



Antifascism: Destroying the Liberal Myths

Free Speech is Not the Issue; Intellectual Power Is

Abstract rights are in the air. They have recently become the subject of endless obsequious commentary around so-called free speech on university campuses. Many conservatives are using it as a convenient foil to promote reactionary, bigoted pseudo-science, which is bought and paid for by the corporate elite. At the same time, countless liberals are indulging in their moral superiority as the unrivaled passive subjects of history, who are content to be *tolerant of anything* as long as they do not actually have to *do something*. Even supposed leftists are defending the institutional promotion of white supremacist, anti-poor, misogynist hacks in the name of purportedly avoiding future censorship of the left (which, of course, already exists).

This consensual abstract rights discourse has so-called progressives belittling those who have taken a committed stance and engaged in direct action against institutions of higher learning that willingly function as echo chambers for fascism, racism, misogyny and economic oppression. It is *as if* activists dedicated to developing concrete political strategies to fight against the institutional propagation of reactionary ideas and practices were supposed to simply stand in silent awe before the moralist intoning of the patronizing, self-appointed judges of action, who themselves passively condone the institutional organization of fascism and top-down class warfare.

Scientific racism and the innate inferiority of major sectors of the world population—women, the indigenous, the poor, subalterns, and many others—were once widely taught at the university and considered credible discourses. If this has changed over time, at least in part, it is not due to tolerance. And it is certainly not because scientific racism and other violent ideologies were sanctioned and promoted by institutions of higher learning in the name of a supposed right to free speech. It was through the direct action of people who recognized that universities are power brokers in the struggle to define legitimate discourse, and who actively defended the position that racist ideology—like other non-scientific forms of structural oppression or ingrained cultural bigotry—does not qualify. If anyone, then, is fighting for the concrete defense of equality and rights that actually mean something, it is precisely the activists who refuse to have institutions of knowledge production legitimize and disseminate discourses rooted in the idea of the inherent inferiority of certain people.

Nevertheless, the consensual discourse on abstract rights persists in defending so-called free speech independently of context, as if rights somehow floated in a pure moral ether above and beyond the soiled political struggles of the here-and-now. It does not recognize, for instance, the crucially important fact that *the constitutional right to express one's views is not the right to have a university approve of them and provide a megaphone for them*. In other words, the right to have institutions of higher learning endorse and market your speech is most definitively *not* a constitutional right.

One of the reasons for this widespread confusion is the faulty conception of institutions inherent in the tradition of political liberalism. The latter incorrectly assumes that institutions like universities are neutral spaces for individuals to freely express their thoughts in an open “marketplace of ideas.” However, everyone familiar with the inner workings, sordid histories and

economic functions of educational institutions knows that they are factories for capitalist modes of social reproduction largely structured by industry interests and guided by corporate investments.

Their power to format the social world—for better or worse—is one of the reasons why the struggle over their ability to define rigorous, legitimate and meaningful discourse is so important and should be taken seriously, instead of passively accepting the promotion of any political agenda whatsoever under the thoughtless banner of “free speech.” As we should know from the history of movements like Nazism, if the institutions of knowledge production put their stamp of approval on discourses such as scientific racism, this has an enormous impact on the broader cultural and political world.

The reactionaries, for all of their faults, are at least well aware of this, and it is precisely for this reason that they have invested in having their toadies speak at universities. Although they are more than happy to use the smoke screen of free speech in order to do this, everyone basically knows that they do not really care about it as a principle. They have not been stalwartly defending, for instance, the right of the revolutionary anti-capitalist left to have a prominent university platform for defending egalitarian, ecological and anti-colonial politics. On the contrary, they only invoke free speech as it pertains to a tactical struggle to market their reactionary ideas while keeping liberals on their heels. If it did not work as well as it does, immediately compelling the liberal intelligentsia to hypnotically kneel down and pray to their false god of tolerance, it is imaginable that they would simply discard it as an unnecessary foil for their not-so-hidden agenda.

The liberals, however, have had a longstanding love affair with abstract rights. Their hallowed claims to the freedom and equality of all men (*sic*) have served as the sacred ideological

supplement to worldwide capitalist expansion, as Domenico Losurdo has demonstrated perhaps better than anyone in *Liberalism: A Counter-History*. By encouraging the masses to gaze up into the sky of abstract ideas and rights, they sought to distract them from the rapacious project of indigenous genocide, chattel and wage slavery, colonization and patriarchal oppression.

