

Why the Desire to Label Other Opinions as ‘Dumb’?

Sometimes our society needs to be reminded of an obvious truth.

We find one in Sean Blanda’s essay for *Medium* this past January. It’s title: [“The ‘Other Side’ Is Not Dumb.”](#)

As you’ve by no doubt heard or read, America is becoming increasingly polarized. This polarization brings with it a pressure to circle the wagons with one’s ideological compatriots, and dismiss those on the other side of an issue as “dumb.”

Blanda admits that there are “hateful” people who aren’t worth dialoguing with. But excluding this group, he states that there are people who represent opposing viewpoints who “do so for genuine, considered reasons.”

So why is there this tendency today to simply label those who disagree as “dumb”? Blanda claims it’s a manifestation of the “false-consensus bias”:

“In psychology, the idea that everyone is like us is called the ‘false-consensus bias.’ This bias often manifests itself when we see TV ratings (‘Who the hell are all these people that watch NCIS?’) or in politics (‘Everyone I know is for stricter gun control! Who are these backwards rubes that disagree?!’) or polls (‘Who are these people voting for Ben Carson?’).

Online it means we can be blindsided by the opinions of our friends or, more broadly, America. Over time, this morphs into a subconscious belief that we and our friends are the sane ones and that there’s a crazy ‘Other Side’ that must be

laughed at?—?an Other Side that just doesn't 'get it,' and is clearly not as intelligent as 'us.'"

I agree with Blanda that the psychological phenomenon of the false-consensus bias plays a role. Those who quickly label differing opinions as 'dumb' can also simply lack the intellectual chops to debate others.

However, I also think a form of pharisaism is at play, as well. As you may remember, the Pharisees were a faction of ancient Judaism that emphasized a strict adherence to the Jewish law and ritual purity. In the Gospels of the New Testament they are often portrayed in a negative light, as the ones who scoffed at Jesus for violating certain rules and eating and drinking with "sinners."

The Pharisaic sect of Judaism was a response to disenfranchisement. It emerged as a result of the Hellenization of Judea and the setting up of a contested priesthood in the temple. Their response was to remain "separate"—which is what the word "Pharisee" means—in order to avoid assimilation into the Hellenistic culture.

Many people in America today, too, feel disenfranchised. The traditional beliefs and bonds that formed people's identities and held communities together in the past have weakened. Confronted with this loss, there's a tendency to grasp for new markers of identity and community, whether it be a political party or ideology, or a position on climate change or gun control. "Doctrinal purity" is maintained by keeping separate from those who have differing opinions and by receiving material only from the "ritually clean" hands of those sources with whom one agrees. With the new cult of intelligence, others who disagree are not called "heretics" or "impure," but "stupid."

When confronted with disenfranchisement, this response of separation is natural. But in the world of ideas, it's not

necessarily right. And it's not intellectual. For, as John Henry Newman [reminds us](#), "The energy of the human intellect does from opposition grow." Ideas become perfected through doing battle with those who disagree.

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