

Reactance: The Psychological Phenomenon Behind the Partisan Response to Roseanne and Samantha Bee

Last week gave us yet another example of the all-too-common phenomenon of celebrity tweet-related scandals. Roseanne Barr, star of a recently revived (and subsequently canceled) self-titled sitcom, tweeted that African-American politician Valerie Jarrett was like the “Muslim Brotherhood and Planet of the Apes had a baby.” The outrage was immediate and, despite Roseanne’s apologies, ABC canceled her show in response to her racist tweet.

Just a few days later, fellow comedienne Samantha Bee, on her tv show “Full Frontal,” would similarly stick her foot in her mouth (ironically, right after mocking Roseanne) by calling Ivanka Trump a “feckless c***” and suggesting that Ivanka should influence her father’s immigration policies by attempting to seduce him.

Many people would agree that, regardless of what the consequences should or should not be, both comediennes’ statements were out of line. However, both women have seen a great deal of rather vocal support. Roseanne’s supporters claim her to be a victim of political correctness and are calling for her show to be restored to air. Meanwhile, Bee’s supporters, including actress Sally Field, have claimed that Bee was simply making a joke and that she should not be criticized for it, seeing as, to quote Field, “the ship sailed on decency” when President Trump was elected.

The defense of both comediennes’ statements does not seem to be principled in nature; it does not try to prove the

objective morality or rightness of the statements themselves. Rather, it is based almost entirely in partisan politics and “whataboutism,” and serves as an example of the psychological phenomenon of *reactance*.

Psychological Reactance

Anyone who has raised (or in my case, been) a certain kind of child is familiar with reactance, though perhaps not by that name. Reactance is the motivation to re-assert freedom, if we feel it is being threatened, by doing precisely the opposite of what we are told to do. Though often thought a childhood phenomenon, it is also prevalent in adult behavior, especially in today’s political atmosphere. The political stances and behavior of both major parties have become less about their own principles and more about opposing or “triggering” their opposition.

This is the primary danger of reactance; it is devoid of positive principle, and is, as the name would suggest, entirely reactionary. It is not about an *actual* threat to our freedom so much as it is about *who* is doing the threatening. When confronting subjects with the exact same threat, researchers [found](#) that their participants only demonstrated reactance when the threat came from someone they perceived as an “other.” If it came from someone they perceived as similar, subjects didn’t even consider it a threat. This is precisely the same sort of behavior shown with Roseanne and Samantha Bee; if they’re one of “ours,” it’s “just a joke,” but if it’s one of “theirs,” it’s offensive and ought to be punished.

Reactance vs. Autonomy

Not all resistance to authority is reactance. Psychology identifies a contrasting form of resistance called *autonomy*, which is more thoughtful, rational, and independent. Autonomy has been explicitly [identified](#) with self-governance and is

defined by careful reflection, consideration of options, and examination of personal beliefs, experience, and values when choosing whether to resist or not.

Unsurprisingly, reactance and autonomy are fundamentally separate and opposed processes with differential implications for decision-making. Simply reacting to other people is not going to produce positive outcomes because it doesn't allow us to consider the implications of our actions. Research supports this, [showing](#) that consideration of negative outcomes is enough to decrease reactance.

However, what is even more dangerous about reactance is that it is incompatible with any sort of principle-driven or, I would argue, positive behavior. You cannot create or sustain something simply by opposing something else any more than you can define something simply by saying what it isn't. Reactance makes us entirely focused on other people rather than allowing us to be introspective and act according to our own internal principle. This kind of rhetoric is damaging—not only to the reputation and image of those who use it, but to their underlying ideology—and is clearly evident in the Roseanne Barr/Samantha Bee affair.

Roseanne and Reactance

Neither Roseanne's nor Bee's defenders have brought up any sort of moral or principled defense of either comedienne. Instead, the defense has been entirely reactant, either in the form of "whataboutism" (well, what about the jokes *they* make?) or even by denying the implied offensiveness, such as those who claim that Bee's use of the "c-word" is somehow a form of feminist self-assertion or that Roseanne is simply being "politically incorrect."

When Monique Judge called Ben Carson a "monkey of the porch variety," many of the same people defending Roseanne were (justifiably) apoplectic due to the phrase's racist overtones.

However, if Judge was being racist, why should Roseanne get a pass? Perhaps because she's one of "ours" rather than one of "theirs"? The same reactance seems to be at work in those who claim Samantha Bee's use of the c-word or her encouraging Ivanka towards incest is somehow acceptable. When much milder (and yet still inappropriate) jokes were made about the Obamas, such people were outraged. Again, this would indicate that this debate is less about principle than it is about reactance.

Reactance Across the Political Sphere

Beyond how we respond to pop-culture, reactance has become a fundamental part of American political discourse. Rather than approach issues from a rational, principled, autonomous perspective, issues have instead become almost entirely defined by reactance to the opposition. If "they" are doing it, it's bad, but if "we" are doing it, it's ok! The same trade or foreign policies alternate between being acceptable and threatening depending on which party enacts them. This kind of political society is untenable and unsustainable.

We are outraged by the fiscal policy of our opponents but are sure that when "our" guy funds the same policies and organizations, he must have a reason. Rather than being based on any sort of principle, political ideology seems instead to be based on triggering the opposing side more than they trigger ours. This is textbook reactance.

Perhaps the most frightening feature of reactance is that it is, in a very real sense, a form of slavery. Reactance is concerned with perceived threats to freedom while it simultaneously harms our ability to identify what actual threats to freedom look like. It binds us to the actions of others rather than allowing us to formulate and nurture our own beliefs and ideas. Our political lives cease to be about

what is best but are instead entirely tied up in what others say and do.

This kind of political society is untenable and unsustainable. If we continue to frame every debate and disagreement, from pop-culture to politics, in the light of what “they” are doing rather than what “we” *should* be doing, then there can be little hope of preserving liberty. If we do not move beyond automatic reactance towards principled, self-governing, and autonomous resistance, then there is little hope that our underlying principles, and the society built on them, will survive.

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