

On the Culture of Debate

The society of indignation and its friends

by Prof. Jan Roy Edlund*



Jan Roy Edlund.
(Picture ma)

(CH-S) The article on the culture of debate, published in June this year, remains highly topical. It analyses the now widespread fear of expressing one's opinion in public and seeks a way back to the practice of free debate.

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Charlie Kirk's death, Roger Köppel at the University of Zurich, self-criticism at Yale. Three events that reveal one thing: the open society has forgotten how to debate. An analysis of the mechanisms behind this – and an attempt to find a way back.

Two events, two settings, one common pattern

Twenty years ago, nobody would have thought it possible that things would have come to this. On 20 May 2026, Roger Köppel, publisher of the "Weltwoche", stood in front of the main building of the University of Zurich, beneath a white tent, holding a microphone. His format replicates what the American activist Charlie Kirk – who was murdered in September 2025 – practised at US universities: open debate in the open air. What used to take place as a matter of course in lecture theatres now must be moved outside the building, under police protection, with a marquee and barriers. For an hour and a half, students spoke, some offering nuanced views, others being provocative. Meanwhile, a dozen masked Antifa demonstrators were ready with whistles, chants and "Züri Nazifrei" slogans. Whenever Köppel replied, the din of the mob drowned out his words. Anyone who wanted to speak had to shout. Anyone who wanted to argue was shouted down with slogans – even the students.

Two days later, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* published Benedict Neff's analysis, "Academy of In-



In Switzerland: Roger Köppel addressing interested listeners and demonstrators outside the University of Zurich on 20 May 2026. (Picture keystone)

tolerance" (22 May 2026), which, drawing on the latest *Yale report*, describes the state of Western universities: an ideological narrowing that has long since made conservatives, liberals and even nuanced left-wingers afraid to speak up in seminars. Two events, two settings, one common pattern.

This issue raises questions that extend far beyond this day. What characterises a society in which even educated people are afraid to speak out in seminars and in public? What mechanisms keep this narrowing of perspectives going? And is there a way back to the practice of free debate?

The nature of the "indignation industry"

Anyone who expresses an opinion today that deviates from the majority consensus experiences a calibrated sequence of social reactions. First, the look of disbelief. Then the sharp retort. And finally, the moral accusation, often in the form of a diagnosis: racist, sexist, populist, conspiratorial, transphobic, anti-American, anti-Semitic – depending on the nature of the topic. What does not take place is a rebuttal. A rebuttal would involve engaging with the argument. It is the most demanding form of dialogue, for it requires the argument to be examined first before it is rejected.

The culture of outrage has largely replaced this process. Categorisation has taken the place of rebuttal. Anyone who says A belongs to B. Anyone who belongs to B can be identified with

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C. Anyone who is C has no right to express their opinion, as this is classified as morally wrong per se. Anyone who is C and dares to express this opinion nonetheless is already a bad person. The whole process takes a few seconds and spares the classifier any effort. Facts or arguments play no part.

Anyone who refuses to play along with this game of outrage, who listens to others and thinks critically, finds themselves under suspicion of being on the morally wrong side. This mechanism can be described as “outrage management” – a system in which moral accusations are used as a resource to direct attention, discipline factions and silence speakers.

Liberalism and its enemies

The impact can be calculated. An *Allensbach survey* commissioned by the “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung” in autumn 2025 found that 44 per cent of Germans believe one must be cautious with political statements today. Only 46 per cent still believe that one can express one’s opinion freely. Thomas Petersen, who led the study, puts it this way: “Many people feel that, in theory, you are allowed to say anything, but in practice you cannot say everything without risking negative consequences.” This is not state censorship. It is something far more potent: social pressure that narrows the scope of what can be said in advance or makes it impossible to say at all.

