Clarence Thomas and the Tough Love Crowd

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Conclusion: What’s So Scary about Partisanship?

Partisanship Is Not Censorship

Surely more truth is always better and partisanship is bad. Doesn’t partisanship smack of self-censorship, and won’t it stultify debate? Perhaps not. First, the class of absolutely uncontestable truths is very small or nonexistent. The choice, where people disagree, is not between truth and its opposite, but between *enduring* truths and trivial ones. If “censorship” is a problem, it is a problem for everyone. Those who pursue Julien Benda’s “disinterest” also need to choose and discard among the many things they can say. Everybody is always already inevitably partisan. We can only try to ensure that we are partisans for the right crowd. Either we set our priorities after careful reflection, remaining skeptical of conventional wisdom; or, unthinking, we adopt conventional wisdom in deciding what to emphasize or ignore.

Furthermore, people who say that partisanship is censorship are wrong if they mean that partisanship implies a net loss to the debate as a whole. In areas like politics, law, and literature we all know that most issues are “eternal” or “recurring.” Particular refinements no doubt abound, but genuine ideological novelty is rare. Indeed, some say that “ideological novelty” is incomprehensible since “ideology” comprises the instinctual fabric of our awareness. They say we are, by definition, unable to tame this fabric through conscious reflection. Ideology, in this picture, is the very currency of thought. Every time we think about our ideology, whatever we come up with is itself a product of that ideology. Our thought therefore cannot capture the ideology that shapes it. We can’t climb outside our way of
seeing. So the idea that partisanship is somehow more ideological than Benda’s ideal of disinterest simply makes no sense. Champions of disinterest too often assume that “ideology, like halitosis, is . . . what the other person has.” Nothing is lost by replacing disinterest with partisanship.

And where censorship implies a loss of freedom, partisanship loosens things up. Partisan skepticism threatens conventional wisdom. What others take for granted, partisans raise as questions. The Toughs exactly mistake conventional wisdom for truth, and therefore add little to what we already know. Partisans, conversely, stir debate. They release suppressed objections and unsettle prevailing thought. Disinterest is self-censorship, and partisanship is its exact opposite.

Coping with Lies

What of the self-righteous zealot who deliberately distorts things under cover of spurious arguments that “the end justifies the means”? This problem is fatal where the zealot holds a large degree of centralized state power (Ronald Reagan, Oliver North) or centralized private power (Ted Turner, Rupert Murdoch, the Wall Street Journal). This is already a big problem in America, says Ishmael Reed: “We live in a country where General Electric, which sponsors one of the chief outlets for anti-black propaganda, ‘NBC News,’ has been in trouble with the law more times than your average mugger.”

How can a mumbling disinterest move us out of this predicament? Effective partisan argument already faces big obstacles in unsettling the contented crowd. The dispossessed already get left out: Bill Clinton forbade Lani Guinier to respond to her critics, then sent her home without the Senate hearing Clarence Thomas got. Since so much stuff muffles the dispossessed’s talk, the last voice we need is Tough counterfeit calm.