

“Far-right are not in favour of free speech”

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Close down freedom of expression for those you don't like and you turn them into freedom-of-expression heroes, writes **Jodie Ginsberg**

2018 MARKS THE 80th anniversary of Kristallnacht, the two-day attack on Jews in Germany. Crystal Night – a glittering name for an evil event – was so dubbed because of the shards of glass that littered the streets after synagogues and Jewish-owned shops and buildings were attacked. Scores of people were killed and tens of thousands of Jews were subsequently incarcerated.

In the decades since the end of World War II, such mass demonstrations of fascism have been rare, but it is chilling to consider Kristallnacht in the light of the 60,000 neo-Nazis who marched openly through Warsaw in November 2017, or the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, USA, earlier in the year in which a counter-protester was killed.

As white supremacists become more visible, and vocal, demands have grown for those who espouse such views to be silenced. And as that happens, the band of people who champion freedom of speech for everyone – regardless of their views – diminishes. The far-right have stepped into that gap, with devastating consequences for free speech and for those who (genuinely) advocate it.

Let's be clear about this: The far-right are not in favour of free speech. The far-right

– the likes of Richard Spencer, who leads a US white supremacist think tank – are in favour of protecting the speech of their own interest group, not the speech of those who oppose them, nor those whose human rights – and very existence – they openly challenge.

But calls from their opponents for Spencer or controversial columnist Katie Hopkins to be silenced has allowed these individuals to set themselves up as the champions and protectors of free speech. And when the only public advocates for free speech are a bunch of neo-Nazis, who wants to defend free speech as a principle?

We must push back. Freedom of expression is a freedom that benefits everybody. The First Amendment is what allowed not only the Unite the Right movement to march in Charlottesville, but gave the thousands of opponents who turned out to vocally oppose the march the chance to do so publicly. Once you accept the principle that only certain voices can be heard, it can be applied to your voice just as easily.

The narrative that suggests publicising the views of the far-right leads directly to much wider violence is steeped in popular narratives, primarily around the Holocaust and

the belief that the public airing of such views led directly to Kristallnacht and the subsequent horrors of Nazi Germany.

But as prominent Danish journalist and editor Flemming Rose has said, this is based on false assumptions. People argue that if only the Weimar government had clamped down on the National Socialists' verbal persecution of the Jews in the years prior to Hitler's rise to power, then the Holocaust would never have happened.

Rose, who famously published cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in 2005 when he was culture editor of Danish daily newspaper Jyllands-Posten, said:

“Contrary to what most people think, Weimar Germany did have hate-speech laws, and they were applied quite frequently. The assertion that Nazi propaganda played a significant role in mobilising anti-Jewish sentiment is, of course, irrefutable. But to claim that the Holocaust could have been prevented if only anti-Semitic speech and Nazi propaganda had been banned has little basis in reality. Leading Nazis such as Joseph Goebbels, Theodor Fritsch and Julius Streicher were all prosecuted for anti-Semitic speech.

“Pre-Hitler Germany had laws very much like the anti-hate laws of today, and they were enforced with some vigour.”

Trevor Phillips, founding chair, Equality and Human Rights Commission, said at the Battle of Ideas in London 2017: “What we have learnt in the last 150 years is that, ultimately, freedom of expression is the last and only defence of the minority in any society. When they have taken away everything else from you... the last thing they can take away is your voice. That was true about Sojourner Truth, it was true about the slaves in the Caribbean, it was true about the Jews in Europe. People can take everything away from you, what they cannot do, ultimately, unless physically, physically they obliterate you is

take away your ability to express your pain, anger, frustration. So the defence of free speech on the grounds that it is somehow an offence to minorities simply flies in the face of every piece of human experience.”

Increasingly, though, I hear the argument that by allowing free speech we benefit only the powerful. That it is a tool that enriches only the privileged. That it is the armour which empowers the far-right and precedes violence, and that, therefore, we must curtail speech to protect those who are persecuted.

This ignores what a powerful and essential tool freedom of expression has been in freedom movements over the centuries: its role in the US civil rights movement of the 1960s or the drive for women's rights, gay and lesbian rights and religious tolerance.

If we want to counter the persistent and growing narrative that free speech only ben-

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efits the privileged, and the far-right, we must raise up those voices who argue the contrary.

Index works with hundreds of writers, artists and campaigners who have experienced persecution as the minority and whose freedom of expression has been repeatedly curtailed. Atheists in Bangladesh who face death for voicing their views in an increasingly hardline Muslim state; political opponents in Bahrain tortured and jailed for criticising the government; gays in Uganda hounded for expressing their sexuality.

These are the voices we need to raise when people celebrate the value of denying speech to those with whom they disagree. ☒

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