A second, more recent Allensbach study provides the punchline. When asked about their tolerance towards other opinions, 28 per cent of Green Party supporters stated that they often get upset when someone takes a different stance. Among AfD voters, the figure stood at 24 per cent. Among CDU and SPD supporters, by contrast, it was around 19 and 18 per cent respectively. Furthermore, people with higher educational qualifications are more intolerant than those with basic or intermediate education. This is the most uncomfortable finding of this survey. Education does not protect against intolerance. It breeds it, insofar as it is interpreted as a claim to moral superiority.

How things could have come to this

An open society that practises debate has historically been the exception, not the rule. For millennia, public discourse was a privilege of the elites – and often a dangerous one. *Socrates* was executed, *Galileo* was silenced, and *Spinoza*

was excommunicated. The hard-won achievements of the Enlightenment – freedom of the press and parliamentary democracy – were designed to create a space in which unpopular views could be expressed without risk to one’s very existence. This space is a cultural construct, not a natural situation. If it is not defended, it will disappear.

In West Germany, this space for discourse was redeveloped after 1945 at considerable effort. The intellectual debates of the 1950s and 1960s – the disputes over rearmament, emergency laws and Ostpolitik – were conducted in a harsh tone, but with disciplined procedure. *Helmut Schmidt* and *Franz Josef Strauss* could contradict one another on talk shows without the audience regarding the other as a criminal. The situation was similar in Switzerland. The *SonntagsTalk* was a forum for argument and counterargument, not a moral inquisition.

The 1968 revolution and its consequences – reflection frowned upon, criticism unwelcome

The first upheaval in this sphere of discourse came from the left and originated in the universities. *Rudi Dutschke*, the figurehead of the West German student movement, formulated the strategy of the “march through the institutions” in 1967: not to storm parliament, but to take over universities, schools, editorial offices and administrative bodies from within. From the *Socialist German Students’ Union* (SDS) and the university sit-ins in Frankfurt and West Berlin emerged an entire generation that sought not to refute the bourgeoisie, but to expose it.

The *Red Army Faction* broke away from the radical fringe and, from 1970 onwards, waged a bloody campaign of left-wing terrorism in Germany against bankers (*Herrhausen*), industrialists (*Schleyer*) and the judiciary (*Buback*). The victims were not chosen as individuals, but as symbols.

Herrhausen, of all people a reformer who publicly advocated debt relief for developing countries. What he thought was irrelevant to the perpetrators. What he represented made him a target. The majority of the ‘68ers did not go down this path. But the method by which the movement morally discredited those who thought differently – “fascist”, “defender of the system”, “reactionary” – became a permanent tool. It outlived the movement and returned, five decades later, to the universities from which it had once originated.

What had been a creeping process in the 1980s and 1990s accelerated dramatically after the turn of the millennium. It took a quantum leap with the advent of social media and the smartphone era. Three developments converged here:

- Firstly, the shift of discourse to the digital sphere, where every emotional escalation is rewarded by algorithms.
- Secondly, the infusing of politics with moral identity markers, which redefined every substantive dispute as a question of good versus evil.
- Thirdly, the abandonment of objectivity by many leading media outlets, which, instead of presenting a balanced comparison of arguments, took it upon themselves to categorise positions.

Trump buries the doctrine of structural discrimination

This third development has given rise to a scandal which, remarkably, has received hardly any coverage in Germany's leading media outlets. In early 2019, a confidential ARD strategy paper was leaked to the public: the "Framing Manual" by the Berkeley linguist *Elisabeth Wehling* (commissioned in 2017).

Strictly speaking, it was a PR report, not an editorial handbook. But its content was a guide to manipulating the audience. It recommended referring to the "broadcasting licence fee" as a "contribution to democratic self-financing". It proposed linguistic rules designed to portray critics of public service broadcasters as sympathisers of authoritarian systems. It revealed a way of thinking that had long since gone beyond the subliminal influence strategies of advertising agencies: the assumption that the audience must be steered via "moral frames", not through arguments and certainly not via facts.

