

explainity explains: Whataboutism

„Whataboutism“ – ever heard about it?

Well, for starters, it’s a made-up word composed of the terms “what” and “about”.

It is a rhetorical tool often seen in debates and arguments, when a critical point or a question is being countered with another question that doesn’t have anything to do with the topic at hand.

If candidate A for example says: “We should use less plastic to protect the environment”, and candidate B responds that there are problems that are far more important, such as the famine in South Sudan, then that’s Whataboutism.

The purpose of Whataboutism generally isn’t to contribute to a topic in a constructive way, or to find a solution or common ground between debaters. The goal instead is to try and steer away from difficult topics and to deflect questions without giving a substantial answer.

Whataboutism got its name in Ireland where in 1974, in a letter to the Irish Times, a reader spoke about the “Whatabouts” for the first time. Whataboutism is especially popular in political propaganda. For example, when the United States denounced the Soviet Union’s prison camps during the cold war, they countered with “...and you lynch black people!”.

The tactic is also often used by demagogues, such as Donald Trump. As president, he repeatedly responded to critical questions by pointing at Hillary Clintons E-Mail scandal.

Whataboutism is widespread not only in politics, but in our daily life and on social media, too.

If Ann for example complains about the gender pay gap, and Kevin responds that women in Saudi-Arabia aren’t even allowed to drive, then that’s fundamentally the same tactic.

In the end, people using Whataboutism all but directly admit that they don’t have any logically sound arguments themselves, and that they are unable to argue in a constructive, goal-oriented way.

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