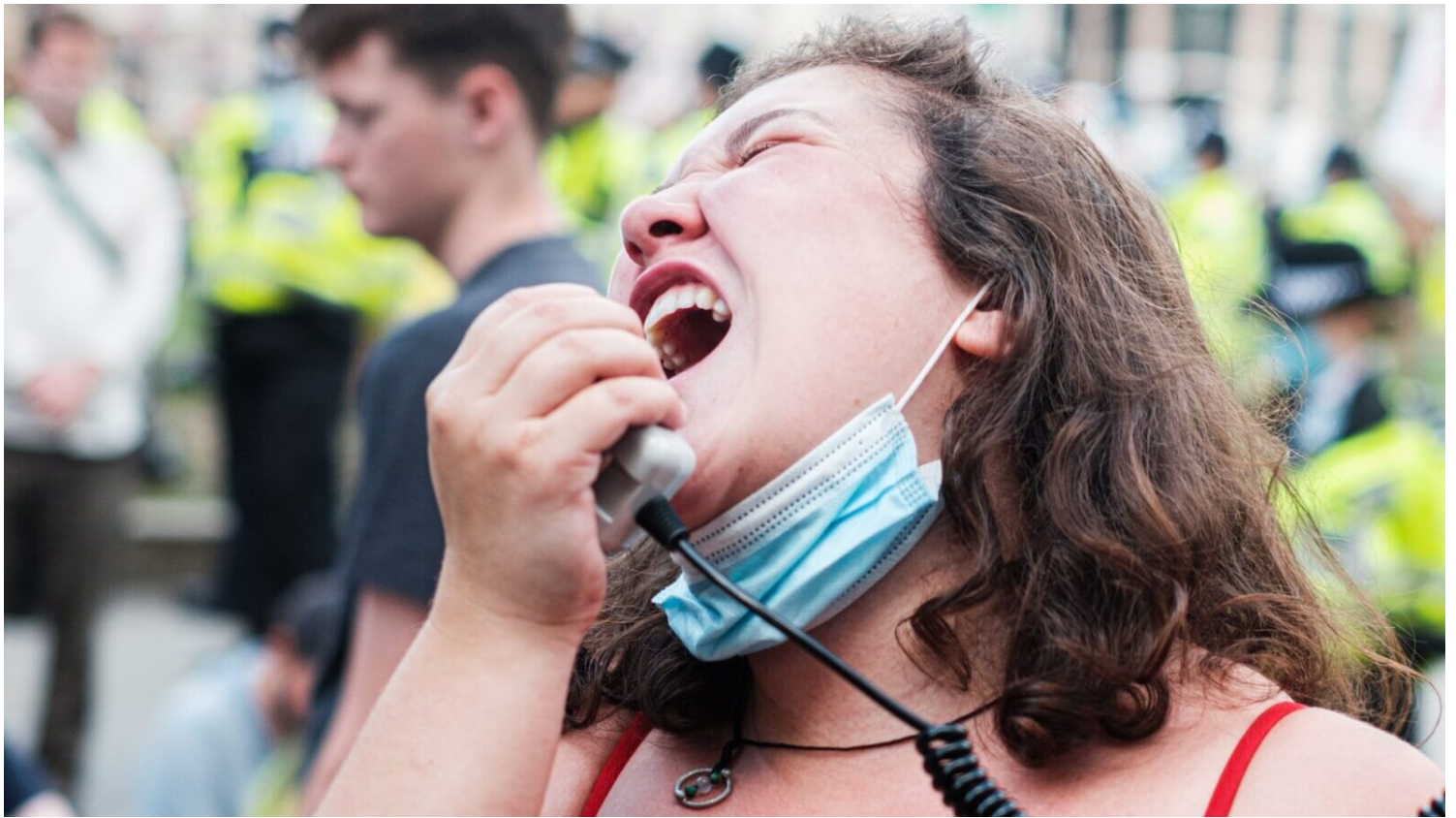


WORDS, NOT DEEDS: THE NEW MEASURE OF VIRTUE

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When the suffragettes campaigned up and down Britain throughout the early decades of the 20th century for the right of women to vote, they adopted a catchy slogan: “deeds, not words.” This summed up their commitment to the cause—carried, as it was, not by flowery articles or rousing orations, but by acts of civil disobedience. To their credit, the likes of Emmeline Pankhurst and Emily Davison were willing to pay the costs of principle—whether that meant routine arrests, as in the case of Pankhurst, or death itself as in the case of Davison, who fatally threw herself in front of the King’s horse at the 1913 Epsom Derby.

These women believed that universal suffrage was urgent and just. Anyone fighting for it was therefore engaged in a virtuous struggle, the heroism of which was only magnified by the fact that the deeds performed by many of the suffragettes involved dangers far exceeding the risks inherent to ordinary life.

Nothing could be further from the modern Left’s strong attachment, indeed its apparent addiction, to ‘virtue-signalling.’ Today’s activists are far more passionate about having the right opinions than doing the right things. This distinguishes the current crop of revolutionaries from their more heroic forebears, be they suffragettes, chartists, or any of the other self-sacrificing movements still valorised by Leftist historians. Conservatives need not be bashful about also mourning them, at least a little. Since almost everything in the past was better, there is no contradiction in arguing as a conservative that this applies as much to political firebrands as it does to architecture, music, and prayer books. It is merely, as Leibniz once remarked of the fact that there exists an equal amount of odd numbers as there exist numbers at all, an “oddity.”

Of course, there are groups like ‘Just Stop Oil’ and ‘Extinction Rebellion’ whose members

