

# Weaponisation

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*Abstract.* It is increasingly common today, in political debate, for people to accuse their opponents of *weaponising* an ideal or value. For example, progressives accuse conservatives of weaponising free speech, and conservatives accuse progressives of weaponising compassion. In this piece I criticise this sort of rhetorical brinkmanship. I argue that an aversion to ‘weaponisation-talk’ is not merely a symptom of a naively conflict-avoidant liberal mindset, i.e. the kind of mindset that’s criticised by agonistic realists. Instead, I suggest that weaponisation-talk is to be resisted because – so I argue – it encourages us to move from a justified frustration about the benighted or disingenuous invocation of some ideal, towards an unjustified sense of antipathy or suspicion about the ideal itself.

In today’s culture wars people are eager to accuse their opponents of *weaponising* values. Some progressive authors, *for instance*, say that conservatives have weaponised free speech. When the right invokes free speech – to criticise censorship they oppose and defend speakers they support – they are *accused* of engaging in a rhetorical sleight of hand. They don’t really care about free speech, they just want political wins. Hence, *for some*, “it is time to stop assuming good faith in the free speech debate”.

At least one author, *Oliver Traldi*, has challenged this. Traldi suggests that complaints about the weaponisation of free speech are themselves made in bad faith. His idea is that progressives often have double standards in this area: “free speech for me, but not for thee”. The ones who want to pay lip service to free speech need to explain their unwillingness to defend the freedom of speakers that they find abhorrent. And so the charge that conservatives are weaponising free speech is,

as Traldi sees it, a piece of verbal misdirection, aimed at masking their double-standards.

Weaponisation rhetoric isn't only used to by progressives to criticise conservatives. It's also used by conservatives criticising progressives. To take one prominent example, Jordan Peterson has defined the left as "the ones who *weaponise compassion*". The leftist insists that the wrongs inflicted upon the oppressed outweigh all other moral concerns, and that we are justified in using authoritarian social policy to redress this (or, if we can't attain the requisite power, demolishing the establishment that presided over the wrongs). This is the ruthless, bleeding heart logic that underpins progressive activism, in Peterson's eyes. And other commentators reiterate his suspicion. Left-wing 'compassion' for oppressed people is a *weaponistic ruse*; its real point is to try to justify progressive power-grabs, and provide a smokescreen for *classist bullying*.

The rise of weaponisation-talk is symptomatic of the utter collapse in cooperative good faith across the progressive-conservative divide. You accuse your opponent of weaponising a value when you think they're invoking it in bad faith, in an effort to peddle one of their insincere political talking points. And such accusations are apt, often enough. An enormous amount of political discourse is tactical spin. The question is how we can name and criticise instances of this, without – as the language of weaponisation seems to encourage – getting drawn into a game of rhetorical brinkmanship, or recklessly embracing the warlike mentality that the language betrays.

One response to these worries might be to bite the bullet, and just embrace the warlike mood. Those who recommend this response go by various names, but one that has come to the fore in modern political theory is *agonistic realism*. The agonistic view, developed by the Belgian theorist *Chantal Mouffe*, among others, is critical of any approach to politics which is driven by a yearning for consensus and an aversion to conflict. This kind of politics strips people's lives of their deepest, most meaningful commitments. And besides, political conflict isn't something to fear. It can lead to welcome social change. And even when it isn't productive – when it breeds anguish and dysfunction – these things cannot be wished away. Politics is necessarily about facing up to a fight. The work of politics is about trying to make the best of things in a fighting world.

Of course, the position that the agonists are attacking – one which seeks to build a stable political consensus around a few core ideals, like civil rights for all, and a minimal social welfare safety net – isn't so flimsy as to just be brushed aside. The politics of consensus and seeking common ground is a pillar of contemporary democratic society. The hope is that instead of endlessly fighting, people with different worldviews can find – and then cooperate under the auspices of – an *overlapping consensus* in their ideas about what makes for a decent society. And in the international realm, we can establish a *law of peoples*: nations with different

political cultures can peacefully coexist and respect each other's sovereignty, so long as they sustain a robust commitment to human rights. The jargon I'm using to describe these ideas comes from the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most famous American political philosopher, John Rawls, but some version of these ideas – some politics centred on the ideal of pluralistic compromise – has been espoused by nearly everyone trying to defend the hybrid system of egalitarianism and individual rights that defines post-war Western democracy.

