

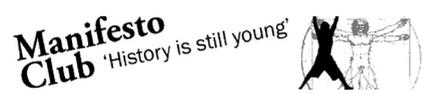


Don't Play the 'Offence Card'
A New Deal for Public Debate
Josie Appleton

A Manifesto Club Thinkpiece

About Thinkpieces

Our ambition at the Manifesto Club is to start to develop the theory and substance of a new progressive politics. Thinkpieces are deep-thinking, spirited proposals for how to do things better in a particular area of life, written by Manifesto Club members from all over the world. Subjects can range from education policy to the running of a local school, from immigration to public culture. For more information, or if you are interested in writing a Thinkpiece, see www.manifestoclub.com/thinkpieces; or email Josie.Appleton@manifestoclub.com



About the Author

Josie Appleton is convenor of the Manifesto Club, and coordinates the different areas of the club's work. She worked at *spiked* after leaving university, and remains a regular contributor to its pages; she also writes articles for a number of newspapers and publications. One of her roles at the Manifesto Club is working with the 'Speaking Our Mind' blog (<http://www.speakingourmind.blogspot.com>), a free speech flagship run by a group of young London-based bloggers. This Thinkpiece comes, in part, out of discussions with that group.



In short...

Accusing your opponent of causing you offence has become an everyday tactic in public discussion.

This is a cowardly tactic, which means that you don't have to bother putting your own case, or pointing out the other's flaws.

This also presents another's opinions as mere 'hate' or 'phobias', suggesting that your opponent is blind or irrational, and not worth arguing with.

Against this, we should celebrate the virtues of public argument. It is through arguments that we develop our own ideas, and learn from each other.

We should avoid playing the 'offence card', and continue with the match of public debate.

A series of recent UK laws has restricted speech judged to be offensive to others: the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006 banned strong criticisms of religion, while the Terrorism Act 2006 criminalised 'indirect incitement' to, or 'glorification' of, terrorism. Institutions across the Western world have brought through codes to limit offensive speech, covering everything from dating behaviour to references to another person's socioeconomic status.

These developments have been subjected to lively public critique and discussion, with some quite rightly pointing out that there is no right not to be offended, and that open public discussion necessarily involves some rough and tumble.

What has gone relatively unnoticed has been a parallel shift in everyday life: *claiming offence has become a normal part of the way people argue in public*. Playing the 'offence card' has become an almost universal tactic for debate. Rather than arguments being an exchange and competition of views, many discussions now consist largely in the two sides trying to get each other censored. Accusing your opponent of 'hate speech', 'Islamophobia', 'homophobia', 'Christophobia' or 'anything-else-o-phobia' is now a way of trying to win an argument. Many discussions degenerate into mutual accusation: 'You hate us'; 'No, you hate us'.

What is now called 'hate speech' includes a whole swathe of plain old opinion – from supporting Israel or supporting Palestine, to supporting or opposing the war in Iraq, to religious or moral opinions about sexuality.

Discussions become a case of two sides competing to present themselves as the victim. This is all heat and no light: there is little revealed in the exchange, and indeed it is often easy to forget why people are arguing in the first place. It is also unnecessarily fractious, obstructing the possibility of a genuine dialogue, where discussants could learn from each other and clarify their differences.

This Thinkpiece is a plea to kick the crying of 'offence' out of public discussion, and for those with strong views to play clean and fair – to concentrate on putting their case, and taking up their opponents' views. Reaching for the 'offence' card is a cowardly tactic, a shortcut to the semblance of victory rather than a meaningful argument. It is the debating equivalent of diving in a football match, and should be equally frowned upon.

Playing the 'offence card'

Few groups of opinion are immune from the fashion for calling 'offence': the same tactic is used by right and left, religious and atheist. Nor does it seem to matter whether a group is large or small, powerful or weak: self-proclaimed victims of offence include everybody from marginal lobbyists to George W Bush, from small sects to established state religions.

In key UK discussions about the Israel-Palestine conflict, for example, the two sides accuse each other of 'hate'. In a case at London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), the Board of Deputies of British Jews delivered a dossier of evidence for anti-Semitic behaviour at SOAS to the school's principal. As a consequence of the board's concerns, the school overturned SOAS student union's decision to elect London Mayor Ken Livingstone (seen as an opponent of Israel) as honorary president; and reprimanded a Muslim student for an article in the student magazine *Spirit*, in which he supported the Palestinian cause.

In response, an academic defended the student against the ban - by

arguing that *he* was the real victim, a victim of Islamophobia. SOAS academic John Game wrote in an open letter to the school's principal, saying: 'Islamophobia in the wider society means that SOAS' "reputation" is under assault. Either one aggressively stands up to such Islamophobia or one decides to sacrifice a few students to it!' [1] The Muslim Council of Britain also claimed that the university's actions were actually Islamophobic.