Anyone who read it understood: talk show presenters, newsreaders on "Tagesthemen", and magazine editors had long since become agents of a control practice designed not to inform the audience, but to shape it.

What Benedict Neff calls "attitude journalism" is the journalistic application of the same principle. One opinion is deemed legitimate, whilst the other is "framed" – labelled, for example, as racist, sexist or conspiratorial. It therefore need not even be heard in the first place. The presenter's leading question, the rhetorical



*The 1968 university protests paved the way for a dictatorial "culture of outrage".
(Picture <https://geschichtsbuch.hamburg.de>)*

corner into which the unwelcome guest is driven, the use of "guilt by association" as a means of disqualification – all of this is now part of the standard repertoire of German and Swiss television debates: "Don't you agree that this statement made by your party colleague five years ago is morally reprehensible?" Anyone who fails to distance themselves is complicit.

Anyone who distances themselves has betrayed their own camp. This is how the school of prejudice operates, discreetly staged in the main news programmes.

The real drama of this shift is not merely that it educates, patronises and manipulates its audience, but that it programmes them in the long term. Anyone who has spent years reading, hearing and seeing that the other side must not be refuted through reasoned argument, but merely delegitimised, adopts this practice on a smaller scale. In technical jargon, this is known as imitative learning. At the local pub. In family chat groups. In the *WhatsApp* group. An entire generation has never seen anything other than this reflexive, emotional framing in journalism. How could they possibly know how a constructive debate works?

The mechanics behind it

The symptoms are one thing. The question of why the mechanics work so seamlessly is another. Why does it work so reliably on us humans? And how did it manage to establish itself as the new standard across the board?

Three layers interlock: a psychological one, a media-technical one and a political-cultural one.

(1) The psychological layer

The psychological layer was revealed by the social psychologist *Solomon Asch* in 1951 in the famous *Asch conformity* experiments. Student subjects were asked to judge the length of lines

on blackboards – a trivial task. However, eight of the nine participants had been instructed beforehand to deliberately give the wrong answer to certain questions. The question was: how would the one “genuine” participant behave?

The results showed that they regularly went along with the group’s incorrect statement. So, rather than courageously pointing out that the lines were obviously different, the participant conformed to the group’s false consensus. This same effect was confirmed in every repetition: some of Asch’s participants adjusted not only their answers but also their perceptions – a finding that *Festinger* described a few years later as “cognitive dissonance”.

Asch was also able to achieve a similar effect with entire groups. In doing so, he did not describe a weakness of this or that generation. He uncovered an anthropological constant. Conformity is not a character flaw, but a survival mechanism. In the Stone Age, anyone excluded from the clan was as good as dead. To this day, the brain distinguishes only vaguely between the biological and the social forms of this death.

Nowadays, nobody is publicly hanged in the market square any more. But they are shunned, ignored, sidelined at work, and excluded from their circle of friends. For a mammal whose nervous system has not undergone any significant changes in the last 50,000 years, social ostracism has a similar effect.

(2) *The media-technological layer*

The second layer is media-technological. It is often invoked but rarely described with precision. It boils down to the simple economic fact that attention is a scarce resource, and media platforms make money from it. Whatever captures attention wins. Whatever invites reflection loses. Empirical evidence shows that a pointed, emotional statement by an angry person generates greater reach on social media than the nuanced analysis of an expert. Scandal trumps statistics. Outrage trumps nuance. By a long way. This is no conspiracy by the platforms. It is simply what the algorithms measure and reward, and what is repeated millions of times a day in a repetitive, endless loop. It is the economic basis of the “outrage industry”. Platforms and the media profit from it; political actors exploit it.