One might imagine that our attitude to weaponisation rhetoric is going to hinge on this debate between agonists and liberals. Perhaps those of us who feel uneasy about this rhetoric are simply expressing liberalism's deeply ingrained – and arguably naïve – conflict-avoidant tendencies? Perhaps, but I think this take on things overlooks a problem that agonists and liberals alike should be worried about. Even if the agonists are justified in criticising liberalism's conflict-avoidant tendencies, nothing is gained by a mode of political conflict in which every agreement and cooperative truce has been pre-emptively sabotaged. Political negotiation – whether it involves consensus-seeking, or agonistic bargaining – cannot achieve anything unless the negotiators have some preparedness to listen and take each other seriously. If good faith is undermined to the point that everyone continually suspect their opponents of duplicity on every front, then politics is bound to become mired in a cold civil war (or worse).

To make criticisms across party lines, nowadays, is to risk lapsing into *Enlightened Centrism*, as it is sardonically called in some corners of the internet. We shouldn't posit equivalences between the hard-line left and right, in a way that serves as a *de facto* apologia for the latter. To be clear, then, let me say that it would be worse – a graver betrayal decency and justice – to defend inhumane immigration detention policies, by claiming that opposition to them is *weaponised compassion*, than to defend left-wing censorship, by complaining about a *weaponisation of free speech*. Government imprisonment of children is worse than the silencing of heterodox opinion on social media.

But the point is that it isn't a competition. Compassion and free speech are both things we should deeply care about. Both are indispensable values in a just and decent society. The real problem with the rhetoric of weaponisation is that it tends to undermine these basic commitments.

The idea that progressives have weaponised compassion, as a ploy aimed at taking and consolidating power, has bubbled up at the same time as an unwillingness, among far too many conservatives, to show a minimally decent level of compassion for people being made to suffer terribly at the hands of inhumane immigration and welfare policies. Jadedness and suspicion about the other side's appeals to compassion has lapsed into a cold-blooded unwillingness to be compassionate.

On the other side, of course it's true that free speech sometimes provides a slogan for a reactionary politics to shelter behind. And sometimes this plays out in a way

that betrays a worryingly simplistic understanding of what a free speech principle actually consists in. (Free speech *doesn't* mean that anyone is entitled to a valuable and rarefied platform – from a publisher, or a university – in order to air their unpopular opinions.) But the fact that cries of ‘free speech’ can be used and abused like this is old news. This observation is what drove the 1990s’s hottest take on free speech issues, by the American literary theorist *Stanley Fish*. The problem for many progressives is that the credible insight here – that cries of ‘free speech’ can provide a slogan for a reactionary politics to shelter behind – has given way to a far-reaching and short-sighted hostility towards free speech. This hostility lends a semblance of credibility to Peterson’s hyperbolic caricature of the left. Some people who would be appalled by the persecution of dissidents and religious minorities in authoritarian states, at the same time rationalise their own side’s censorious actions by insisting that free speech is nothing more than an alibi for bigotry. Jadedness about the other side’s appeals to free speech can slide into a failure to recognise free speech as a pillar of a just society.

The thing that I’m inviting us to worry about is that weaponisation rhetoric is hardening us to the ideals – like free speech, and compassion – that our political opponents, in their bad faith, have ‘weaponised’. Of course nothing will be gained by pretending that political discourse isn’t shot through with insincere, tactical moralising. But we should be looking for ways of responding to this which don’t, at the same time, encourage the sort of tribalism that debases our deeper perspective on what justice requires of us. If we keep insisting that our political opponents have turned some ideal into a weapon, then we will compromise our ability to see that the ideal remains – that it still makes demands on us, and has a pre-weaponised form that can be retrieved.<sup>1</sup>

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