do engage in “direct action” and, at least in principle, face the prospect of arrest or financial penalty. Whatever such disruptive, anti-social tactics might say about [the general decline of public faith in parliamentary democracy](#), they still suggest that left-wing risk-taking is not yet an extinct species, just a critically endangered one. Then again, perhaps the number of boobies willing to glue themselves to roads or [spray paint all over the offices of think tanks](#) would deplete somewhat if the authorities did not treat these green zealots with [kid-gloves](#).

A member of the environmental activist group 'Just Stop Oil' reacts after spraying orange paint on the window shop of the Aston Martin car show room, in central London. (Photo by ISABEL INFANTES / AFP)

So why such a dramatic change in the average calibre of left-wing troublemakers? One obvious answer is that posturing is so much easier than sacrifice. Why devote thousands of silent hours to mastering natural science, learning to code, and working to perfect an affordable form of clean energy that will be instantly embraced across the globe when you can reap more immediate plaudits by shrieking about “the climate crisis” in Trafalgar Square? Why set up a charity for disadvantaged children of all backgrounds when you can pin educational inequality on ‘systemic racism’ and be met with storms of enlightened applause? “Words, not deeds” is the unofficial mantra of slouches who would rather impress the world than change it.

Still, when has it not been easier to chatter about problems, to show how much you care about their impact, than make sacrifices to solve them? Virtue-signalling is not new. But it has enjoyed a special burgeoning in recent decades, not least because modern culture sooner rewards noisy displays of passion than less visible acts of virtue. Why else would John Kerry be praised as a warrior for “climate justice” despite boasting a carbon footprint the size of India’s? Or Colin Kaepernick be awarded a multi-million dollar *Nike* contract for making meaningless gestures on the sports field? The widespread nature of virtue-signalling today, along with the rewards that follow from uttering the approved slogans in lieu of actually doing anything, suggests a deeper reason than mere laziness for the modern Left’s almost complete abandonment of sacrifice.

