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The Right's Post-Kirk Crackdown Has a Familiar Mob Logic

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The assassination of Charlie Kirk has led to more than shock, grief and a demand that the killer be brought to justice. Pugnacious and divisive in life, Mr. Kirk has been canonized in death as a saint of civil discourse. His murder has unleashed a furious assault by the Trump administration and its supporters against their political enemies, including anyone who demurs from this beatification.

In 1960, the economist Thomas Schelling identified this kind of phenomenon as one of many striking social events driven by “common knowledge”: the state in which everyone knows something, everyone knows that everyone else knows that thing and so on. The phenomenon, which was further explored by the anthropologist John Tooby, may be called a communal outrage.

A communal outrage begins with an incident in which one or more people are attacked in a public setting, ostensibly because of their membership in a group — an ethnicity, nation, class or coalition. Word of the attack goes viral and may be embellished (and sometimes fabricated) to make it seem more intentional and gruesome. The victim is sanctified as a symbol of the group, and the incident is seen as an intolerable affront that cannot pass unchallenged. The atrocity is cherished as a morbid sacred myth, with doubters shamed and punished. The victim's group lashes out at members of the aggressor's group, far out of proportion to the original harm. The result may be a riot, pogrom, revolution, war or social movement.

The post-Kirk crackdown is an example of this lashing out. The chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, Brendan Carr, used the language of a Mafia thug (“we can do this the easy way or the hard way”) to pressure ABC to take action against the talk-show host Jimmy Kimmel. Attorney General Pam Bondi warned, “We will absolutely target you, go after you, if you are targeting anyone with hate speech” — a category protected under the First Amendment. (After bipartisan backlash, supported by quotations from Mr. Kirk himself, Ms. Bondi defined “hate speech” as threats of violence.) President Trump's adviser Stephen Miller threatened, “With God as my witness, we are going to use every resource we have” to “identify, disrupt, dismantle and destroy” left-wing political organizations that he said constitute “a vast domestic terror movement.”

This is not just the familiar story of a government's finding a pretext to crack down on its opponents. Citizens have also joined in the frenzy. Right-wing influencers have demanded the firing or harassment of anyone whose public comments, real or misattributed, they deemed disrespectful of Mr. Kirk. Within weeks of the shooting, dozens of people have been fired or suspended or disciplined, including teachers, firefighters, restaurant workers and a cheerleading coach.

Outrage incidents often drive history. To take a few examples: The explosion of the U.S. battleship Maine in Havana Harbor in 1898 led to the demand “Remember the Maine,” egging the United States into the Spanish-American War. The Reichstag fire of 1933 licensed the consolidation of the Nazi regime. The 2010 self-immolation of a Tunisian produce vendor set off the Arab Spring. Ten years later, the death of George Floyd under the knee of a white police officer led to nationwide demonstrations, many violent, and a wave of firings, deplatformings and cancellations.

How can we make sense of these runaway reactions? Can we go beyond metaphors like “last straw” and “dry tinder” to find a hidden logic? Could they be, however shortsightedly or destructively, intelligible solutions to an immediate challenge?

The responses to a communal outrage incident are not exactly acts of revenge, which, according to the saying, is a dish best served cold. An effective act of revenge is premeditated, targeted at the perpetrators and proportional to the harm. Its ultimate goal is deterrence. As the evolutionary psychologists Martin Daly and Margo Wilson have put it, "Effective deterrence is a matter of convincing our rivals that any attempt to advance their interests at our expense will lead to such severe penalties that the competitive gambit will end up a net loss."

The white-hot ferocity of communal outrage has a different logic. It is a solution to the problem people face when there are several good ways of doing something, but they have to settle on doing it the same way — a predicament called a coordination dilemma. The problem may be solved if one salient option, called a focal point, stands out from the others. In Schelling's classic example, a couple accidentally separated in New York may gravitate to the clock in Grand Central Station at noon, since each guesses it would pop into the mind of the other.

Outrage incidents are focal points that solve two coordination problems. The first problem is a contest for dominance: for respect, standing, honor, face, deference.

Organisms, including humans, do not come to blows every time they compete over some resource or privilege. Instead, they may settle into a dominance hierarchy in which one always cedes the resource to the other, sparing both from the costs of a brawl that may be higher than what they are fighting over.