When those who rejected this form of cloud gazing—Black Elk, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth and so many others—pointed out how these supposed rights were actually anchored in a vast system of structural oppression, such that only an infinitesimally small minority of the population benefitted from them (primarily white, male, property-owning deists of European descent), the liberals retorted with their infamous progress narrative: although our system of abstract rights was historically and materially founded upon your exclusion, if you work hard enough and follow our rules, at some point we might include you, at least formally. Bloodstained bison fields slowly became fenced in gambling dens, plantations morphed into prisons, colonies were transformed into neo-colonies, multicultural tokenism made the corporatocracy more colorful, and there was certainly progress ... of cloud gazing.

Unlike abstract rights, anchored rights are ones that have meaning and substance precisely because they are embodied in specific material relations. They are rights that actually exist in this world, like the right to free speech enshrined by, and originally for, the white, male, property-owning, colonial settlers in America. Rights are therefore about power, and who has the force to establish, define and defend them. It is precisely liberalism's refusal to overtly recognize this that has perpetuated the false veneer of neutrality that actually allows liberal institutions like the university to obscure or cover over racism, patriarchy, and the ensanguined spread of imperialist oppression.

With all of this in mind, anytime individuals or institutions claim they are defenders of free speech on campus, we should translate this abstract assertion into an anchored reality by examining what this means *concretely*. For instance, I was recently involved with coordinating a direct action campaign at Villanova University against the institutional promotion of the hack bigotry of neo-eugenicist Charles Murray. Although many conservatives and liberals appealed to “free speech” to defend his supposed right to have the university broadcast his invectives against equality, I sincerely doubt that the same amount of corporate funding, military-police enforcement and campus fanfare would have gone into defending Tim Miller’s right to free speech. I will likely never know this, however, because Villanova’s invitation to this radical queer activist and artist was rescinded. Although each institutional decision is surely the result of a unique configuration of forces, this juxtaposition requires that we ask the following concrete question: is “free speech” only defended on Villanova’s campus for misogynist, racist, classist pseudo-academics bankrolled by the corporate elite?

It is imperative to recognize the tactical uses of free speech discourse as a mechanism to empower or disempower voices on campus. Universities, far from being neutral, are in the daily business of defining the difference between scientific and unscientific claims, between worthy and unworthy discourses. We must therefore critically interrogate their choices and actively participate in the struggle over ideas.

This means recognizing that the way we think—and train people to think—has real political implications in the world, and that this is precisely why reactionaries want to spread their debunked ideas throughout institutions of higher learning. The slippery slope of the misguided “free speech” argument plays into their hands and will lead nowhere other than into the thoughtless, relativist abyss of justifying

university podiums for Nazi and colonial Holocaust deniers, individuals who think people of color are apes, pedophilia advocates, astronomers who believe the world is flat, and doctors who imagine that diseases are spread by evil spirits.

The question we should be asking, then, is not the abstract one of whether or not an individual or institution is “for” or “against” free speech *in general*, and then confusedly extending this to the university context. The real question is: what are the institutional forces that are empowering certain ideas and—by necessity—excluding or sidelining others? This requires examining the power structures that produce the very field of possibility for thought and organize the purportedly “open debate” in terms of viable intellectual positions. It also means analyzing how the intellectual and moral torpor of a “one-size-fits-all” principle of “free speech” directly contributes to distracting us from actually holding institutional power brokers accountable for the types of ideas they are endorsing and disseminating.

Abstract rights are in the air, then. They are floating above the material struggles over ideas and confusing people about the real issues. It is time to ground them. This means recognizing that there are only anchored rights, and that *the right to be a bigot is not the right to have a university promote your bigotry*. It also requires acknowledging that institutions of knowledge production are important sites of struggle with real-world implications, as we should all know from the history of scientific racism and other debunked forms of oppression that have sought university approval and propagation. The agents operative within institutions of higher learning need be take responsibility for the power of the ideas that they promote, rather than hiding behind false beliefs in neutrality or clouded misconceptions of free speech. If history has taught us anything, it is that some ideas are worth fighting for.

Who's Afraid of Direct Action on Campus?

Antifa's disruption of white supremacists in Charlottesville, Virginia, again raises the question of direct action, particularly on college campuses. The "Unite the Right" event began with a parade of torch-wielding racists the night before at the University of Virginia, and Dr. Cornel West has credited anti-fascists with protecting unarmed clergy from the attacking bigots that night. Nonetheless, we are witnessing the rise of an ever more violent right emboldened by the support of the Trump administration, with neo-fascists like Richard Spencer openly declaring they are targeting colleges as their bases of operation. And yet again—like activists at Berkeley, Middlebury, Villanova and elsewhere—those who use direct action to *disrupt* race, class, gender and sexual oppression on their campuses are vilified. For instance, college student Takiyah Thompson was recently arrested on felony charges for having attached the rope that toppled a monument to the Confederacy. All of this raises the question: Who's afraid of direct action?