People seem to be aware that this is an underhand tactic. Facing the accusation of anti-Semitism/Islamophobia/homophobia, many will often complain that this is a 'smear' to 'silence my opinion'. Yet they seemingly fail to realise that they are playing the same game - and almost invariably finish by claiming that the other camp is the *real* hate group and that they are the genuine victims.

In a piece titled 'Playing the Anti-Semitism card', Asghar Bukhari outlined how Jewish groups pounced on his every utterance as evidence of anti-Semitism. Yet he fires back by accusing them of Islamophobia. 'Why should a Muslim be beaten up for it by the press, and demanded they make it clear, when a pro-Israeli Jew could get away with anything about Muslims, often writing for the very Islamophobic press that was so outraged at the Muslim use of lax language!' [2]

One blogger defends his right to criticise Israel, taking up pro-Israeli 'efforts to conceal the Israeli spy scandal....behind cries of "hate" and "anti-Semite"'. He argues persuasively that 'Israel's supporters constantly spin any criticism of Israel's actions as hate against the Jewish people'. Yet he finishes the article, 'But if you want to see REAL hate in action, please read on', proceeding to give a list of Israeli statements about Palestinians that he believes are *really* offensive [3].

Religious and gay rights groups are engaging in the same dance of death. The gay popstar Elton John has said that he wanted all religion banned, because it 'promotes hatred and spite against gays' and turns people into 'hateful lemmings'. In response, however, Christians say that the real hate crime is against them. When the EU commissioner for Justice was

criticised for his comments about gays, and accused of homophobia, he responded by saying that there is 'an anti-Christian "inquisition" in the EU': 'There is a hate campaign against me.' [4]

Muslim and gay groups fought it out over Ken Livingstone, mayor of London, who has patronised both groups in the past. After Livingstone invited the Muslim scholar Dr Yusuf al-Qaradawi to speak in London, gay rights activist Peter Tatchell said: 'In the name of fighting Islamophobia the mayor is colluding with homophobia.' [5] Tatchell also criticised Livingstone's reception for the mayor of Moscow, claiming that the Moscow mayor was homophobic and had tacitly supported an assault on a gay rights parade.

In response, Livingstone's press office hit back: 'The attempt of Mr Tatchell to focus attention on the role of the grand Mufti in Moscow, in the face of numerous attacks on gay rights in Eastern Europe which overwhelmingly come from right-wing Christian and secular currents, is a clear example of an Islamophobic campaign.' [6] Tatchell's supporters retorted: 'Mr Livingstone is clearly determined to treat Islam with kid gloves no matter how stridently homophobic its adherents are. The slightest criticism of Islam is immediately branded Islamophobic.'

In these exchanges, we see how discussion reaches a dead end. The claims and counter-claims of offence replace an exchange of views. The discussion becomes increasingly rancorous, but it is an empty tit-for-tat.

Denigrating your opponent

The accusation of 'hate speech' or 'phobia' characterises an opponent as irrational, and not worth arguing with. Their views are apparently not opinions, to be listened to and debated, but merely the expression of instinctive hate or a knee-jerk phobia.

The first use of 'phobia' to describe an opinion was 'homophobia,' used in the late 1960s. At that time, homosexuality was in some circles still

considered a mental illness requiring treatment. Some psychiatrists sympathetic to gay rights turned the tables, and declared that it was *heterosexuals* who had the mental illness. There was no interval where sexuality was discussed as a matter for morality or ethics: the diagnosis of illness was simply switched from one group to another.

Still, the use of the term 'homophobia' remained in the margins until the 1990s, when it was taken up by governments and gay rights groups. It was in the 1990s, too, that other phobias made their appearance, with 'Islamophobia' given profile in a 1997 report by the Runnymede Trust. In the 2000s there was a veritable epidemic of phobias, with groups diagnosing their critics as suffering from illnesses including Christophobia, Hinduphobia, Sikhphobia and Hibernophobia (fear of the Irish).

Prior to the epidemic of phobias, opinions – even objectionable ones – were described as 'isms' (as in racism, sexism), which could be engaged with and argued against. If you did not agree with somebody's views, you had to explain why, and illustrate their errors. Accusing critics of 'hate' or 'phobia' suggests that they do not have ideas worthy of recognition, only beastly black bile. Discussion would be like talking spider anatomy with an arachnophobe. They don't need conversation: they need treatment!

Campaigners for complaint

The focus on crying 'hate speech' means that lobby groups become organs for complaint. Their role is less to celebrate their own cause, than to present themselves as the victims of their opponents. Muslim organisations now spend very little time talking about the virtues of Islam, or offering moral guidance for a good Muslim life: instead, many have dedicated themselves to unearthing Islamophobia in every nook and cranny, analysing TV coverage and the subtexts of newspaper reports.

Similarly, gay organisations talk less about free love, free choice, or the virtue of love between people of the same sex. Instead they dedicate

themselves to highlighting homophobia - for example, by exposing the use of the word 'gay' as an insult in school playgrounds and students unions.