Added to this are pace and behavioural conditioning: on a smartphone, people scroll, swipe and tap their way through content. The average attention span of a *TikTok* user is around eight

seconds per post. Anything that takes longer is skipped. In this environment, it is the emotionally instantaneous – the slogan, the image, the shock – that wins out. The argument stands no chance, because it requires build-up, background, context and time. An entire generation is therefore growing up in an environment that structurally disadvantages and excludes reasoned argument. Those socialised in this way have not simply forgotten how to argue. They have never learnt it in the first place.

(3) *The political-cultural layer*

The third layer is political-cultural. On top of the first two layers, a division of the world into two polarised camps flourishes. With every major issue of recent years, the starting point was not the question: What do we know? What are the facts? What considerations need to be weighed up? What is the background? But rather: Which side are you on? *Trump*? Good or evil. Covid-19? Showing solidarity or anti-constitutional. Ukraine? Democrat or *Putin* sympathiser. Israel–Gaza? Anti-Semite or apartheid denier. Gender? Progressive or transphobic.

This categorisation is no accident. Whilst in the 1980s the morning paper and the *Tagesschau* were enough to keep us informed, today we live in a world where we are confronted on a daily basis with a flood of information amounting to millions of pieces. Yet our lives are shaped by work, family and our next holiday.

Most people simply do not have the resources for extensive research, for spending hours listening, scrutinising and weighing up the facts. Categorisation is the easy way out here. It saves cognitive energy. You no longer have to laboriously work out for yourself what is “right and wrong”: it is already provided, dressed up as “morality”. Those who wear the right label belong. Those who do not are categorised. In this game, differentiation is not a virtue but a cause for suspicion. Anyone who says “it’s more complicated” when discussing a morally charged topic is, as a rule, immediately counted among the opposition. Anyone who says “but” within their own camp has already half left it. Reflection and questioning are viewed with suspicion. Labelling and going along with the crowd are met with approval.

A small experiment

At this point, allow me to conduct a small experiment in self-observation. What follows is a review of the past one and a half decades at elite

Western universities. Depending on one's political stance, it will trigger one or other reflex of indignation in the next paragraph or the one after: the need to reject, to categorise, to sort out the author himself. It is worth observing this reflex rather than giving in to it.

It would be a mistake to limit the diagnosis made here to one political side. Pressure to conform is structural, not partisan. It operates wherever one side happens to hold the majority. Over the past one and a half decades, this majority at Western elite universities has been held by the progressive camp. What has taken place there amounts to an institutional takeover. The latest *Yale report* from April 2026 documents the extent of this: 82 per cent of professors are Democrats, 2 per cent Republicans; a ratio of 36 to 1. In the humanities, the ratio is as high as 72 to 1. Nearly a third of students no longer dare to express their own political views on campus.

This institutional takeover is the distant, fully-fledged heir to the "March through the Institutions". The battle cries of the '68 generation were not archived but reactivated and extended to encompass a whole new generation. Anyone who does not fit into the camp today is labelled transphobic, a Nazi, misogynist, racist, a coloniser, white-privileged, anti-Semitic, a climate denier, a conspiracy theorist or simply "right-wing". The list is constantly growing; new terms are added with every season. What has remained the same is the function. Anyone bearing one of these labels has no place in the conversation.

The theoretical framework was provided by a series of interlinked schools of thought: postcolonial theory; "Critical Race Theory" with its concept of systemic racism; gender studies, with its deconstruction of biological gender categories; queer theory; and intersectionality theory. What united them was the assumption of a pervasive structure of oppression within Western society. Every position had to be scrutinised to determine whether it supported this unjust structure or helped to overthrow it. Anyone who did not actively participate was already part of the problem. A neutral, analytical, procedural stance had no place within this framework.

Intersectionality formed the operational core. It elevates identity to a moral hierarchy by situating every person along multiple axes of oppression – race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion – and deriving from this a sort of points system of moral weight.



