

Free Speech and Equity;

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Debates and mobilizations around free speech are breaking out all over. The far right is presenting itself as the champion of free speech on campuses and throughout society. After protests in August, the Ryerson University administration cancelled a panel called “The Stifling of Free Speech on University Campuses” that featured far right speakers including Faith Goldy, who was fired from Rebel Media for her sympathetic coverage of white supremacist rallies at Charlottesville. According to this right wing perspective, the real threat to free speech is leftists who try to limit the expression of racism, sexism, transphobia, and other forms of bigotry. At the same time, leftists have a long history of fighting for free speech. Freedom for expression around Palestine, for example, is always under attack from Israel advocacy organizations who seek to shut down critics, particularly those calling for boycott, divestment and sanctions against Israeli institutions. The fight for Palestinian freedom has necessarily included a wide range of mobilizations around freedom of speech, challenging the attempt to erase Palestinian expression, and indeed existence, as part of the Israeli state’s settler colonial project.

The politics of free speech are complex and contradictory. On the one hand, radicals have had to fight hard against the state, employers and university administrators to carve out political space for discussion, debate and organizing. On the other hand, access to the means of public expression is highly unequal and some speech is dedicated to shutting down others. The principle of free speech and the principle of equity against oppression sometimes bump up against each other. Despite these complexities, free speech cannot be simply a term of convenience we use to defend our own spaces, but rather must be a general principle with exceptions only under specific conditions.

Free Speech Matters

From the perspective of leftists, free speech is about fighting for the space and developing the capacities we need to overturn the capitalist system and build a new world from below. Free speech is not the first choice of the bosses or the state. For most people, the world of employment is the opposite of a free speech zone, where employees can get fired for trying to

organize a union. The history of state repression of political expression through censorship and police actions is long and brutal.

Union organizers, political activists and organizations of the oppressed have fought hard for free speech. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), for example, launched free speech campaigns to fight for the right to speak and organize in the streets. The free speech campaign in San Diego, California in 1912 saw over 150 members of the IWW arrested and others beaten by vigilantes. Emma Goldman, a prominent anarchist, was harassed, arrested and jailed for defending free speech in meetings and on the streets. In 1902 she wrote, “O Liberty! Poor outraged, degraded Liberty. Fallen indeed art thou from thy once lofty height when every petty policeman can soil thy pure form with his foul hands, and trample in the mire of Chicago’s streets thy beauteous lineaments.”

Free speech is also a means to developing the kind of left that is oriented to building from below by expanding democracy. The struggle to overturn capitalism pushes us to create new forms of democracy in which people collectively make decisions about matters concerning our common destiny, ranging from ecological planning to the organization of work. Democracy from below requires that we develop confidence in persuasion through open discussion and debate as part of a project of transformation.

Our appeals for free speech will have much less leverage if used expediently to defend our latest campaign and not the rights of others. Advocating free speech for ourselves means recognizing that others, including those we disagree with, also have the right to expression. But this cannot be an absolute principle, because we need to recognize the persistent inequalities in access to public expression and the particular harm posed by specific forms of speech.

Fascism as an Exception

There are certain exceptional times when specific forms of speech need to be shut down as part of a project of defending free speech. Fascism is perhaps the clearest example. Fascism is organized around a political project of aggressive and exclusive nationalism politically expressed through the deliberate use of terror to destroy opponents through mass thuggery in the streets. The goal of fascism is ultimately to crush all forms of democracy and create authoritarian state rule. Fascism emerged in the early 20th in Germany, Italy and other places as a specifically counter-revolutionary force rooted primarily in the lower middle classes in the face of massive working-class mobilizations with revolutionary potential. Since World War Two, fascism has persisted as a nationalist, racist, sexist and queer-bashing current, rising particularly at times of economic dislocation by directing energies against scapegoats (immigrants, people of colour, queers, muslims and/or jews).

Fascism is oriented to shutting down free speech through terror and violence, including terror marches, vigilante actions and breaking up the meetings of others. To tolerate fascism is to be complicit in the victimization of the racialized groups and the political opponents they are aiming to destroy. Mass mobilization to stop fascism must be a high priority political project whenever such movements emerge. The murder and injuries at Charlottesville are a present-day reminder of the political project of fascism.

Fascism can be stopped, and we have many examples where this was done successfully. In Britain, for example, both the 1936 Battle of Cable Street and the 1977 Battle of Lewisham defeated growing fascist movements. In both cases, thousands – including but not limited to radicals – mobilized to stop a fascist terror march aimed at an area of the city largely populated by racialized groups targeted by the far right. Unions and other workers’ organizations, left-wing groups and community-based cultural and anti-racist groups mobilized together and successfully stopped the fascists from marching. In both 1936 and 1977, this defeat on the streets was a tremendous setback for the far right, who lost their purchase when they could not intimidate.

Whose Speech?

A lot of debates on free speech among leftists focus on speakers who are not specifically fascist, but who orient their politics around undermining the rights of others. The basis of white supremacy, settler-colonialism, male dominance and anti-queer bigotry is to deliberately shut down the speech and political expression of targeted groups while defending the privileged or exclusive access of members of the dominant groups to voice in various public forums. The principle of free speech and the principle of equity against oppression do not sit easily together in these situations, which presents a real political challenge.

