



Editors' Afterword to the Forum on Social Justice and Psychoanalysis

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Well, there they are, the best cases that the disputants in this incendiary controversy can present. Did a justifiable degree of light emerge along with the interspersed blasts of volcanic heat? Should we editors have ignored the controversy altogether?

“If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear,” George Orwell controversially opined.¹ That Orwell’s remark could be regarded as controversial is a sign of the times. We are quite content to let the Forum exchanges speak for themselves, except for the small matter of one respondent who merrily impugns the editors. In this fervid atmosphere, any accusation, unanswered, will be seized upon as true, so answer there must be.

There is no deterring some aspirant sages from blazing straight ahead into a buzzsaw of their very own making. In Carter J. Carter’s response to the Burston/Nelson paper and to the journal editors one beholds a chap exhibiting every trait that he purports to disprove about his opponents’ case against what is often termed (elements of) “woke” or, in this case, “critical social justice theory” (CJST) whose proponents are negatively portrayed as illiberal, smug, siloed, intolerant, basking in self-bestowed virtue, and imbued with special pleading that exempts themselves from scrutiny while granting license to vilify whomever they please. Encountering Carter is meeting a would-be Inspector Javert who can’t help displaying his inner Inspector Clouseau.

Behold what mostly (though not all) right-wing sources label CJST, whose adherents endorse, according to a patently right-wing website immediately appearing on anyone’s Google search, progressive values, such as seeking remedies for racial, ethnic creedal, sexual, disability and class injustice, all of which we heartily endorse as social priorities.² Carter commences to perform a curious sleight-of-hand feat in which he

¹ Billy Bragg, whose music we much admire, and who is doubtless unhappy about BBC appropriating the statement, says rather misguidedly that Orwell’s remark is a demand for license instead of accountability. Perhaps so for the self-serving BBC, Mr. Bragg, but not for George Orwell. Billy Bragg, “Cancel culture does not stifle debate, but it does challenge the old order,” *The Guardian* (UK) 10 July 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jul/10/free-speech-young-people>

² The editors of *Counterweight*, who most definitely are foes, define CJST thusly: “Critical Social Justice (CSJ) is a specific theoretical *approach* to addressing issues of prejudice and discrimination on the grounds of characteristics like race, sex, sexuality, gender identity, dis/ability and body size. It has some of its intellectual ancestry in Marxist thought and the concept of “critical consciousness” (that is, becoming aware of oppressive power systems – note the similarity with “woke”) but more from postmodern concepts of knowledge, power and discourses. CSJ holds that knowledge is not objective but is culturally constructed to maintain oppressive power systems. This is believed to be achieved primarily by certain kinds of

claims CSJT does not exist (essentially because it does not possess an institutional address) while all the time affirming all the values ascribed to it, which are indeed supported by many Leftists and, of course, rned by Rightists. So then, hey presto! no CJST and, therefore, by logical extension, no one supports the values and traits ascribed to it. Really? Here is a doozy of a double bind in which Carter asserts CJST is imaginary - all the while calling down fire and brimstone on miscreants who do not act according to its supposedly non-existent precepts.

No validity is conceded to heretical opponents, and even worse it is implied they are fascists. To suggest Burston and Nelson are fascists, under any conceivable custom-tailored definition, smacks of the Weimar Germany era when Left factions who should have united to resist the rising Nazis resorted instead to divisive name-calling, such as “social fascists.” What a boon to solidarity among progressive political movements. We have a theory in psychoanalysis called projective identification where we ascribe to others aspects of ourselves we do not wish to know. This feature seems to be vigorously at work in this instance.

Despite the conspicuous fact that this Forum emerged from a huge roiling public dispute welling up from within a major psychoanalytic association, which splashed all over the international press, we are rebuked by Carter for the temerity of providing a venue to air the dispute so that readers may come to their own conclusions about the issues raised. We editors have always and perhaps naively assumed that any Left worth having prized free speech and critical inquiry as a way of testing truth.