The murdered Charlie Kirk reopened the dialogue at US universities. (Picture www.economist.com)

The more axes that are deemed "oppressed", the higher one's rank in the hierarchy of credibility. According to this logic, a Black, queer, disabled woman speaks with "disproportionately" greater legitimacy than a white, heterosexual, able-bodied man, whose statement is immediately relativised or dismissed as an expression of his privilege. Arguments are no longer scrutinised but measured against the speaker's position in the "privilege maths".

Institutional implementation took place via DEI (*Diversity, Equity and Inclusion*). DEI offices became central administrative units, DEI statements a prerequisite for appointments, and bias training for compulsory staff measure. Pronoun requirements became grounds for disciplinary action; microaggressions became accusations capable of paralysing courses; "safe spaces" became a mandatory institutional requirement; and "trigger warnings" became the curricular norm.

Anyone who failed to comply with the requirements risked disciplinary proceedings and exclusion. Self-identification became the unquestionable ultimate criterion, including configurations that lay beyond the bounds of biological and social plausibility. Anyone who voiced doubts was deemed a threat to those in need of protection—people with wounded identities—whom the system promised to defend.

At the discursive level, a vocabulary of immediate disqualification was cultivated. Anyone who adhered to two biological gender categories was transphobic. Anyone who viewed migration critically was racist. Anyone who analysed Israeli security policy was anti-Semitic or an apologist for apartheid. Anyone who questioned women's quotas was sexist. Anyone who did not view the police primarily as an organ of repression was covering up structural violence. Anyone who did not identify capitalism as the root of

all evil was a bigwig, a corporate lackey or an exploiter. Arguments were devalued by labelling their proponents. Anyone bearing that label was branded – finished.

Anyone who broke these moral rules therefore learnt them the hard way. Conservative guest speakers were shouted down, pelted with paint bombs and blocked by picket lines. Lectures were cancelled because the security risk was too high. Lecturers who deviated from the accepted line lost their jobs, research funding and invitations to speak.

The evolutionary biologist *Carole Hooven* effectively lost her post at Harvard in 2022 after explaining in a television interview how biological sex is determined by the XX/XY chromosomes. A finding that, a decade earlier, had still been in every school textbook. The evolutionary biologist *Bret Weinstein*, then a professor at *Evergreen State College* in Washington, lost his job in 2017 because he had spoken out against a campaign in which white professors and students had been urged to stay off campus for a day. Professor Weinstein describes himself as “deeply progressive”, voted for *Bernie Sanders* and has been on the progressive side of the political spectrum throughout his professional life.

That is precisely what makes this case so instructive: the outrage machine does not check whether someone is on the right side. It only checks whether they are currently taking the right position and adopting the right stance. Anyone who deviates on a single point is out, regardless of their entire political track record.

Charlie Kirk was not a provocateur who appeared out of nowhere. His programme “Prove Me Wrong” was a direct response to a university reality in which conservative speech had become socially and professionally impossible. He sought dialogue where it was no longer permitted. He paid for it with his life.

An incident in May 2026 shows that correction does not come solely from above: Over eight hundred mathematics and science professors at the University of California (UC system: Berkeley, UCLA, San Diego, etc.), including seven out of nine mathematics chairholders, called in an open letter for the reintroduction of the standardised SAT/ACT maths entrance exams for STEM degree programmes (science, technology, engineering and mathematics).

The SAT is the nationwide US academic aptitude test used by high school leavers to ap-

ply for university places. In 2020, it was abolished in the name of equal opportunities because it was said to disadvantage students of colour and applicants from low-income backgrounds.

Five years later, experts are turning the argument on its head: failing to measure gaps does not remove barriers, but shifts them into the classroom, where they are harder to overcome. Here, it is not the opposing side that refutes this stance, but the evidence – and, of all people, those who face the consequences daily.