We cannot advocate free speech while ignoring the histories and current practices of colonial, racist and sexist violence aimed deliberately at shutting down the expression of Indigenous and racialized people as well as that of women and queers. The discussion of free speech cannot be separate from the fundamental question of who is threatened simply for being in public spaces, whether by the cops or by random members of dominant groups (for example, white people, men, straights) who take for granted their right to bully and attack. It makes complete sense that Indigenous and racialized people, women and queers want to interrupt the endless stream of oppressive lies, myths and threats that are inseparable from violence.

But this does not mean we can or should deny a platform to everyone who is racist, sexist, islamophobic or anti-queer. There is no doubt that racist, sexist and homophobic speech wounds and silences. We will not, however, build our most powerful transformative movements to defeat white supremacy, settler-colonialism, male dominance, heterosexism or anti-trans bigotry if we focus on shutting down offensive speech.

In practice, shutting down offensive speech often means appealing to authorities such as university administrations to regulate expression by closing down certain events. For example, a committed group of activists at Ryerson University has done important work in mobilizing against anti-choice vigils on campus that use large graphic anti-abortion posters. This pro-choice group has organized great counter-protests, challenging the images and messages of the anti-choice vigils. However, they have also focussed a lot of their energies on trying to get the university administration to shut down the anti-choice protests on campus.

We do not want university administrators, employers or the state to be the arbiters of acceptable speech. Nor do we want to be completely instrumental about free speech, reducing it to a slogan we use to defend our own activities. Indeed, let’s be clear that until the dominant power relations are overturned, the weight of banning will fall overwhelmingly on the radicals rather than the bigots. Just look at the sorry record of threats, disciplinary action and indeed firings of American academics who have supported Palestine or advocated anti-racist positions. Steven Salaita lost a job as professor at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign simply on the basis of tweets criticizing Israel.

Rather than appealing to administrators, employers or the state to shut down offensive speech, radicals need mobilizing strategies connected with expansive educational

campaigns. Mobilizing pro-choice students, staff, faculty and community members at Ryerson, for example, would mean building a movement to make the campus a pro-choice space, where people actively engage in the fight for full access to abortion and contraception as well as freedom from forced sterilization and the right to have children with real supports such as income and housing.

Such a mobilization might include tabling, counter-demonstrations, pro-choice educational events and building active support among a wide variety of clubs, unions and other organizations. The powerful history of the Ontario Coalition for Abortion Clinics in mobilizing for abortion rights and against the anti-choice bigots is a great example of this broader strategy of political engagement. This broad mobilizing strategy included direct confrontation on the streets when necessary, for example to preserve access to clinics when anti-choicers tried to blockade clinics to intimidate women seeking abortions and shut down facilities.

When Bannon Comes To Town?

Radicals cannot shy away from direct confrontation but must at the same time orient towards mass mobilization tied to extensive educational work to convince others. A focus on shutting down offensive speech regardless of circumstances can shortcut the battle of ideas and absolve us of the responsibility of convincing others and mobilizing mass movements.

So if Steve Bannon or Ezra Levant is coming to a place near you, what are you going to do? I think the most important point is to say you should not answer this question as if there was a simple hard and fast principle. In fact, there are two conflicting principles, free speech and equity against oppression. You should neither commit yourself to shutting them down nor to defending their right to speak without assessing the forces on the ground and evaluating the impact of various actions in order to debate effective responses that fit the circumstances. Sometimes shutting down an event actually serves the other side by bolstering their claim to be defenders of free speech, while at other times it provides an important victory to radicals building movements. In any given situation, activists need to ask themselves who is inviting this speaker and why; and how our own movements can emerge from this campaign stronger, with wider chains of solidarity and more active engagement? It is important to think about groups that might be potential allies, and what might win or prevent their endorsement. Of course, sometimes we need to walk away from allies whose demands threaten to weaken our movement. However, it is crucial to think about broadening the base of our movements, connecting to others through politics of solidarity and engaging with those who are newer to politics or whose views are in flux.

The contradiction between the principle of free speech and the principle of equity against oppression leads to specific complex situations where appropriate responses cannot simply be read out of a rule book. Effective activism means always thinking about how to strengthen our movements and to win transformative victories that change the world.

Free Speech and Liberation

Ultimately, the position we take on free speech is about the vision of freedom we are bringing to the work of changing the world. At the core of a vision of liberation from below is the commitment to widening circles of activist engagement and generalizing the skills, knowledge and resources for making a new world. Free speech is a crucial tool in this process. A lot of comradely discussion and debate is required, genuinely learning from each other as we build meaningful solidarity based on commitments to overturning capitalism, white supremacy, settler-colonialism, male dominance, anti-trans bigotry and heterosexism. We also need to be optimistic about our ability to persuade others, through discussion and debate as well as through changing

the world to undercut the bases of their bigotry. It is amazing to see the sharp fall in measures of anti-queer bigotry where queer rights get recognized, even if that does not stop gay-bashing, trans-bashing or the overall policing of sexuality and gender norms.

Free speech, then, should be a general principle in our movements, with certain specified exceptions – most importantly around fascism – for those whose political orientation is about violently shutting down opponents. This ultimately enables us to build the most effective movements for change and to create the political conditions in which counter-power can thrive. But we have to recognize that this commitment is going to need a lot of discussion and debate around the complex relationship between free speech and equity, given the highly uneven access to public voice in a world of settler colonialism, white supremacy, employer dictatorship and sex/gender oppression. A commitment to free speech is part of building a left that can have these debates constructively, mobilize mass movements against fascism, and expand democracy from below. Such a left will only be credible if it combines this commitment to free speech with a wide-ranging focus on transformative equity politics built through engaging with and learning from people experiencing and resisting bigotry.

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