University campuses have, on numerous occasions, been hotbeds of radical activism and coordinated direct action against US imperialism, institutionalized racism and a vast array of other forms of structural domination. However, judging by the united chorus of conservatives and liberals who have been vociferously disgruntled with the 2017 surge in direct actions on university campuses—including strikes and labor movements at Yale and elsewhere—many have decided that the era for such actions should be brought to a close.

Conservatives, by definition, want to conserve the extant systems of oppression, even if they sometimes prefer to conveniently ignore the patent fact that they are oppressive. Their resistance to direct action should come as no surprise since they want those systems to function as seamlessly as possible.

And yet strangely enough, many liberals, too, who so often commemorate direct action in the past—at least in its most asepticized forms—reject today’s campus uprisings as well.

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By burying direct actions in a sanitized past while simultaneously celebrating their effects, liberals would like to have the best of both worlds: they want to benefit from the boldness of others without having to do anything themselves. This, in fact, is often a crucial part of their Whig history, for they sometimes admit that direct action was necessary in the past (or in far-off lands) but, according to their self-congratulatory progress narrative, those were the old days, and times have changed. Liberal commemoration of direct action is thus best understood as a funeral procession.

Direct action is one of the most important and potent tools for demonstrating that, contrary to a widespread liberal fantasy, education does not take place in an ivory tower above the fray of systems of domination and violence. It works to unveil the ways in which the educational apparatus is intimately entangled with those systems, while also pointing out its role in indoctrinating students to fit as seamlessly as possible into a world of exploitation and oppression.

The power of direct action has been on full display over the last year or so as protesters on various campuses pulled back the veil on the ways that universities—claiming to be neutral spaces for “free discussion”—give corporate-funded, pseudo-intellectual reactionaries a privileged platform and military-style protection. These uprisings are only the most recent examples in a long tradition of educational direct action. In the 1980s, for example, student activists at Columbia University occupied the president’s office as part of a wider movement putting the spotlight on university complicity in apartheid. They were among those praised by Nelson Mandela as powerful actors in the defeat of the racist South African regime. Direct action has also shown us how universities profit from the global economic imperialism that generates college apparel, and it has highlighted universities’ continuing legacy of white supremacy.

Like sand poured into the gears of the mindless machine of “business as usual,” direct action can grind the conformist system to a halt and provide priceless opportunities to scrutinize the inner workings of this machine, including what drives it and what it produces. From administrators and staff to professors and students, many want to prevent this outbreak of critical thinking and active, experiential learning.

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They have become so accustomed to the well-oiled machinery of the institutions of capitalist social reproduction and class triage that they experience any glitch in its smooth operation as an aberrant interruption. In fact, their misinformed belief that this machinery operates in ivory towers founded on an intellectual meritocracy frequently triggers the application of

the scarlet letter of “violence” to any act that does not conform to the rules of business-as-usual.

The world is thereby turned upside-down according to a *dialectic of violence* that serves as one of the major defense mechanisms against critique. The structural violence of exclusionary and repressive institutions is rendered invisible precisely through its ubiquity, whereas direct action that calls out this violence by interrupting it is immediately seen and condemned as violent. Like state violence in general, institutionalized violence has a monopoly on invisibility. Its guard dogs only see violence in the acts of anyone who seeks to put a halt to it.

Yes, it will likely be uncomfortable for conservatives and liberals when activists challenge a corporate-sponsored white-supremacist promoter of eugenics, occupy a president’s office in the name of global justice, organize a hunger strike against oppressive labor practices, and in general, put their bodies on the line in radical acts of protest against institutionalized violence. Their inculcated feelings of allegiance to the systems that have produced them and from which they benefit should not, however, be allowed to be a bulwark against the collective educational opportunity provided by progressive direct action. They should be recognized for precisely what they are: a refusal to think.

The criminalization of dissent strives to mask the opposition between two modalities of education. For pedagogical and heuristic purposes, let us call the first *education as indirect action*, which is a form of cultural training and formatting that is implicit enough so as to not be readily visible to many of those who are subjected to it, and whose ultimate objective is the pacification of the masses. Made to be complicit, indirect actors, the “educated” are those who do not even see the institutional process of indoctrination of which they are a part,

and who thereby remain oblivious to the larger forces that are actively pursuing their agenda through the extant institutions of education.

