

New Public Thinking

Towards a better public conversation

On Engagement

February 25th, 2011 → 5:31 pm @ **Keith Kahn-Harris**

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Without anyone really noticing, the term 'engagement' seems to be on the way to becoming ubiquitous in public discourse. One recent manifestation of this was a recent report on campus extremism by UK university vice-chancellors that suggested that universities should 'engage with, rather than proscribe' extreme views on campus. The report's call for engagement was fiercely rejected by some and welcomed by others. Indeed, the question of extremism, particularly Islamic extremism, is the issue around which issues of engagement are most strongly debated. The Obama administration's attempts to engage with Iran are deeply controversial, for example.

What is this thing called engagement? There is a paradox here: engagement is a vague term (maybe even deliberately so) that points towards an unspecified form of interaction. But it is treated by its opponents as if it were clear what it meant. What engagement with extremists on campus actually means appears to be some sort of debate, discussion and challenge, whose nature is yet to be decided. For those who oppose it though, engagement with extremists means a process that confers legitimacy on those who should be utterly shunned.

The stronger meaning of engagement can be found in its use in combative contexts. Soldiers 'engage' an enemy in a firefight. Two UK groups that are often on opposing sides call themselves Engage: one a group combating leftwing antisemitism, the other a group encouraging Muslim campaigning in the public sphere. For both groups, to engage is to fight for a particular point of view. This may not seem too far away from the vice-chancellor's view of engagement as interaction and debate, but in practice the emphasis on combat makes them very different.

So engagement is always a form of interaction, but its use ranges from a kind of interaction that aims to defeat an opponent through force of argument, to a more open-ended form of communication that, while it does not (as its opponents claim) necessarily confer approval, nevertheless upholds the other as a worthy interlocutor. Most people would probably agree that there is a place for both kinds of engagement. The debate about engagement focuses on *who* to engage and *how* to engage with them. In actual fact then, those who believe extremists should have no place on campus and those who believe in engaging with them, are both arguing for a form of engagement: one for an engagement that will neutralise an enemy, the other for an engagement with an enemy as someone who can and should be communicated with.

At stake here are different views of what communication can achieve. Those who believe in engaging with extremism within debates feel that free communication and interaction can undermine extremism, whereas those who reject such engagement are much more pessimistic about the possibilities of communication. One can perhaps see this as a clash between two facets of enlightenment thinking: one a belief in rational discussion within public spheres as a good, the other an assertive attempt to propagate truth through marginalising the irrational other. In one view, the Islamic extremist can be joined as a partner in rational discussion, in the other their irredeemable irrationality requires a defensive action to preserve the possibility of rationality. This distinction may, it is true, elide some of the nuances in debates about engagement, but the central problematic of the debate remains: how do we communicate with those who threaten communication itself?

Perhaps part of the problem with debates about engagement is that there is an explicit or implicit assumption by many protagonists that engagement is a public matter. That is, in the enlightenment tradition, debate should occur in the public sphere in which different ideas will encounter each other and (hopefully) result in some kind of resolution and forward motion. As post-enlightenment critics, particularly feminists, have pointed out, the enlightenment ignorance and denigration of the private sphere is one of its key weaknesses. Politics is not simply a public matter and the workings of power extend into the private realm, where they require political contestation.

It is through a revalorisation of the private that new approaches can be found to the problem of engagement. Although public debates sometimes live up to the enlightenment ideal, they all too frequently do not. The public sphere is all too frequently simply a repository of reiterated, fixed opinions, declaimed with much passion but little civility. Public debates with extremists will rarely result in a meeting of minds and even more rarely with the 'defeat' of the extremist side. Force of argument is no guarantee of victory (whatever that may mean). And if the belief in engagement with extremists is often naive, then so are the beliefs of proponents of more aggressive forms of engagement. Those who wish to drive extremists from

public events on campuses and other spaces all too often have an equally naive faith in the power of exclusion. Preventing someone from speaking does not kill their ideas or even undermine their support; in fact a sense of persecution can result in increased sympathy.

In contrast, private engagement may well have more far-reaching effects than whatever form of public engagement. In meetings behind closed doors and off the record, the stakes are lower and the risk of public humiliation disappears. Free from the need to maintain one's public position, the possibility of real engagement opens up – engagement based on careful listening to each other and sharing one's deeper emotions and concerns. That is not to say that private engagement is always a productive process or that it is always transformational. But the possibilities are there.

The value of private engagement is one of the lessons of those involved in inter-faith dialogue and in conflict resolution. This kind of work rarely goes on in public; it occurs quietly without the pressures of disclosure. A conflict resolution facilitator that I know tells me that behind closed doors, members of Islamist groups often have much more nuanced views than they express in public. That isn't to say that in private everyone is a liberal, but at the very least private engagement can lead to a proper understanding of the other. Even if you want to defeat the other's views, knowing what they are is a better starting point than tilting at the windmills of public stances.