With *Donald Trump’s* election victory in November 2024, the pendulum has swung back. It is now swinging with equal force in the opposite direction. Since he took office in 2025, the institutional legacy of the DEI era has been dismantled with the same hard-hitting state-imposed rigour. Several thousand federal employees have been dismissed or pressured to resign from their posts; inspectors-general have been sacked; and critical voices have been forced out of research institutions. Research programmes on climate, diversity and gender studies have been terminated without due process. Universities that did not toe the line received threats of having federal funding withdrawn; some lost it. DEI offices have been closed across the board.

What the academic left had built up institutionally over fifteen years is now to be rolled back in two years. Mostly using the same methods of moral suspicion and administrative overreach that the other side had previously cultivated. Those who enforced speech bans yesterday are today lamenting the loss of their research funding. Those who remained silent yesterday whilst colleagues were being weeded out are now being pushed out themselves. Those who shouted others down yesterday are being drowned out today. The labels change. The logic remains the same.

Did you feel it – that reflexive outrage?

Back to the experiment: anyone who has read the last few paragraphs will – depending on their political stance – have noticed that reflexive outrage at some point along the way. For some, it was when the list of DEI practices was mentioned; for others, it was only when Trump’s measures were discussed. One might have labelled the author “reactionary”, “right-wing” or “close to the AfD” as soon as DEI, pronouns and safe spaces were mentioned. The other would

have preferred to categorise him as “woke” or part of the “left-wing camp”. The same reflex, just at different points. Neither reacted to arguments, but to buzzwords, triggers – so-called emotional stimuli. Neither reacted to what was actually written, but to what they had been conditioned to react to.

That is precisely the outrage machine in its most basic form. It doesn’t just operate on talk shows and social media. It operates within each of us, at every moment when a provocative word triggers a pre-determined social categorisation – even before the sentence has been read to the end. Anyone who has observed this reflex has learnt, in those few seconds, to resist it. Anyone who has given in to it has caught themselves in the act of emotional categorisation. Both are gains. For the only thing that can weaken the outrage reflex is its conscious recognition at the very moment it kicks in. And this is precisely where the key lies to the question of what should be done.

What should be done

Why is a tent, a microphone and three hundred people outside the entrance to the University of Zurich even necessary to hold a reasonable discussion? To artificially recreate what used to take place in every lecture theatre? Why must someone like Roger Köppel carry on in the tradition of Charlie Kirk, fighting against shouting and slogans and exposing himself to the same risks?

The answer is sobering: someone must start restoring what has been lost. The solution, then, does not lie far away, abstractly in a new law or the clever concept of a government commission. The narrowing of what can be said has grown over two decades, in lecture theatres, newsrooms and on social media. The way back leads only through the very place where this nar-

rowing began: with individual people, their conversations and the way they interact with one another. We literally need a grassroots movement to revive a culture of dialogue. A fresh start from the very bottom.

The guidance for this practice comes from the philosopher of science *Karl Popper*. In 1945, in “The Open Society and Its Enemies”, he formulated a philosophy that is once again urgently needed today. His book was written in exile, against the backdrop of the catastrophe of conformism under National Socialism. Popper called his approach “critical rationalism”.

In essence: we can never know whether we are right. We must therefore present our convictions to others, subject them to their criticism and correct them as soon as better arguments emerge. Truth, then, does not arise from moral declarations and the “right attitude”, but from the attempt to jointly dispel errors. Anyone who shields their opinion from scrutiny has not truly formed it but merely adopted it blindly. Popper’s “critical method” is the antithesis of closed-minded thinking of any kind. It is a process of speech and counter-speech. It demands that we listen to arguments precisely when they come from the “wrong camp”.

Everyone can play their part in reclaiming this culture of dialogue. So next time, consciously hold back that reflex to be outraged. Endure the contradiction for longer, listen more intently, ask more questions, delve deeper and thus explore the opposing position. With the sister who votes differently. With the brother-in-law who thinks differently. Anyone who wants to learn how to argue properly should give it a go. At lunch. At home. Tonight.

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(Translation “Swiss Standpoint”)