By contrast, *education as direct action is education in action*. If indirect education cultivates acceptance of the status quo, direct action trains us to think for ourselves. In fact, it is arguable that it alone can provide the kind of education that the Establishment so often claims to sell. Education, according to the contemporary administrative buzzwords, should be “active” and “experiential”—ideally through social “outreach”—so that it creates “critical thinkers” who question fundamentals.

The terror that conservatives and liberals alike feel in the face of direct action is the fear that education will finally make good on its promises.

And yet this is precisely what traditional, indoctrinating forms of education cannot provide, and what direct action offers in spades. By occupying a president’s office, shutting down life on campus with mock shantytowns, challenging the attack on public education funding and expelling racist ideologues, activists think critically about what so many want to ignore, and so begin to actively transform a world riddled with inequalities. The terror that conservatives and liberals alike feel in the face of direct action is the fear that education will finally make good on its promises.

The answer to the question, “Who’s afraid of direct action on campus?” should now be obvious: those inculcated by the indirect action of institutionalized indoctrination, as well as those who seek—usually through clandestine means and dark money—to use these institutions for their own reactionary agenda. They have much to learn from the coming intellectual insurrections and the intensifying waves of mobilization in the

name of direct action education, which is an essential force against the increasingly aggressive right-wing cooptation of institutions of higher learning (which we have witnessed yet again at the University of Virginia and Charlottesville).

As founding members of the Radical Education Department, we are part of the national and international effort that generates such insurrections. Our aim is to develop and strengthen counter-institutions and forms of radical guerilla education that can be a constant force for transforming the systems of domination that schools help to reproduce. This project is rooted not only in our own actions at Villanova, but also in the long, inspiring and continuing history of experiments in radical education across the globe, from the American student activism of the 1960s to the socialist educational programs in Cuba, and from the massive Canadian student strikes of the new millennium to the Zapatista encuentros. Those who are afraid of direct action should be terrified that we could collectively and actively educate ourselves through the building of a new pedagogical order capable of transforming the world for the better.

It's Time to Get Violence: Breaking Down the Assault on Antifa

Violence is the great obfuscator. When its name is invoked by the powerful, rest assured that it is masking much more than it reveals. While it is presented as an objective description of a state of affairs requiring immediate condemnation, it simultaneously serves to discredit movements and ideas, deny the political agency of certain actors, and cloak brutal forms of domination. Its purportedly objective presentation is, in fact, a legerdemain that stirs up moral sentiments in order to muddy political analysis. Under the guise of indubitable moral rectitude, the world is turned upside: those who stand up for justice are often made to appear as senseless savages, and the greatest perpetrators of violence are exonerated, or even presented as victims.

Of late, violence has made headlines in the U.S. corporate media by serving to discredit the work of anti-fascist activists and distract from the actual threats of fascism and white supremacy. One would think that the very expression “anti-fascism” would immediately convoke pledges of allegiance in a country whose nationalist narratives include the story of its own rise to power as the global hegemon through the militant defeat of fascism in WWII. Regardless of whether or not we sanction its veracity, the story of the violent fight against fascism—not with kicks and punches, but with bombers, tanks, heavy artillery and nuclear bombs—is, indeed, one of the founding narratives of contemporary America.

However, in the current political climate, innumerable spin-doctors, corporate-funded pundits, and even supposed leftists are intent on misrepresenting and discrediting antifascism with their sweeping and self-congratulatory denunciations of the “violence” of antifa activists. Rhetorically, they do this through a series of elisions and obfuscations. For one, they sever contemporary antifa movements from the long history and deep ideological commitments of anti-fascism. They aggressively misrepresent activists mobilized in defense of equality and justice as nothing more than savage progenitors of violence, obfuscating the fundamental political stakes of the movement, as well as the vast array of its activities. It should come as no surprise that this is occurring precisely at the moment when racist, xenophobic, and fascist ideologies are gaining institutional power and seeking greater normalization in U.S. political culture (indeed, the Department of Homeland Security has recently classified antifa activities as “domestic terrorist violence”).

To take but one glaring example, the dominant mass media image of antifa has recently been consolidated by Chris Hedges, who has indisputably demonstrated that public figures associated with the Left can sometimes serve the agenda of the Right better than their own foot soldiers. From a privileged vantage point far removed from the violence enacted by white supremacists, Hedges peremptorily proclaimed that antifascist direct action that openly confronts fascist violence is nothing but the mirror of the latter. In one grandiose and historically inaccurate claim after the next, he levels the variegated and heterogeneous social phenomenon of antifa, patronizingly flattens the political agency of all of the different actors involved, collapses the colossal difference between fighting for fascism and struggling for freedom and equality, and crushes an entire field of political struggle in order to make it fit neatly within his simple moral categories.

