

The Limitations of Contra-Elitism

Spooky

2022-05-31

On May 21st, 2021, the Center published a piece by Andrew Kemle titled “Libertarianism vs Psychopathic Dumbfuckery.” The article discusses Rand Paul’s active role in the ongoing disinformation campaign against vaccination and COVID response more generally, focusing specifically on his promotion of conspiracies blaming eminent immunologist Dr. Anthony Fauci and the U.S. government for “creating the COVID-19 pandemic.” The crux of Andrew’s argument is a challenge to Paul the Younger’s claim to the label of “libertarianism” on the grounds that considering the health of others, voluntary adherence to the suggestions of public health experts, and **getting the fucking vaccine** is a consistent and necessary libertarian position for anyone who takes freedom seriously.

This is not why people are upset – at least not the people we care to listen to. What readers are rightly outraged about is the obscene choice of terminology. Though Andrew does attempt to clarify that his target is a maliciously ignorant politician, the paragraph in which he clarifies this is, in my view, insufficient:

I don’t want to minimize the severe (and in many ways, *tragic*) nature of a psychopathy diagnosis. Our understanding of psychopathy is evolving (not all psychopaths are remorseless, for instance, though the most violent offenders certainly are) and because both genetic and environmental influences often act outside a person’s control, there are legitimate questions to ask about how responsible a psychopath is for their own lack of empathy. But given that a callous disregard for others’ wellbeing *is* a hallmark symptom of psychopathy, I think the comparison is accurate. And while I used to think, back in my social democrat/state socialist phase, that there *was* no distinction between libertarianism and psychopathy, having been immersed in the literature and the history of libertarianism as a philosophy, I know now that that’s as far from the truth as possible.

The fact that this isn’t clarified at the very start of the piece is already a monumental slip-up, but to add insult to (what I assume is unintentional) injury, this is a really weak qualification. Psychopathy, sociopathy, and antisocial personality disorder are among the *most* vilified and misunderstood diagnoses in the history of psychopathology, even by experts within the field. Dr. Robert D. Hare, a prominent psychopathologist who developed the Psychopathy Checklist (PCL-R), in a classic display of good-faith debate, attempted to sue critics of his diagnostic test into shutting up. The validity of the PCL-R has been disputed in the literature, with the general consensus leaning more towards a correlational trend between individuals diagnosed with the condition and *incarceration rates*, rather than a direct causal effect on *criminality* as is commonly assumed.

Neurodivergent people, including those on the antisocial personality spectrum, are the targets of violence, not perpetrators, and even if clarifying comments like

this are present, the rest of Andrew's piece does, in effect, "callously disregard" the personhood of individuals on this spectrum by associating Rand Paul and pseudolibertarian grifters with a complex and still largely unexplored psychological phenomenon.

We are genuinely sorry we failed to be allies to our readers who fall on the anti-social personality spectrum. This response is an attempt to make clear our realization of that error, do better by our supporters and the radical spaces we inhabit, and unambiguously condemn the broader use of ableist language to express contempt for economic and political elites. Much like the work of former contributor-turned-Keith-Preston-enjoyer Dakota Hensley, the original piece will be kept on the site for the sake of context and record-keeping. That said, I now want to shift our focus away from Andrew's article to condemn the wider discursive problem in question: applying popular stereotypes of psychopathology, heterodoxy, and deviance to the condemnation of our rulers, economic elites, and representatives of privilege.

The Feelings of the Powerful

On publication, the first responses to this article will probably sound something like this: "So what if the most powerful people in the world get some mean words thrown at them sometimes? Tough shit! Their feelings don't matter to me and they shouldn't matter to anyone – they have gallons of blood on their slimy little hands, I'm not gonna be nice to thieves and murderers who profit off of our suffering!"

First, a clarification; your hostility towards the powers that be is obviously valid, nowhere on this site will you find any statement to the contrary (if you ever do, never be afraid to let us know). Everything is fucked, our planet is dying, and the profiteers and cronies at the top do not care. Even in the rare event that they do care in their heart of hearts, it makes little difference; the system is stacked in favor of heartless reactionaries who will gladly throw the oppressed people of the world into wood chippers if it earns them clout, chewing up any well-meaning public servant into ineffectual pulp for the right-populist disinformation machine to turn into a bullshit scandal to be charged against "the left" as a whole. Our rulers are killing us – some gleefully, others less so – and we're right to bring attention to their blood-soaked hands. To just say "I, too, am upset" would be a monumental understatement of my position, and I hope this paragraph's open vitriol is an adequate demonstration of that sentiment.

So, with all of that laid out, hear me out; in our condemnation of the spineless crypto-fascists¹ that are active participants in the burning of the world, we might want to avoid reinforcing negative associations that hurt divergent, disabled, and deviant individuals who lack the protections of the powerful. I highly doubt Rand Paul or anyone in his position cares about being labeled a psychopath or "dumbfuck" by some left-wing anarchist think tank – his ego is completely unscathed by accusations from the likes of us. What I can say with certainty is that people with ASPD diagnoses *absolutely do* care if the language we use to describe callous politi-

cians doing awful things suggests that psychopathy or “dumbfuckery” are at all causally related to the matter at hand. A long time reader pointed this out publicly and was deeply hurt by a source they trusted using terms that reinforce the negative connotation between pathology and awful behavior. The impetus for writing this piece was the valid experience of someone *not* in power, *not* spreading disinformation, *not* doing anything to negatively affect public health; to say this is just about a politician erases and ignores that specific impact of our words on people we want to empower and liberate through our work here.

