

The Moral Preening of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

Six months ago, it would have seemed impossible for the press to be more addicted to someone than they are to Donald Trump. Yet Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) is clearly giving the president a run for his money. In breathless coverage that any attention-hungry celebrity would sell his own mother to achieve, the media dutifully informs us of AOC's every Twitter "[clapback](#)" and "callout."

Love her, or love to hate her, there is no doubt that AOC will continue to play a large role in our political discourse—if such a term can still adequately describe the perpetual screaming and Twitter feuding that characterize our current level of communication. For her part, AOC seems to be personally bringing about the next stage of devolution in our politics.

In the 1920s, philosopher Irving Babbitt presciently [remarked](#) that "we are living in the Meddle Ages," in that "the conscience that is felt as a still small voice and that is the basis of real justice" has been "substituted [for] a social conscience that operates rather through a megaphone. The busybody, for the first time perhaps in the history of the world, has been taken at his own estimate of himself." AOC represents the continuation of this unfortunate trend under which ordering one's own life takes a back seat to trying to order an entire society and the lives of everyone in it.

AOC is attractive to people in part because of her grandiose ideas and drive to enact them with haste. Her constant hectoring and "clap-backing" is driven by what's perceived as righteous moral anger, which often seems to place facts in the backseat. In her [own words](#), those who criticize her are "more concerned about being precisely, factually, and semantically

correct than about being morally right.” Short of a detachment from reality, it isn’t clear how one can be simultaneously factually incorrect and morally correct. One can’t help but think that AOC is channeling Rousseau’s famous line at the beginning of *The Second Discourse* where he instructs the reader to “begin by putting aside the facts, for they have no bearing on the question.”

As Babbit warned, moral emoting has come to replace actual moral results. It does not matter if AOC’s ideas don’t work; all that counts is that she has good intentions. When faced with criticism over her Green New Deal proposals, she [claimed](#) that such concerns don’t matter. At least, she argued, she’s trying to do something, and that makes her “the boss.” It doesn’t seem to occur to her that others are hesitant to propose such bold plans because they recognize that actually fixing problems, as opposed to hectoring with self-righteous indignation, is very difficult work.

Inevitably, when public moral emoting (where the actual results are irrelevant) replaces private moral action (which is evaluated on the results of said action), private disorder will reign. AOC is no exception. The fact that the public launch of her Green New Deal proposal was a calamitous disaster never made her question whether those unable to structure a public proposal might be incapable of completely restructuring the U.S. economy.

It makes sense, then, that AOC has been [accused](#) by her constituents of failing to be invested in the community she represents. Minutiae just isn’t her thing. Residents have complained about the impossibility of contacting her and her failure to participate in various community initiatives. “I thought AOC would be our savior, but that’s not the case,” said one resident. She has yet to even open an office in the Bronx, citing an inability to find office space.

Working to have graffiti removed or improve mail service is

hardly as sexy as pledging to overhaul the entire economy. Such mundane concerns don't provide the same opportunity for moral preening.

In the end, however, all the blame cannot be placed on AOC alone. Her rise to power and fame has not happened in a vacuum; it is rather the result of a process that long predates her arrival on the political scene. The classical conception of virtue being tied to one's own personal conduct has been replaced by a new morality, one in which virtue stems not from what you do, but from the extent to which you're capable of signaling virtuous thoughts and feelings.

In some ways, AOC's style captures perfectly our current predicament. Rhetoric is more important than results, and hubris in the name of virtue more admirable than the humble ordering of one's own life. However, in the end, no amount of self-righteous indignation or sick Twitter burns can overcome reality. The results of one's actions can only be ignored for so long. Hopefully, both AOC and our society recognize this before it's too late.

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