

## Comment

# Vile abuse is now tolerated in our universities

The spitting hatred I suffered over my views on empire shows our democratic values are in peril



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“OMG, this is serious shit. We need to SHUT THIS DOWN”. So ran one of the earliest tweets to greet the news of the launch of my “Ethics and Empire” project last December. And there was more where that came from: my scholarship was “supremacist shite”, I was a “racist” and a “bigot”, and whatever came out of my mouth was “vomit”.

All this in reaction to my modest view that “empire” can mean a variety of things, is capable of good as well as evil, raises ethical questions worth thinking about, and requires sophisticated moral evaluation.

Incontinent abuse on Twitter is, sadly, so common as to be unremarkable. But this was remarkable, since its author is a senior academic at one of Britain’s most prestigious universities.

When I discovered this, I decided to write to the relevant heads of college and faculty. I had no complaint about being at the sharp end of criticism, for that comes with the academic territory.

Besides, in this case there was none to complain about: criticism requires an objection supported by reasons, but these tweets didn’t rise

above the level of spitting hatred. No, my complaint was about the uncivil manner. I held that this was an inappropriate way for one academic colleague to express disagreement with another and, more important, that it was an appalling example to set students. I could have added that, if a university teacher is seen to treat an academic peer with such hissing contempt, then intimidated students are likely to be discouraged from speaking their dissenting minds. So what did the two heads plan to do about it?

Nothing. Neither could bring themselves to say that the Twitter conduct I reported was wrong. One hinted that it wasn’t “as temperate as one might hope for”. The other kept entirely clear of moral judgment, arguing that such speech is simply conventional for its medium, albeit

If we live by law alone, civil society will not remain civil for long

in tension with “accepted manners or styles of address” in more traditional contexts. Neither touched the issue of a teacher’s responsibility to model behaviour. Both defended their colleague’s legal right to behave as she did, invoking “freedom within the law”.

The problem with this is that we can’t live by law alone. For if we tried, civil society would not long remain civil, and civil peace would not survive at all. That’s because all sorts of wrong can be done legally.

Within limits, it’s no crime to be grossly unkind, unfair, mendacious, contemptuous or vindictive. That doesn’t mean it’s morally OK. It just means that the police and the courts don’t have the power to counter every form of injustice — or that, if they did have the power, the state would be dangerously intrusive. So if one person abuses his legal freedom to spray others with provocative vitriol, and if they then react by availing themselves of the same liberty, what will happen? Sooner than later, war.

For sure, it seems a long way from online aggro to blood on the senior common room’s carpet. It’s conceivable that we could behave with vicious abandon on Twitter but exercise virtuous self-restraint in the tutorial or seminar or committee meeting. But we’d be naive to depend on it. After all, we’re creatures of habit, taking our characters with us from one social context to another.

So if we haven’t learnt to restrain ourselves so as to be capable of doing justice in one place, then the chances are that we’ll show ourselves incapable of it in others. Even the faculty head acknowledged this social seepage, albeit in studiously amoral terms, when he wrote that “unfortunately, contemporary modes of communication now cut across and into more traditional formats with the consequence that what heretofore has been widely accepted as appropriate forms of speech for civil society are now being challenged”.

What’s more, if the distance from Twitter abuse to blood on dons’ carpets seems reassuringly long, then a recent statement by the

Metropolitan Police commissioner should shorten it. Commenting on the upsurge of lethal stabbings in London, Cressida Dick observed a direct causal connection between social media and murder, claiming that the febrile online atmosphere was among the factors responsible for rising knife crime.

Learning the habits of self-restraint is not only important for peace on campus or the streets. It’s also vital for the survival of democracy. In *How Democracies Die*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt argue that democratic institutions need more than constitutional law to function. Crucially, they need informal social norms of forbearance to prevent political rivals from becoming mortal enemies — for then “political competition descends into warfare, and our institutions turn into weapons”.

So we really can’t afford to offload the task of maintaining social peace on to the courts. We can’t afford to affirm the legal right to free speech while refusing to uphold the social norm of forbearance. All institutions of civil society have a social obligation to require civility from their members, so that, trained to contain themselves, they’re capable of not trampling over other people and breaking the law.

Among those institutions are universities, but, if the response to my complaint is typical, then they are abdicating their responsibility.

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Melanie Phillips is away



## The West must decide how much it cares about Syria

### David Miliband

Assad has plunged to disgusting new depths by allegedly attacking his own citizens with chemical weapons this weekend. But deaths by chemical weapons are not separate from the killing by barrel bombs or mortars or any other means of killing now devastatingly routine in Syria. These different weapons are all part of the same war, in the same country, with the same players.

