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Taking Responsibility

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Taking Responsibility

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Comments

This is Carolyn Marvin's rebuttal to John Durham Peters's response to her critical review of his book *Courting the Abyss*.

Taking Responsibility

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I thank John Peters for his gracious response to my assessment of *Courting the Abyss*, especially since he correctly notes that "abyss walkers" was my locution, conflating abyss artists (an ironic putdown) and abyss redeemers (their "enablers"). I do think the image nicely covers them both, but I regret the misattribution.

Peters says I misread a critique that is meant to be narrowly directed to the ethics of a tradition whose ideals he admires. He adds that ethics and politics are not the same thing. Maybe so, but ethics are unrealizable unless they are translated into practical structures of action, in this case, the law. To "urgently" reconstruct liberal ethics is to undertake a far-reaching transformation needing a good deal more explication than Peters offers about how limits on expression would look different in his re-jiggered ethical regime. In practical terms, he never really tells us what he has in mind.

He also believes I fault him for not writing a history of civil liberties, which he wasn't trying to do. My concern was less specific than that but it is historical. To argue theoretically about liberalism is often illuminating, but it's largely a fight to the draw. Liberalism is *both* harsh and compassionate; with its ethic of self-correction it leaves space for human weakness and fallibility, *and* it acts as its own referee.

To break out of that stalemate, a valid assessment of liberalism must consider the extent to which it has advanced democratic equality. Peters put this historical question aside. It's no real trick then to frame examples that make liberalism look mostly mean and 'outrage' mostly irresponsible. But this is polemic, not analysis. Peters' self-imposed historical moratorium is selective as well. He puts an impressive collection of historical thinkers on display (scrutinizing the rhetoric of Supreme Court justices more than the consequences of their opinions, for example) but the folks in the streets are not on his radar. The point isn't to slight philosophers or romanticize protesters but to grasp how both have shaped modern liberalism. Ground level outrageous expression (so called) by dissenters helped further the dignity and equality of citizens' lives profoundly in the 20th century. One would not know this from *Courting the Abyss*, and knowing it challenges the tilted picture Peters draws of reckless and insensitive elites trampling the wounded sensibilities of ordinary, decent people.

Peters professes no desire to roll back civil liberties and firmly takes censorship off the table. He also wants liberalism not to "discriminate against the tender minded or against those who have genuine problems with modernity" and build a world where "secular reason is not the exclusive common language." I'm not sure what it means to discriminate against the tender-minded; we're all tender-minded about something. The struggle for a right not to be offended is an old fight. It may yet win the day. But specifics have to propel an argument forward that strives to be more than a heartfelt plea for us to be as considerate with each other as possible. We suffer bigots and others who offend because, among other

things, the adoption of laws that protect minorities are legitimized in democratic societies by hearing all that can be said on the other side across the broad spectrum of public talk. This includes the proposition, however misguided it may seem, that Islam sponsors terrorism, to reference the Danish cartoons.

Then there's Andres Serrano, whom Peters accuses of bad faith for asking why urine should offend. It's a good question. I wish he had entertained it instead of impugning Serrano's motives. The image of a divine savior soaked in urine occasions some reflection on the original outrage of Christianity. When Rome rendered Jesus spectacularly and shamefully abject, his followers promptly deified him. Here is abyss artistry in high heroic mode. It suggests the radical instability of outrage and its power to expand dignity and equality (and yes, the stuff that's not as nice), lessons I believe *Courting the Abyss*, for all its fine and worthwhile commentary, does not fully engage. Are John Peters and I are on the same team? We might have different interpretations of the rules, but I think we both love the game. That's certainly enough for me.