

Actor Richard Dreyfuss' Disgust for Cultural Capitulation

There is a massive difference between cultural capitulation and cultural sensitivity. We should resist the former and practice the latter.

What do I mean by cultural capitulation? I mean bowing down to the latest cultural fad, of kowtowing to the most current manifestation of what is PC, of becoming slaves to whatever the societal elites decide is acceptable.

A current example would be the cultural mandate that requires us to give our preferred gender pronouns or to deny biological realities when talking with a trans-identified person. We rightly say no to that mandate for many reasons. (For a listing of relevant articles, go [here](#).)

This, of course, is quite different than cultural sensitivity, by which I mean recognizing what could legitimately offend someone in another culture or be easily misunderstood. This is something we often learn the hard way, especially when traveling to other countries or hosting people from other cultures. There are cultural taboos of which we know nothing until we cross a forbidden line.

The difficult question is to be able to determine when something is a matter of unacceptable cultural capitulation and when it's a matter of legitimate cultural sensitivity.

All this can be illustrated in a recent interview on PBS' "Firing Line" with the famed actor Richard Dreyfuss.

He was asked by Margaret Hoover for his views on the new Oscar rules in which a film would not be eligible for best picture

unless it met certain requirements for inclusion and representation.

He responded, "They make me vomit."

How so? "Because," explained, "this is an art form, it's also a form of commerce and it makes money, but it's an art. And no one should be telling me, as an artist, that I have to give in to the latest most current idea of what morality is."

He continued, "And what are we risking? Are we really risking hurting people's feelings? You can't legislate that. And you have to let life be life.

"And," he said, "I'm sorry, I don't think there's a minority or a majority in the country that has to be catered to like that."

So, the "Jaws" actor opined, you have to let art be art without worrying about meeting some kind of hiring quota. You need to hire the best people who can do the best job. That's what art and creativity require.

Otherwise, to bring in an argument that Dreyfuss did not raise, you could require the NBA to draft more white basketball players or Silicon Valley to employ less Asians. Ability and success would now become secondary to skin color or ethnicity.

Of course, to some extent there *are* quotas like this that exist. Hollywood is not the first to go in this direction. But to say, "Your film cannot be considered for the best picture Oscar because you didn't meet our quota," is to put stifling limits on artistic expression.

Dreyfuss wouldn't have it for a minute, also saying that we can't be required to walk on eggshells because it might offend a certain portion of Americans. In a similar spirit, Cindy Adams wrote in a 2022 op-ed piece for the New York Post,

“Wokeness is killing everything, including comedy.”

But Dreyfuss didn't stop there. He pointed out that Lawrence Olivier was the last white man to play Othello, doing so in blackface in 1968—and doing it very well. He asked, “Am I being told that I will never have a chance to play a Black man? Is someone else being told that if they're not Jewish, they shouldn't play the ‘Merchant of Venice?’ Are we crazy? Do we not know that art is art?”

Yes, he argued, “This is so patronizing. It's so thoughtless and treating people like children.”

When Hoover asked him “whether the history of slavery and racism in America might justify making ‘blackface’ a taboo,” he said no.

He explained, “Because it's patronizing. Because it says we're so fragile that we can't have our feelings hurt. We have to anticipate having our feelings hurt, our children's feelings hurt. We don't know how to stand up and bop the bully in the face.”

And here is where a specific cultural line was crossed (even if we put aside the extreme reaction from some of his critics).

It's one thing to say that a non-Jew should be able to play the part of a Jew. Why not? This is acting after all. Otherwise, only an army general could play the part of a general and only a thief could play the part of a thief. Or perhaps only a serial killer could play the role of a serial killer and only an assassin could play the role of an assassin. You get the point.

At the same time, it would be culturally insensitive to cast a known anti-Semite (picture David Duke as an actor) in the role of a Holocaust survivor or to cast a known white supremacist (such as Richard B. Spencer) in the role of an 19-century

abolitionist.

When it comes to blackface, while it has a varied history, including some comedic roles (such as Dan Aykroyd in a scene in “Trading Places” in 1983), and while there is debate surrounding the use of blackface in Al Jolson’s 1917 “The Jazz Singer,” there is no doubt that there is a distinct racist history associated with blackface roles in America.

As noted on the website, “The portrayal of blackface—when people darken their skin with shoe polish, greasepaint or burnt cork and paint on enlarged lips and other exaggerated features—is steeped in centuries of racism. It peaked in popularity during an era in the United States when demands for civil rights by recently emancipated slaves triggered racial hostility. And today, because of blackface’s historic use to denigrate people of African descent, its continued use is still considered racist.”

For Dreyfuss, this is still a matter of “patronizing,” of saying “we’re so fragile that we can’t have our feelings hurt.”

But when a word or action unnecessarily opens a past, legitimate and reasonable wound, then cultural sensitivity says, “Avoid that word or action.”

So, while I agree with the general spirit of Dreyfuss’s comments, I wish he had picked a different example to use. This way, we could have focused on the question of refusing to capitulate to the latest PC trend. To cave in here is to lose our souls. {eoa}

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