And by the same measure, the fates of civilians in Ghouta and Idlib and Daraa are connected. While Isis, the Kurds, a tangle of armed opposition militias, the Assad government and their foreign backers continue to fight for territory and resources, nowhere is safe. The International Rescue Committee is particularly fearful for the 2.6 million people in Idlib province, also on Assad’s target list, where humanitarian needs are already so difficult to meet.

We now face a situation where there is nothing to deter the warring parties from continuing the conflict, no progress in peacemaking and no relief for the Syrian people. What is needed is a change of approach from reactive interventions to strategic and long-term goals, with the means to achieve them.

First and foremost, the western world needs to decide how much it cares about the future of Syria and the fate of its people. The West’s leverage has been drained by uncertainty and disunity since the start of the war. That is the vacuum that President Putin has filled. The abdication of the US from global diplomacy since the inauguration of President Trump has added to the problem.

If the West really does care then it will need to put resources and effort into its response on a scale way beyond what has been offered so far. This means three first steps. The OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism, now expired after the Russian veto, urgently needs to be re-established to hold to account those responsible for the use of chemical weapons. Temporary ceasefires need to be made real and permanent so humanitarians can access populations in desperate need of food and medicine. And an inclusive political process, run by the UN, must be lifted off the ground again with credible, focused diplomacy. The UN can no longer subcontract the peace process to Russia and Iran.

Strategy in Syria must be matched with sanctuary for its refugees. While the war continues, refugees need to continue to be offered safe haven where they flee. More Syrians were killed in Douma than have been resettled to the US this year. It is time to meet battle tactics with smart diplomatic and political strategy. Only then will hope and recovery for the Syrian people win out.

David Miliband is president and CEO of the International Rescue Committee

## Ann Treneman Notebook

### Keep your award in the loo until it falls apart

It seems that even Olivier awards fall apart, as in actually disintegrate. This is one of the revelations from Sunday’s mega-ceremony at the Royal Albert Hall. The moment the playwright Jez Butterworth, a big bear of a man who won for *The Ferryman*, got his hands on the trophy, he began to inspect it. “I won one of these before and it was 22 years ago,” he said, referring to his play *Mojo*. “About ten years ago, this bit here on the bottom, it fell off and I lost it.” Then he moved house. “I lost the top bit which, let’s face it, is the important bit. It’s the Olivier bit.” He wasn’t impressed by the new one either. “I’m already worried as the build quality hasn’t improved.”

Wait a minute! Just where was this award being kept? Cupboard? Top shelf? Doorstop? Awards are lovely to win but a nightmare to own.

Where to put them? It seems as if there are only two real options: the mantelpiece or, the humblebrag option, the loo. But once again, I feel Bob Dylan has the answer. He travels with his Oscar and usually places him on top of one of the huge speakers on stage. That way, Oscar’s almost like a friend.

### Lineker the luvvie

When Jez lumbered up to get his award, I caught a glimpse of the man sitting next to him. Was it Gary Lineker? I think it was. Not too many people can claim to be a theatre luvvie and a sports presenter (not to mention crisp tsar) but he can. He is often seen in the stalls, or even the harder seats at smaller theatres. Later I discovered that he and Jez had shared a hug on the (rainy) Olivier red carpet. Love it.

### Dove affair

My husband Ian has created what can only be called a man cave: in his room everything is black and

chrome and there are tons of gadgets, not to mention very large screens. It seems a fitting counterpoint then to observe what is happening just outside one of the windows which looks out on to a yew tree. There, directly at eye level, two collared doves have built a nest. You really cannot imagine a more devoted couple as the birds take turns sitting on their two eggs.

When the male comes to take over (doves are big on paternity duties), he gives her a peck on the cheek. So we are literally watching a love nest from inside the man cave. Now we can hardly wait for the great hatching.

### Hoppy days

Whenever we get bored with the love nest, there are always the frogs. Honestly, it’s almost embarrassing. Actually remove that “almost”. Indeed, I found

myself apologising to a visitor the other day. “Sorry,” I said, as the pond, already full of frogspawn, writhed with action, with the creatures clamped onto each other in eternal embrace. “It’s almost like a frog orgy,” I said, hurrying past, though I didn’t need that “almost” either.

Actually I think a Frog TV channel could be a winner. People seem fascinated. I just have to keep telling myself that, soon, all those frogs, new and old, will be out there, eating snips and snails, though possibly not puppy dog tails.

### Gilded lives

I have just had a week filled with restoration comedy which was like binge-watching scenes from the 1700s. So my word of the week is “equipage”, as in *The Fantastic Follies of Mrs Rich* and spoken by the lady herself. She rides around London in her new-money gilt coach with crimson velvet and gold fringe, manned by six footmen covered in lace. But that doesn’t stop her being cut up by a duchess in an old coach with one tattered footman. “I spoke to her with a mien and tone proportionable to my equipage,” huffs Mrs Rich but, sadly, was still snubbed. It’s enough to make you whinny.

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