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fired for running controversial pieces; books are withdrawn for alleged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.

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