One overlooked factor is the wokesters' theoretical obsession with systems. A slightly garbled and for the most part unacknowledged inheritance from Marxism, it is generally felt by today's left-wing radicals that an individual's conduct, virtuous or not, is ultimately the product of the system—typically oppressive, according to the Left's narrative—in which he finds himself. Tied to an obsession with identity, this has caused an earthquake under the Christian moral landscape the West once inhabited. All of a sudden, a black man who commits a crime deserves no real blame unless, as in the case of 'misgendering' or some slur against homosexuals, that crime serves to 'reinforce' the alleged pathologies inherent in the system, be it 'transphobia' or 'anti-gay hatred.' A mere murder or an armed-robbery, meanwhile, can largely be blamed on the system itself—at least if carried out by an assailant who, living in a structurally 'racist' society, happens to be black.

For the same reason, a white police officer who saves a black girl's life will not be praised half as much if, in order to do so, he had to shoot a different black girl who was trying to stab her. On the contrary, LeBron James will [call](#) on his millions of Twitter followers to demand the officer's scalp, as the wealthy athlete did immediately after [Nicholas Reardon's lawful killing of Ma'Khia Bryant](#). He later deleted the vengeful tweet, only then to double-down and [explain](#), in his characteristically ineloquent way, that he was not at all sorry:

<https://twitter.com/KingJames/status/1385013333007343619>

Still, the basketball star can be credited for proving my point. The content of our characters is no longer important to a generation of would-be radicals who have been taught to regard a person's place in—as James puts it—"the entire system" of oppression as the main criterion of judgement. All of a sudden, having adopted such a distorting prism, it becomes intellectually feasible for CNN to [blame](#) the recent killing of Tyre Nichols at the hands of five black police officers on that most shape-shifting of foes, white supremacy. The individual agency of these violent cops, according to our enlightened betters, does not matter half as much as the structurally racist system they represent.

So what can virtue mean once it has been divorced from conduct and the specifics of motive, intent, and circumstance? According to Marx's faith in the power of an awakened political "consciousness" (*Bewusstsein*) to spur action, the only other route to virtue besides revolution against the system can be holding and spreading the correct opinions. This is why Marx devoted so much time to polemic, even against some of his own left-wing cousins, such as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Bruno Bauer, whom he regarded as intellectually impure. Opinions, attitudes, and dramatic shifts in consciousness are increasingly considered the best way to overthrow the system. It is only an added bonus that they also require much less in the way of practical effort.

There is a certain logic to the idea. A rich man who gives to the poor does a good thing, but his charity should not be overvalued. According to the tenets of Marxism, it is just one kind deed within a wider systemic vortex of economic exploitation. Giving the rich man too much credit detracts from the urgency of addressing the main structural injustice. Solving *that* will require more than one or two millionaires with generous instincts. In fact, it will more likely require—as per the communist script—the forcible expropriation of all the other millionaires, perhaps even the kind-hearted ones, sanctioned by law and enforced at the barrel of a gun.

Promoting the right ideas, then, should be prioritized, for it pushes society closer to seeing this revolutionary moment as a moral imperative. Meanwhile, making too much of charitable do-gooders will have exactly the opposite effect, forestalling the emergence of this revolutionary consciousness by encouraging many to believe that perhaps the rich are not so bad after all.

Thus, once the 'woke' idea of the West as a socially constructed, oppressive hellhole is accepted, words, attitudes, and opinions—quite apart from the behaviour they inspire—come to be seen as more ethical than even the noblest acts of self-sacrifice. Why should we care for such romance if it fails to achieve anything enduringly total or revolutionary beyond itself? A good deed at best does a moderate amount of good. Far more threatening is that good deed's tendency to shore up popular faith in an unjust system. Meanwhile, a politically correct opinion, signal, or gesture can motivate people to

agitate for the complete transformation of society, the first step towards a utopia so magnificently ordered that personal responsibility and heroic acts of love are no longer needed at all.

People are free to choose whether to buy this rather convenient re-definition of virtue, but they should not ignore the question or dismiss it as one for academic philosophers to discuss among themselves in cloistered seminars. If the new measure of virtue is a distortion, it matters. There can be few things more dangerous to justice than a culture in which, on all ethical questions, clumsy ideological templates reign supreme and the details of moral character, practical intent, and personal responsibility become optional.