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# When Good Political Arguments Go Bad: On “Critique Drift”

It’s time to recognize that the injunction against criticizing those who self-identify as activists for social justice is a dead-end for our movement.

BY [Freddie deBoer](#)

Many in the broad online left have adopted a norm where being an ally means that you never critique people who are presumed to be speaking from your side, and especially if they are seen as speaking from a position of greater oppression.

I have had the opportunity to meet a lot of engineers in my days attending an engineering school. A couple years back, a friend of mine who is also an academic was visiting from her institution. (I have gotten her permission to tell this story, with the caveat that I admit that I am a rogue and a ne’er-do-well. So admitted.) We had a conversation with a civil engineer who is a friend of a friend. A white male himself, he told us of a recent eight-month trip he had taken to western Africa, in which he had helped build a bridge. He spoke glowingly of his trip, and of the people he had seen and worked with and how gratified he was to help.

Later on in the evening, my friend complained about him and his story. She rolled her eyes at his [“voluntourism,”](#) complained of all the imperialist overtones, and compared him to white college kids who take [Facebook profile pics with beaming African children](#). Other than to say that voluntourism seemed like the wrong critique, given that he was paid for his efforts, I let it

go. Though we were and are friends, I knew that there was little benefit to disputing her critique, and high potential risk.

Still, in my head, I did my own eye rolling. Yes, voluntourism is a thing, and there was more than a little wince-inducing language in the way he told his story. It's not like I didn't understand where this was coming from at all. But... dude *built a bridge*. For a community that had been trying to get it done for years. It made it easier for them to access hospitals and schools. It was a worthy project that genuinely helped a community that had asked for some and, however poorly he may have expressed himself, he deserved to feel pride and to share that feeling.

What my friend was guilty of, in my estimation, is a phenomenon I've seen more and more, which I call critique drift. Critique drift is the phenomenon in which a particular critical political lens that correctly identifies a problem gets generalized and used less and less specifically over time. This in turn blunts the force of the critique and ultimately fuels a backlash against it. Critique drift is a way that good political arguments go bad.

So my friend here used a term that reflects a real phenomenon (voluntourism) which has been used to good effect in the past but which has, over time, become less effective thanks to overgeneralizing it and treating it as a [magic word](#). This general trend has become a remarkable problem for the Left, particularly in online spaces, where the sheer volume of engagement threatens to produce critique drift even among those who use language carefully.

Very obvious examples of critique drift include the term "mansplaining," "tone policing," and "gaslighting." Each highlights real phenomena: men who condescendingly explain things to women who know more than they do about the subject at hand; people using critiques of tone as a way to dismiss or avoid the substance of the argument; the tendency to try to make someone feel crazy as a way to win an argument. All of those are real.

But the actual communicative, rhetorical and analytical value of each has been severely undermined, in my view, by the way in which they are now applied to more and more situations, or to instances where the standards for meeting these simply haven't been met. Political critique draws power from specificity, but the presumed social force of using certain terms inevitably leads to their watering down. It's a real problem.

Or consider the trigger warning. Trigger warnings were initially endorsed specifically for the good of those who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, a specific and potentially debilitating medical issue that afflicts a very small percentage of people. Triggers were not broad categories of potential offense that provoked vague feelings of discomfort, but very specific situations that resulted in deeply painful experiences that stemmed from narrowly-defined traumatic episodes.

Now, triggers are everywhere, lurking behind every corner, endorsed by people in all manner of situations for all manner of reasons, and subject to appropriation by those who would use them for cynical ends—such as the students at other institutions my academic friends tell me about, who use talk of triggers as an all-encompassing excuse to get out of doing work or experiencing viewpoints they don't like. Some of the most privileged college students in the world now feel no compunction against invoking triggers at any time they find it convenient. Anyone who questions whether they actually deserve to invoke that claim, meanwhile, is regarded as inherently a bad ally and bad person. This, in turn, compels some people to think that all talk of triggers and trigger warnings is academic lefty bullshit that leaves us unable to educate, unable to ever bring students to encounter any remotely challenging or controversial opinions, and makes conservative backlash that much more likely. This is classic critique drift.

I have occasionally been surprised to meet people who think that I don't believe, for example, that mansplaining or tone policing are real, or even worse that I don't think privilege is real. Of course I think those things are real. They're real and pernicious and have to be accounted for. But I find myself arguing against their particular use in so many instances because they're often employed in a sloppy, unhelpful, or dishonest way. Worse, even pointing out that they've been employed in a sloppy, unhelpful or dishonest way is treated as absolutely anathema by a very vocal and influential part of the online left. That's bad in and of itself, and it fuels backlash.