Engagement is likely to remain a popular term and a heavily contested one. Changing the terms of the debate, creating a new meaning to engagement, is one way of injecting some clarity into an often hopelessly obscure situation. Here we may find inspiration from the etymology of the term, which derives from the idea of pledging and binding together, as in the contemporary sense of engagement as a prelude to marriage. Engagement can be a pledge, not to agree or approve of each other, but to acknowledge each other's common humanity through a process of meeting.

5 Comments → “On Engagement”

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1 week ago

[...] This post was mentioned on Twitter by Dougald Hine, Keith Kahn-Harris. Keith Kahn-Harris said: New essay of mine published on @NewPubThink 'On Engagement' – <http://bit.ly/ePG4Xp> [...]

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Antonio Dias

1 week ago

Thank you for running through the “public” meanings attached to the term engagement. As you begin to acknowledge in your conclusion, I find it most useful to look at engagement as the actual process we undertake when we activate an intention to interact with our world. The more aware we can be of the struggle involved within us, and between us and our perceptions, the more humility we are willing to bring to these other outward forms of engagement. Humility begins to be seen as a useful attitude not merely a platitudinous “virtue.” This is implicit in what you refer to as “private.” It's an attitude aimed at how we ground and place ourselves as we enter into any interaction with any one or any thing.

The acknowledgement you refer to, an acknowledgement of our own vulnerability and our need to cohabit convivially, is the basis of engagement. It calls any assumptions like the ones you ascribe to liberals, or authoritarians, into question by the very nature of our attitude towards engagement itself when we begin to see it as an internal process based on a conviction that to sidestep a probing internalized skepticism would be folly. It places much of what was traditionally held as an external adversarial relationship between parties arguing various positions and locates an internal component by which we are as willing to doubt and mistrust our own constructions, considering them as potentially flawed, as we are with those of our “opponents.”

It strikes me that the whole edifice of adversarial argument is a form of “trial by combat” in which we expect the gods to favor the side that is right and in which we hold little responsibility for policing our own misperceptions, biases, and obfuscations. In the end this just allows the more powerful – at any given moment – to dominate and does nothing to help anyone hone a more useful form of interaction with our surroundings. This takes what could be an incremental process of behavioral evolution and throws us back on the outcome of a rougher justice within the parameters of physical biological evolution, if in our unwillingness to look beyond our “battles” with our “enemies” we ignore the accumulation of factors that will destroy us all.

I see the growing interest in engagement as a sign of interest in building more mature relationships. In a way, this echoes the sense of an engagement as “the prelude to marriage.” The difference between the rough and tumble of disengaged interaction, and the ways in which we approach each other within an “engagement,” is based on the declaration of a bond between parties and an acknowledgement of the need to arrive at some form of livable mutuality. These are precisely the attitudes and declarations we need to begin to make with each other on a broader scale and with our wider world.

[Reply](#)

Keith Kahn-Harris

1 week ago

Many thanks Antonio for your thoughtful response. I don't have much to add to it as I agree with it! I note that in your 'about me' section of your website you use the term 'engage'.

[Reply](#)

Andrew Taggart

1 week ago

Thanks, Keith, for writing such a nuanced piece. A great contribution to public discourse. As I was reading it, 3 thoughts came to mind.

1. What would a sociological/historical account look like that explained the terminological shift from "commitment" to "engagement"?
2. With regard to public discourse: Would some "thick understanding" of civility be sufficient to make genuine public engagement possible? I don't know, and that may just leave us with a 2nd order question—namely, what is civility, and can it be learned?
3. You speak highly of private engagement. This leaves room—very loosely understood—for a therapeutic conception of philosophy grounded in friendship. Whence the question: How can philosophy be therapeutic, loosely understood, and what is the nature of friendship?

Again, fine essay. Thanks.

[Reply](#)

Keith Kahn-Harris

1 week ago

Thanks Andrew. Those are tough questions/comments! I'll have a go at responding:

- 1) I am really intrigued by your counterposing commitment and engagement. It may be a fruitful way of thinking through the concepts. However I'm not sure whether it applies to the empirical case discussed in my essay, in the sense that engagement doesn't seem to be a replacement for commitment in the kind of discourse I'm discussing.
- 2) I'm currently struggling with how to understand civility. For me, the sense that works best is actually a minimal definition of civility: be polite, don't be shrill etc. More substantial definitions of civility can work as an ideal but tend to be impossible to put into practice.
- 3) That one I'll leave to philosophers like yourself!

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