

Responding with charity

By [Benjamin J. Dueholm](#)

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“Political correctness,” the stifling culture of left-wing taboos around race, gender, and sexuality remembered from campus battles of the 1980s and 90s, “has returned.” [So claims New York magazine’s Jonathan Chait in an essay](#) that has sent the small tinderbox of progressive media into skyward sparks. According to Chait, this revival is heralded by hashtag activism, privilege-checking and calling out, strict policing of online and in-class language, “trigger warnings,” and bumptious student responses to commencement speakers. The consequences, he says, are dangerous.

“Liberals still hold to the classic Enlightenment political tradition that cherishes individuals rights, freedom of expression, and the protection of a kind of free political marketplace,” Chait asserts. The politically correct “left,” however, critiques concepts like free speech and individual rights in terms of the power structures they inhabit. “While politically less threatening than conservatism,” Chait grants, “the p.c. left is actually more philosophically threatening. It is an undemocratic creed.”

Them’s fightin’ words, as they used to say, and many of Chait’s readers were happy to oblige. Some pointed out that the “p.c. left” doesn’t have a monopoly on language policing or the suppression of disfavored speech. (As I write, anti-abortion activists are pushing St. Norbert College in Wisconsin to disinvite Gloria Steinem from an on-campus appearance.) For that matter, individual rights and free speech are hardly the glorious legacy of “the classic Enlightenment political tradition.” And all politics, not just the politics of feminism and racial consciousness, are in some sense “identity politics”; [as Matt Yglesias points out](#), “those with the right identities have the privilege of simply calling it politics while labeling other people's agendas ‘identity.’”

Yet whatever his argument’s flaws, Chait has a point. [Julian Sanchez argues](#) that when people treat every dissident member of their team as actually playing for the other team, it makes constructive arguments among allies really hard to bother with. “When teetotalers are the only ones willing to say ‘maybe you’ve had one too many’ because your friends are worried about sounding like abstemious scolds,” he

writes, “the advice is a lot easier to dismiss. Which is fine until it’s time to drive home.”

[Freddie deBoer adds this lament](#): “The prohibition against ever telling anyone to be friendlier and more forgiving is so powerful and calcified it’s a permanent feature of today’s progressivism.”

A public conversation so charged with pessimistic, hostile, and even violent metaphors may have serious implications. Can privilege be identified and assessed without being “checked” or (in light of recent U.S. history especially) “interrogated”? Can a thoughtless use of words be named and discussed in a manner that is not, in a phrase reminiscent of antebellum dueling, “calling out”? Could an appeal for assuming good faith be usefully construed as something less aggressive than “tone policing”? Can a response to memories of trauma be compared to something other than the mechanism that fires a gun?

These are not rhetorical questions. Perhaps we really are doomed to choose between Chait’s fantasy of universal sweet reason and these endlessly evolving conventions of speech, enforced across even the slightest gradients of privilege.

If we’re not, it’ll be because *charity* in conversation really is possible. Charity is more than mere etiquette, which by its nature favors existing power structures. Charity also is not simply a function of the “Enlightenment tradition,” which is but one story among many.

True charity would mean a sincere embrace of the other person and their potential for good faith and frailty, a potential that mirrors our own. An argument that honors this potential would do more than spare people’s feelings. Indeed, it would sometimes do *less*, because it could not exclude the reality of serious disagreement. It would be an end in itself.