, as was apparent when the right turned its guns against Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn.

Conversely, capitulating to the understandable tendency to lash out against those we perceive to be our enemies only makes the job of the right much easier.

Those who have not learned this lesson should not be speaking for us.

(1) Thanks to Will Shetterly for reminding me of the relevance of this remark.