The alpha may be the one who looks stronger or who has prevailed in previous skirmishes, signaling that the outcome of a duel is a foregone conclusion that both have an interest in avoiding. Or he may be grandfathered in for no reason other than that both parties want to avoid a fight.

However a dominance hierarchy is determined, it exists only as common knowledge. One rival stands his ground because he knows the other will give way, and the other gives way because he knows the first will stand his ground.

Sometimes, of course, dominance is up for grabs. A beta may be tired of always getting the short end of the stick; an uneasy alpha may want to prop up the hierarchy as it stands. Since a pecking order exists in the minds of the antagonists (and of onlookers who could become allies), these contests are fought in the arena of common knowledge: what everyone knows that everyone knows.

That's why people kill each other over trivial curses, jostlings, traffic discourtesies and other signs of disrespect, particularly in the presence of an audience. What they are fighting over is the common knowledge that they will stand their ground in a confrontation.

Humans are social animals, and their well-being depends on the fortunes of their groups. Groups such as nations or political coalitions may think of themselves as rivals jockeying for respect, and mindful of saving or losing face.

And this brings us to the dominance contests prompted by communal outrages. A group that acquiesces to a conspicuous attack on one of its members has tacitly conceded that in the future it will back down in an unlimited series of confrontations. Striking back while the whole world is watching is a way for the group to recalibrate self-fulfilling expectations of how it is to be treated.

The other coordination problem that an outrage incident can solve is achieving solidarity within a group. There can be strength in numbers: As Gandhi explained in the eponymous 1982 movie, "One hundred thousand Englishmen simply cannot control 350 million Indians if those Indians refuse to cooperate." But those citizens can't refuse to cooperate when each fears that no one else will join him or her, if only out of fear that others have that fear.

That's why dictators are terrified of public protests. In a demonstration in a public square, each protester not only can see the others but also can see that the others are seeing the others. This common knowledge can allow them to coordinate their resistance, whether by literally storming the palace or by bringing the state machinery to a halt through work stoppages and boycotts.

What emboldens people to turn out for a protest, or join other forms of collective action, in the first place? An outrage incident can signal to everyone that the time to take up the battle is now.

It's often been pointed out that Mr. Trump and the MAGA movement have a chronic sense of being disrespected. Mr. Trump fumed for decades about being looked down on by coastal elites, and his pique has grown with each investigation, indictment and impeachment. For many of his followers, these insults merged with a smoldering resentment at the creeping takeover by leftist values in public life, from government mandates to popular entertainment.

Mr. Kirk's killing is, for all of them, a perfect outrage incident. As an advocate of MAGA willing to take the battle to the enemy, Mr. Kirk was a pre-eminent symbol of the coalition. And his suspected killer, an internet-addled loner with a gun, nonetheless has enough left-adjacent trappings (a transgender partner, some antifascist memes) that he can be mentally fitted into a vast liberal conspiracy. The shooting was an unendurable public offense, which mobilized the coalition to muster its forces, in this case a combination of government muscle and social media shaming mobs, to rectify the affront.

Though communal outrages begin with a standard sequence — conspicuous insult or transgression, viral outrage, mass counterattack — they do not unfold according to a determined script. Some assassinations, like that of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., led to a violent aftermath; others, like that of Robert F. Kennedy a few months later, left only sadness. The 2001 terrorist attacks pushed the United States into wars, while the 2004 train bombing in Madrid pulled Spain out of one, and neither caused pogroms against Muslims.

The outcome depends on how the incident is perceived. It may be fanned into flames by outrage entrepreneurs who don't want to let the crisis go to waste. They frame the victim as a martyr for a humiliated group and the perpetrator as an agent of a threatening one.

In the Kirk case, the counterattack so far has been nonviolent, and we should be wary of throwing around scare words like "fascism" and "civil war." But history shows that the virulent fury uncorked by a communal outrage incident can set off a cascade of unpredictable and dreadful consequences. Mr. Kirk was the innocent victim of a coldblooded killer, apparently acting alone, who should be held to account by the criminal justice system. Cooler heads on the right must push back against the all-too-human temptation to use it as an opportunity to lash out against their apparent enemies.

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