

# Moral Health

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## Michael Savage: Liberals & the Stormy Weather of Free Speech

Filed under: [Articles](#) — Laurence Thomas

OBVIOUSLY, IT IS WRONG to promote hate. But what counts as promoting hate? And it is the answer to that question that, in broad strokes, sharply marks the difference between liberals and conservatives. For liberals, there is a vanishingly thin line between being critical, on the one hand, and being hostile in an untoward manner and thus promoting hate, on the other. In particular, liberals tend not to think that criticism is a way of engendering excellence. Encouragement, liberals insist, is the route to excellence.

Conservatives, by contrast, tend to think that substantive criticism is not only justified but also that often enough criticism is absolutely necessary in order to attain excellence. While hardly opposed to encouragement, conservatives maintain that encouragement shorn of criticism can be very hypocritical, and so not a way of taking another seriously.

When applied to ethnic groups: Liberals tend to maintain that any criticism of members of an ethnic group is racist; whereas conservatives tend to hold that criticisms of members of an ethnic group can be ever so appropriate. Whatever else is true, liberals are simply wrong. It is ludicrous to hold that merely criticizing a member of an ethnic group makes one racist. If a Latino kills an Asian in cold blood while attempting to rob the Asian, then that Latino is open to severe moral criticism for his behavior.

And even if we concede that racism is the explanation for why the members of various ethnic groups have not achieved various excellences, what does not follow from this at all is that the members of these groups cannot be criticized for failing to have higher aspirations and to take certain courses of action. Suppose, for example, that in the attempt to rob me you knock me unconscious and then drag me in the middle of a highway. Upon regaining conscious, I just lie there waiting for someone to help me, although I am fully capable of getting myself to the side of the road, where I would be much safer. I was a fool

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for just lying there; and you would be ever so right to point that out to me.

In a word: The reality of racism does not negate the truth that there are things which victims of racism can and should do for themselves.

*This is where Michael Savage enters into the picture.* The substance of Savage's view is twofold: (a) Liberal democracy has gone way too far in not holding the member of ethnic groups accountable for their behavior. (b) Various members of ethnic groups are masterfully exploiting this liberal mindset.

Now, while the view that I have attributed to Michael Savage may be false, it cannot be properly characterized as racist. Notice that the view does not say, or entail, that minorities are incapable of achieving the highest level of intellectual and moral excellences. It assumes no form of genetic inferiority on the part of minorities. I have never heard him come even close to positing genetic inferiority on the part of this or that ethnic group.

It is, alas, a conceptual truth that a group cannot in anyway be deemed inferior merely on account of being accused morally irresponsible. After all, the very charge of racism itself entails that individuals are not acting morally responsibly *without* entailing that those so charged, typically individuals who are white, are inferior in any way at all.

Michael Savage could be mistaken in his view that various members of ethnic groups are not acting as responsibly as they should. Alas, a mistaken view is not thereby a racist view. For instance, if it turns out that affirmative action has done more harm than good to blacks, then many who believe in affirmative action will be mistaken in their view of the good of the practice. Yet, it would be just absurd to accuse these supporters of being racist simply on account of the supporters being mistaken about the good of affirmative action.

Mr. Savage is against affirmative action. This no more makes him racist than being for affirmative action makes one honest and upright.

The moral of the story is this: While the difference between hate speech and critical

speech may at times be difficult to ascertain, the distinction is one of fundamental importance; hence, it is a mistake to regard all critical speech as hate speech. This is especially wrong when we do so merely because doing so is convenient or suits our political aims.

There can be little doubt that Michael Savage's view fall under the rubric of critical speech. However, the argument that his views constitute racist speech is untenable and without merit *unless* one mistakenly and wrongly conflates critical speech with racist speech. This I say not because I am in general agreement with what Savage says, but because the distinction between racist speech and critical speech is an extremely important distinction that liberal democracy must not ignore and because his many claims—bombastic though they might be—do not meet the criteria for being labeled racist.

These considerations bring me to the topic of free speech. Whatever else is true, the very idea of free speech can make no sense at all—indeed, the idea is politically bankrupt—if the only speech that is permitted is the speech which expresses views with which we concur. Liberal democracy will flounder if it does not take this truth seriously.

What is more, liberal democracy cultivates none other than irresponsibility if it allows that the mere charge of racism warrants preventing a person from speaking. For there is no evidence at all that victims of racism are more saintly or righteous than others; accordingly, there is simply nothing about being a victim of racism that precludes the possibility of misusing the charge of racism. Worse, still, liberal democracy itself becomes oppressive if it allows that the mere charge of racism warrants preventing a person from speaking.

It is thus rather disconcerting that liberals have remained so very quiet given the recent events that have unfolded around Michael Savage: He has been barred from entering the United Kingdom on the grounds that he promotes racism. When one considers [the list of individuals who have been barred on these grounds](#), it simply makes no sense at all to suppose that Savage is in the same category as these individuals.

Of course, liberals in the United States do not determine the policies of the United Kingdom. This truth, though, is no bar to liberals going on record as supporting Savage's right to critical speech (which, as has been noted, does not thereby constitute racist free speech). The silence of liberals would suggest that they take delight in the symbolic

significance of Savage being barred from the United Kingdom: He should be silenced in the United States, if only he could be.

If this is what liberals think, and there is little reason to imagine that they think otherwise, then the political trajectory of the United States is a most disconcerting one. There is a right and wrong way to ensure liberty for all. Silencing criticisms of ethnic groups, by insisting that all such criticism is tantamount to racism in spirit if not in word is none other than a Pyrrhic victory. For if we tolerate and support silencing others merely in order to suit our political ends, then in the very famous and haunting words of Pastor Martin Niemöller's: There will be no one left to speak on our behalf when it is determined that we, too, should be silenced.

Over and over and over again, history has shown that silencing others for the greater good of all never ever results in the realization of that outcome, namely the greater good of all.

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