To our rulers, what we say gets lost in a sea of noise; to our allies, our fellow radicals, and our friends, what we say is worth a lot more. We are heard first by the people listening to us – our peers, supporters, and the people we want to help – and it sends an awful message when we disregard their pain in the pursuit of inflicting hurt on those above who deserve it. We don’t misgender cis people in response to transphobia because the act of misgendering is itself a horrible denial of identity that we want to *de*-legitimize in all circumstances, not *normalize* under specific conditions. We don’t call the cops on our political enemies because we want to *de*-legitimize calling the cops on anyone, not *normalize* use of policing against specific people. We don’t share Madison Cawthorne’s leaked nude video because spreading revenge porn is an act of sexual violence that we want to *de*-legitimize, not *normalize*. I trust you understand my point here: sound travels. The first people to hear your message will be those closest to you (your peers and/or collaborators), followed by your general audience who will likely share your work directly with people in their circles or to social media. Unless you’re sending a direct, secure message to Wacky Randy himself, it’s very unlikely that he or anyone in a similar position will hear your grievances. What’s certain, however, is that your peers, your audience, and your collaborators will read what you write and react to what you’re saying. The more critical readers among us might find the language crude and perhaps a bit tactless, but ultimately see the point you’re making (i.e. “this politician did a really fucked up thing and that’s bad, actually, and ableism isn’t okay”). Others might have a very different takeaway, however; in using the term “psychopathic dumbfuckery,” you validate people who think the term “psychopath” is synonymous with “misanthropic danger to society” and that ableist language (“dumbfuck” included) is entirely acceptable when applied to political elites. This, I would argue, is not a risk we should be comfortable taking.

¹If the use of the term “fascist” to describe politicians who are, in the most technical sense, right-wing populist GOP conservatives (with libertarian characteristics in the case of Rand Paul) is upsetting to you on pedantic grounds, shut up. Just shut the fuck up, please. Nobody gives a singular solitary shit about the proper application of “fascist” or “Nazi” except white nationalists and third positionists. Put the dictionary down, go outside, and actually *talk* to people instead of policing the language people use to express their frustration with white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Shut up, shut up, *shut up*. Roger Griffin is rolling in his grave and he’s not even dead yet, you aren’t doing anyone a favor, you just look like a fascist entryist trying to control the conversation.

Contra-Elitism is for Libs

Let me pose a question: are the worst people at the top bad because they're *too* normal, or because they're not normal enough? I put this at the end not only to catch the scrollers among you (we don't judge here), but also to highlight how long discussions like this can go before anyone bothers to make such an important clarification. "What's wrong with Rand Paul" is a long, *long* conversation we've already tried (and, in my view, failed) to have with our audience, so I'll use some other examples to illustrate my point.

I'm sure we can all agree that Orange Man is, indeed, indisputably *bad*. "Orange Man Bad" is a valid statement. "Orange Man mentally unstable and stupid, therefore he is bad" is, by contrast, not at all a valid statement. The status of stability and intelligence as unambiguously positive psychological traits is an ableist assumption inherited from an ableist society that only serves to promote ableist attitudes. Reactionary populism is not linked to psychopathology in any causal capacity, it's just a consequence of the fact that some people are absolutely terrible in ways that we, people who *aren't* the worst, will never be able to fully understand. To insist otherwise (i.e. that reactionary ideology *is* pathological) is to effectively condemn reactionaries for their deviancy, to malign fringe individuals for being too abnormal. In case it wasn't clear, I detest this framing of the issue.

What separates anarchists from mainstream progressives is our relationship to the marginal, the heterodox, and the divergent – that which we call "deviant." From our perspective, the problem with elites is their embodiment of traits on which the present system places a high premium (whiteness, wealth, cisheteronormativity, etc.). Political authority, economic privilege, and all forms of social hierarchy are themselves arrangements of domination to be rejected entirely rather than value-neutral tools to be used by a proper representative. This radical anti-elitism is a basic premise of anarchism that a fair proportion of us get right most of the time.² Progressives and democrats, on the other hand, dislike bad rulers specifically *because* they are deviant, and, as a result, begin to resent them for undermining trust in systems they wish would work better. "Mental handicaps," "daddy issues," sexual frustration, stupidity – these dismissive buzzwords and shorthands replace real investigation of the factors that lead politicians and the ultra-wealthy down far-right pipelines, allow GOP populism to be a pervasive force in political discourse, and incentivize public officials to self-sensationalize by saying stupid bullshit on camera. All of this obscures the actual reasons why awful people do awful things in the name of simplistic elegance, giving a clear prognosis that makes for a good headline. This I refer to as contra-elitism: the criticism and condemnation of individual elites through validation and reinforcement of exclusionary rhetoric, attitudes, and narratives.

I do not believe Andrew is a contra-elitist in a broader ideological sense, but I

²Though certainly not all.

do think, at the absolute most charitable interpretation, the crux of his argument relies on contra-elitism as the hook, a problem further exacerbated by an upsetting lack of understanding towards people with ASPD. What I hope I've demonstrated so far is that this is not a rhetorical tendency exclusive to liberals and ableists. At its most benign, contra-elitism is the rhetorical equivalent of forgetting strangers can hear you and your leftist friends making edgy jokes; sound travels to unintended targets and, in the process, hurts people it wasn't directed at. Depending on what was said and who heard it (i.e. you, our wonderful readers), an apology might be in order, followed by a thorough attempt to undo the damage done. Whether that effort is convincing to our audience isn't a matter in which we have the last word, however.

In outlining this persistent rhetorical misstep under the label of "contra-elitism," I hope it becomes possible to identify this trend more broadly and promote healthier discussion of what's actually wrong with this system we've stumbled into. Spoilers: it's not psychopaths you should be worried about.

Anarchist Archive

anarchist-archive.org · anarchist-archive@riseup.net