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How Would the Right Know It's Wrong?



By Marty Kaplan

While the left despairs of Barack Obama's capitulation to K Street and Wall Street, the right continues to insist that he's a Marxist, socialist, communist enemy of capitalism. What could possibly convince the right that it's wrong — about that, or anything else?

Not the press. The right gets its facts from Fox News, talk radio, the screaming sirens on the Web and the mandarins of the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page. It maintains that the mainstream media is in the tank for liberals, which is hilarious, because the prestige press is so terrified of the right that it has substituted the diligence of he-said/she-said stenography for the challenge of refereeing disputes, and because the 24/7 chase for ratings and page-hits makes covering sex, celebrity and crime — and celebrity sex crime — way more important than figuring out what's actually important.

Not the political system. Demagoguery is fun. It wins airtime. Its plumage-ruffling signifies to the Beltway culture a mature appreciation for the virtues of pandering and partisanship. It's also profitable: polarizing plus demonizing equals fundraising. Whatever hopes the Founders had for the deliberative grandeur of our legislative system are mocked by the likes of Michelle Bachmann, John Boehner, Mitch McConnell and James Inhofe.

Not philosophy. For a few Enlightenment centuries, the dream of reason — a culture of science — was embraced as the best defense against tyranny, whether the oppression came from cardinals or kings. The supreme modern exemplar of this view was the British philosopher Karl Popper. What separates rational argument from ideological or religious wrangling, Popper explained, is the possibility of disconfirmation. A scientific statement can always, potentially, be refuted by evidence, while an ideological or theological contention can always — no matter what seems to contradict it — be held fast.

Marx and Freud both said they were scientists, but Popper exiled them from that kingdom. Marxism is too versatile, its explanatory power too great. There's nothing that a Marxist economist can't explain; no new evidence can ever falsify the system. To Freud, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, and sometimes it's a penis, but sometimes it can be anything at all; there are no interpretive maneuvers that an analyst is prevented from performing. *The Open Society and Its*

Enemies, which Popper wrote in the shadow of World War II, extended the urgency of falsifiability to the clash between democracy and totalitarianism. In an open society, leaders make their beliefs vulnerable to challenge and revision. But the salons of a closed society belong to a cult; nothing can prove to them that they're wrong.

Late in the twentieth century, the scientific worldview lost its luster. Far from being a privileged epistemology, a universally valid way of knowing the world, science was declared to be a cultural artifact, just another tribal value system. Enter postmodernism. Everything is subjective, relative, political, socially constructed. No opinion is better, or more reasonable, than any other. No fact exists independent of a perspective. Efforts to establish hierarchies of values, to separate true from false, are actually pernicious attempts to disguise power plays as citizenship and to present self-interest as sweet reason.

No wonder our press couldn't settle whether Obama was palin' around with terrorists or not, and can't say whether a public option is a government takeover of health care or not, and wouldn't dream of holding entertainer Rush Limbaugh accountable for his poison. On the news, who's to say whether a protester toting an AK-47 is potential assassin or a Fourth Amendment advocate? Philip Morris shill Betsy McCaughey deserves equal time with CIGNA whistleblower Wendell Potter. "Socialism" isn't an actual idea with an actual meaning; it's just a slogan, whose definition in the eye of its beholder.

No wonder our political system can't solve big problems. Ruthless opposition and dingbat delusions are the currency of right-wing success, and sand in the gears of democracy. Whether they're cynical postures or sincere beliefs doesn't matter. The grand national conversation that was intended to enable citizens and their representatives to find common ground for conflicting values has become a grand national midway of carny-barkers and rodeo clowns.

If it weren't so scary, it'd be funny that the loons who spread the falsehood that Saddam Hussein was behind 9/11, who say that global climate change is a hoax and who want creationism to share equal time with evolution in our schools are the same furies who shout "You lie!" at the president and make insatiable demands for evidence of his American birth. Funny, because — from Moliere to Stephen Colbert — hypocrisy is part of the human comedy. Scary, because the epistemological checks and balances that are supposed to protect an open society from totalitarianism are pretty much impotent in an age of PoMo politainment.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.

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