It also hampers our ability to meaningfully spread the critique. I've been asked point blank on many occasions how one can know when a disagreement coming from a man becomes mansplaining. On an intellectual, theoretical level, I absolutely believe there's an important difference. In the realm of actual practice? At this point, I'm not sure there is any such definition, because the term is so often used as a meaningless intensifier or petty insult. Likewise, I absolutely believe that tone policing is a real and troubling phenomenon, and that there's a space between doing that and doing the kind of inevitable and necessary criticism of tactics and language that any political movement needs. But in the actual scrum of online political argument, "tone policing" now seems to mean nothing but "criticism of my argument that I don't like." That's critique drift.

As Douglas Williams of [the South Lawn](#) has pointed out, even the terms of social justice politics that seem to be employed in the most unhelpful ways often spring from smart, perceptive places. Privilege theory and intersectionality are the perfect example. Both contain trenchant critiques, but also a complex and careful set of limitations and guidelines that agitate against using those critiques frivolously. But only the acidity of the critique tends to be preserved, not the care or limitation. In thinkpieces about privilege, I find, people are quick to say that you can enjoy privileges and still be oppressed, or impoverished, or otherwise suffer. But those caveats tend to drain away in the actual argumentative forum.

Take [this piece](#) on straight white male as being the lowest "difficulty setting" in the video game of life by John Scalzi, a sci-fi writer who has earned a lot of attention as a champion of social justice. It's funny and effective, and the analogy strikes me as largely correct. And Scalzi includes the necessary caveat that you can choose the lowest difficulty setting and still get unlucky and still suffer and still deserve help.

But when someone learns about privilege from this framing, do they then turn around and remember that key element? My experience tells me that they don't; when people argue politics with these terms, they very rarely hold on to the qualifications and instead use only the weaponized critique. Indeed, Scalzi himself rarely seems to stop to remind people of those qualifications when he is waging political war online. And why would he? He is rewarded for being as acid in his critique as possible, not by being understanding and magnanimous. In these online spaces, viciousness trumps specificity and care.

This all largely descends from a related condition: many in the broad online left have adopted a norm where being an ally means that you never critique people who are presumed to be speaking from your side, and especially if they are seen as speaking from a position of greater oppression. I understand the need for solidarity, I understand the problem of undermining and derailing, and I recognize why people feel strongly that those who have traditionally been silenced should be given a position of privilege in our conversations. But critique drift demonstrates why a healthy, functioning political movement can't forbid tactical criticism of those with whom you largely agree. Because critical vocabulary and political arguments are common intellectual property which gain or lose power based on their communal use, never criticizing those who misuse them ultimately disarms the Left. Refusing to say "this is a real thing, but you are not being fair or helpful in making that accusation right now" alienates

potential allies, contributes to the burgeoning backlash against social justice politics, and prevents us from making the most accurate, cogent critique possible.

I find myself, more and more often, in the useless position of defending particular critiques in the general while having to admit that a particular instance of it is cheap or unfair or just wrong. I also find myself constantly having to tell people that I do in fact believe in a given critique, because denying that a particular application of that critique is correct does not in any way mean that I deny its salience in general. Both of these things amount to wasted time and energy, precisely the kind of wasted time and energy that the online left appears to be drowning in right now. Like so many others, I am exhausted by the need to constantly assert the sincerity of my views because I refuse to engage in the useless signaling that is so much a part of current social justice culture.

And you can imagine the immediate rejoinder to this post: just more of the same of what I'm criticizing. "You're mansplaining politics, you're tone policing, you're gaslighting." That's exactly the problem: Every critique of this type of engagement can simply be ground up in more of the same.

I am far from alone in thinking that the way in which we are prosecuting this immensely important set of arguments is unhealthy and unhelpful. As someone who has been making this type of argument for a long time, I attract a lot of communications from people who feel strongly about the need to pursue social justice but who feel that the social justice movement has lost its way. (A *lot* of people.) These people are not enemies of the fight for equality and justice; in fact, they reach out precisely because they think current tactics are impediment to the achievement of actual equality and justice. Many of them are afraid to be public with those feelings, because they fear reprisals from those who enforce a very narrow, cliquey vision of progressive politics.

Well: we have been talking about privilege for 30 years. We've been talking about intersectionality for 25. We're still here in this unjust world. It's time to recognize that the injunction against criticizing those who self-identify as activists for social justice is a dead-end for our movement. While the work of counseling others to be more specific, fair and self-critical in their engagement is uncomfortable, fraught work, it is also profoundly necessary, and I see no possible alternative if the Left is to wage a campaign against injustice that can actually win.

## ABOUT THIS AUTHOR

Freddie deBoer is a graduate student at Purdue University. He blogs at [fredrikdeboer.com](http://fredrikdeboer.com).

[More information about Freddie deBoer](#)