Readers should be aware that in this spirit of open-mindedness we went well out of our way to invite and secure Carter’s contribution, which we still welcome. So what if Carter has his cake and eats it too, castigating a Forum to which he contributes? Yet, quite disturbingly, Carter’s first and default response was to censor Burston and Nelson, whose work, in his ‘formidable’ view, is not worthy of the light of day. From his vantage point Carter J. Carter simply could not imagine that the paper would pass professional muster and therefore concluded that it was unrefereed in what is, after all, a refereed journal. His impetuous verdict speaks volumes about his proclivities.

knowledge being legitimised by powerful forces in society, then being accepted by everyone and perpetuated by ways of talking about things – discourses. These oppressive power systems believed to exist and permeate everything are called things like white supremacy, patriarchy, colonialism, heteronormativity (assuming that most people are heterosexual), cishnormativity (assuming that people are men or women depending on their reproductive systems), ableism and fatphobia. However, it is believed, most of us cannot see these oppressive discourses and systems because they are just the water we swim in. The marginalised have a greater ability to see them and so have a greater competence to define them and point them out.” Accessed 10/10/23: <https://counterweightsupport.com/2021/02/17/what-do-we-mean-by-critical-social-justice/>

For the self-identified Left there ironically is not a lot to disagree with in this characterization; mainly it’s a matter of whether you approve the goals or not.

Not only was the paper approved by referees, one of them is among the respondents and might be rather miffed to hear he is not supposed to exist. The wide range of Forum responses, trespassing outside Carter J. Carter's comfort zone, indicates that there is significant professional opinion that reckons, at very least, the Burton/Nelson paper is worthy of publication, sober discussion and further scrutiny. Since we editors still had concerns about the paper after the refereeing stage, we asked Burston and Nelson if they would allow it to be the subject of a Forum that would surely contain robust critiques. To their immense credit, they readily agreed. Given the mutual hostilities widely at play, refereeing the responses likely would have nullified them all – Carter himself would not have stood a chance in such a process - so from the start we promised all the respondents we contacted that their contributions would be free and unhindered in every respect.

What Carter J. Carter considers beyond the pale says more about him than about foes or all the respondents (one of whom Carter cites very favorably throughout his work yet who takes a view here decidedly contrary to his own). So the glee with which Carter embarks on his rebuttal mission is, as Noam Chomsky likes to say of such adamant displays, interesting. No matter how Carter and his allies strive to excuse, disguise or relabel their motives and demands, what better word for shutting down a serious contrary view is there but censorship? On the firm basis of sheer hearsay one overagitated Ivy Leaguer, of all people, even resigned from the editorial board without so much as bothering to take the trouble of viewing the Forum contributions, which is not a far cry from H. L. Mencken's Bible Belt hicks who banned books they hadn't read.³

Knowledge is a perpetual enterprise of conjecture and refutation, critical exchange, appraisal of contrasting cases, and scrupulous efforts to engage with the best arguments that opponents can offer. Overall, we believe this Forum fulfilled its task, despite lapses in civility and a snarling sense in a couple of cases that if one side said the sun rose in the East, the other would furiously contest it. One can draw opposing lessons from this impressive array of contending arguments, and indeed change one's opinion entirely after exposure to them. (Is there anywhere a fiercer defense of key public figure Dr. Sheehi than that mounted here by Kemp and Carter?) It is entirely possible to support all the causes that Carter J. Carter does and at the same time remain extremely leery about and indeed opposed to accompanying behavior. We want no part of a Left that is afraid of free speech and averse to rigorous examination, including self-examination. After all, the title of this journal is *Free Associations*; allied as it is to free speech it is amazing to us editors that people who ought to know better seem to go all superego-ish when forced to deal with ideas that challenge their own cherished notions.

³ In a parallel and purely academic realm, worthy of the most careful consideration in such disputes is the University of Chicago's 2014 "Report of the Committee on Free Expression": <https://provost.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/documents/reports/FOECommitteeReport.pdf> Also see the interesting essay clashes in Akeel Bilgrami and Jonathan Cole, eds, *Who's Afraid of Academic Freedom?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).