It becomes a matter, not of making your own argument, but of dishing the dirt on your opponent. Online, supporters of Palestine or Israel set up their 'anti-Semitism watch' or 'Islamophobia watch', documenting day-by-day the numerous ways in which the other side is deemed to be insulting them.

Religious groups start to become more interested in other people's services than in their own. In Australia, religious groups sent their representatives into each other's services, to gather evidence in order to level claims of hate speech. The Islamic Council of Victoria had delegates in one sermon by the evangelical Catch the Fire Ministries, and took the organisation to court for its unkind references to Islam.

Insult is uncovered in small print. The UK-based Islamophobia Watch was offended by a Human Rights Watch job advert for a position of Sharia adviser for its Women's Rights section – on the basis that Human Rights Watch had not also advertised for Christian and Jewish advisers on women's rights [7].

Appealing to referees

Playing the 'offence' card empowers a whole swathe of quangos to moderate public discussion. This means that public debate no longer occurs spontaneously in the figurative coffee shop of civil society, but always requires a judge and mediator. Discussion is not just between the debaters themselves, but becomes a matter for media monitors and lawyers, who pick apart the statements of the other side.

So is Internet Watch Foundation ordained to pronounce on acceptable language on the internet, and the Press Complaints Commission for the media. These groups are not elected, nor is their authority founded in the law of the land. Their authority is merely based on the fact that they

accept complaints forms.

Public debate becomes petulant and childish: 'Sir, he said this about me'; 'No Sir, he said that about me'. The aim is to marginalise opponents as purveyors of hate speech – yet the result is to marginalise themselves, too. They declare the other a vicious aggressor, themselves a powerless victim requiring assistance: both are apparently incapable of engaging independently in public discussion.

This demonstrates the essential reciprocity in public relationships, and the fact that a relationship to another person is also a relationship to yourself. Valuing your own freedom and valuing others' freedom are two sides of the same coin: you protect your own right to free speech by defending another's, even if you disagree with everything he or she says. Equally, denigrating others reflects back as a denigration of the self.

A new deal for public debate

The fashion for crying 'offence' is severely damaging the quality of public discussion – more so, perhaps, than official hate speech laws and codes. Because issues cannot be discussed rationally, this leads to simmering tensions and raucous outbursts of mutual accusation. Divisions become both more intractable and less meaningful.

This Thinkpiece is a call for a more tolerant and grown-up approach to public discussion, founded on a respect for opponents, and a zest for argument. This means focusing on exploring your case, and listening to and engaging with other people's views. At its simplest, it means pledging not to cry 'offence' – and recognising that when this tactic is used, it is a shameful cheat. Of course, putting away the offence card won't solve everything that is wrong with public debate, but it would help.

This isn't just about playing fair. We also need to revalue public argument, and to understand why it is important to our lives.

Argument is the creative engine for the development of our own ideas. In every decent argument we learn something different about the world and ourselves. Though arguments are often frustrating as hell, we often admit afterwards that we learnt something important, and that we weren't quite as correct as we had thought. When people are protected from argument – through convention or tradition – they stew in their own complacency. Their minds freeze along the hard lines of this or that opinion.

Through argument we reveal new parts of the world to each other, and we keep our minds more supple and subtle. It is often in the effort to persuade others that we find out what we really mean. We are forced to join up the dots, rather than leap from point to point in our own heads; and we must face the contradictions in our views rather than skate over them.

Arguments can also teach us to be critical with ourselves, to test our own ideas. Debating practice enables us to be our own discussant, to find the gaps in our own arguments, to focus, to cut out flabbiness or spare words.

If discussion is merely the exchange of accusations of offence, it is worse than silence, and fixes empty opinions as polarities to one another. After a few minutes of 'Islamophobia' versus 'homophobia', who really knows – or cares - what it means to 'be Muslim' or to 'be gay'? A social exchange should produce new ideas, and develop both parties – in this case it numbs and stunts both. Discussants leave feeling more angry and more convinced of their own rightness, but ultimately more hollow.

So we need to stop crying offence, and to enter with keen spirit into the match of public discussion. We often ultimately leave a skirmish taller and stronger than we entered it, and our opponent does too. Stop diving: play on.

Endnotes

[1] <http://melbourne.indymedia.org/news/2007/01/135710.php>

[2] <http://mpacuk.org/content/view/3047/35/>

[3] <http://www.whatreallyhappened.com/hatespeech.html>

[4] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/3749352.stm>

[5] <http://www.petertatchell.net/religion/qaradawi.htm>

[6] <http://www.islamophobia-watch.com/islamophobia-watch/2007/3/10/tatchell-outrage-and-the-grand-mufti.html>

[7] <http://www.islamophobia-watch.com/islamophobia-watch/2007/8/23/islam-and-womens-rights.html>