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Charlie Kirk's murder demonstrates how the credentialed class keeps itself ignorant.



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Charlie Kirk BRIAN CAHN/ ZUMA PRESS

The Left's Vast Lack of Knowledge

That voters are sorting themselves along lines of educational attainment is the most salient fact of American politics in the 21st century. The credentialed vote mostly Democratic; everybody else plumps mostly Republican. You might be tempted to deduce that liberals and progressives know more about their conservative opposites than vice versa. You would be exactly wrong, as the fallout from Charlie Kirk's assassination reminds us by the hour.

The day after Kirk was killed, the New York Times ran a story headlined "Where Charlie Kirk Stood on Key Political Issues." The authors pieced together quotations manifestly taken from websites unfriendly to Kirk and made no attempt to convey the context or intended point of the various reproduced assertions. A section on antisemitism made Kirk, who'd been dead less than a day, sound like a Jew-hater of the 1930s.

A day later the Times issued a correction: "An earlier version of this article described incorrectly an antisemitic statement that Charlie Kirk had made on an episode of his podcast. He was quoting a statement from a post on social media and went on to critique it. It was not his own statement."

Six Times employees worked on the story—two named in the byline, four more mentioned as contributors at the end. None, evidently, bothered to wonder how such a person as they described could also be a ferocious proponent of the Jewish state and the Jewish people. The thought process seems to have been: Kirk was a rightwinger, right-wingers by definition hold retrograde opinions, so an antisemite Kirk surely was. Progressive commentators insisting, days after his assassination, that his killer was a Republican—the indefatigably mistaken Laurence Tribe is one—leaned on a similar sort of sylogism.

A columnist at the Washington Post, meanwhile, was let go this week after (among other things) posting a quotation of Kirk, the sentence slightly rewritten to make it look as if he were claiming black women generally aren't as smart as whites. Kirk expressed his views abrasively, but common sense and love of country should have told the columnist that the exponent of such a view wouldn't attract a mass following in 21st century America. I choose to think she didn't doctor the line deliberately.

It's an old complaint on the right. Whereas conservatives are obliged to know what their correlatives on the left say and write—so pervasive are their ideas and assumptions in our cultural institutions—liberals and progressives feel no corresponding need to know the opinions of people on the right. I was amused last week by a sentence in the New Yorker. The piece had to do with Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s rough treatment of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The author related the view of a CDC scientist as follows: "It will be something of a miracle . . . if the country's next major health threat is met with the same skill, resources, and strategy as the last one." The observation is made, as far as I can tell, without irony. You can believe, as I do, that Mr. Kennedy's conduct in his current role is mostly deplorable, and also suspect that the author of this sentence would benefit from diversifying his sources of news.

Often am I reminded of a line in Charles Portis's novel "True Grit": "You do not think much of me, do you, Cogburn?" asks the Texas Ranger LaBoeuf. The reply: "I don't think about you at all when your mouth is closed."

Several months ago I referred in these pages to liberals' disinclination to subject themselves to views held on the right. I said it "isn't a provable thesis." More than one reader informed me otherwise and suggested I have a look at Jonathan Haidt's book "The Righteous Mind" (2012).

I read it. Mr. Haidt recalls conducting a study with two other researchers on how accurately liberals, conservatives and moderates identify one another's views. The study's liberal subjects, unsurprisingly, performed the worst. My favorite sentence, on page 287: "When faced with questions such as 'One of the worst things a person could do is hurt a defenseless animal' or 'Justice is the most important requirement for society,' liberals assumed that conservatives would disagree."

Kirk's cultured despisers—the progressive scribblers and Democratic politicians groping for a way to condemn violence while denouncing Kirk's views—could learn a lot from the man. "When people stop talking," he said in a typical riff last year, "really bad stuff starts." Or, as Yuval Levin of the American Enterprise Institute put it in his book "American Covenant" (2024), "The breakdown of political culture in our day is not a function of our having forgotten how to agree with each other but of our having forgotten how to disagree constructively."

← Note

Disagreeing constructively requires that you first consider the arguments with which you purport to disagree. In a saner world, the party of credentialed knowledge-class urbanites would know this without being told.

By Barton Swaim

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