This rhetorical leveling of antifa by the reckless moral bulldozer of a right-minded leftist, which has been resolutely criticized by John-Patrick Schultz and others, exemplifies one of the key tactics used to discredit dissent in general, which consists in smothering its political claims under the scarlet letter of “violence.” When people who are oppressed and vulnerable resist domination and assert their political agency, it often takes forms that do not follow the protocols so cherished by the liberals and conservatives in power, precisely because the system that supports them works to kettle the agency of those below. The powerful and their lackeys use this as evidence to assert that dissenters are illegitimate, uncivil, and ultimately savage. Out of control and ungovernable, they need to be forcefully trained to obey the civilizing moral compass that only the Right, and right-minded leftists, can provide. This obviously does not imply, by contrast, that we are obliged to indiscriminately condone everyone and everything affiliated with antifa. It simply means that we need to train ourselves to see through the numerous tactics employed to discredit it across the board and ignore its political stakes.

In the face, then, of this contemporary restaging of the savage and the civilized, which is viciously intent on transforming a complex political struggle into a simple moral opposition, it is important to remind ourselves of a few basic things. First of all, as the author of *Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook* has cogently explained in a recent interview, antifa is rooted in a century-long battle against the fascism that rose and spread in interwar Europe by using the parliamentary system and many of the very same protocols defended by so many liberals and conservatives today. It is part of a vast historical power struggle over the very meaning of politics, and it stalwartly resists the assumption that those who are violently dedicated to destroying certain sectors of the population are simply expressing an opinion that should be respected or tolerated. These are precisely the views that were at the root of some of

the most ruthless and destructive political regimes of the last century, including the Nazi Third Reich and the bloody dictatorships of Franco and Mussolini.

One of the important fronts of the current anti-fascist struggles concerns the horizons of political acceptability. Empowered by a state apparatus that has proven time and again that it has their backs, fascists, white supremacists and neo-Nazis are on the attack (and receiving ample funding from reactionaries, as well as extensive media coverage). They are rabidly intent on expanding the field of political acceptability to include them, perniciously attempting to co-opt and operationalize principles of “free speech,” “civil discourse,” and “tolerance” for their own ends. It is precisely in this context, and against a historical backdrop in which liberal tolerance and the parliamentary system did little or nothing to stop the rise of fascism in the interwar period, that activists are putting their own bodies on the line to expunge fascism’s extreme violence from the field of political possibility before its roots spread even deeper.

We should never forget, then, that antifa is *a struggle against the violence of fascism*. Those militating for white supremacy and Nazism, as well as those standing on the sidelines waving the banner of their own moral superiority while they promote “non-violent” tolerance of the opinion of those whose kin have built gas chambers and run lynching campaigns, are fighting for the right to establish or militate for a system founded on the most extreme forms of systemic violence. Rather than people who wear black, hide their faces from the oppressive surveillance state, or put their own lives at risk to protect others (such as Cornel West and other threatened activists in Charlottesville), why aren’t the fascists—as well as those defending their right to push on others the “opinion” that swaths of the population should be decimated—identified as the violent ones?

One reason is that systems of domination do everything in their power to render their own violence invisible, in part through the hyper-visibility of any significant resistance to it, which is precisely what is labeled as “violent.” Self-appointed moral referees like Hedges falsely presume that the term “violence” simply refers to an objective fact rather than operating as an ideological tool used to discredit dissent. They believe, in spite of all of the evidence to the contrary, that the Right and the corporate media and state apparatus—with all of their well-paid specialists in smear campaigns, public lies, infiltration, and false flag operations—would simply respect some ephemeral “moral authority” of the Left if the latter never engaged in activities that *they* identify as violent.

To take but one of the most flagrant examples of why this is utterly incorrect, let us recall the FBI’s position on the most outspoken defender of non-violent resistance to white supremacy in the 1960s, Martin Luther King, Jr. Two days after the peaceful March on Washington and his uplifting “I Have a Dream” speech, the head of the domestic intelligence division, William Sullivan, summed up the FBI’s stance in a memo to top bureau leaders, and later wrote an anonymous letter to King trying to blackmail him into committing suicide: “We must mark him now, if we have not done so before, as the most dangerous Negro of the future in this Nation from the standpoint of communism, the Negro and national security.”

The notion of violence operates, perhaps first and foremost, as an instrument of perception management. It serves to organize a political playing field in such a way that certain movements and figures are delegitimated, and particular tactics are taken away from the oppressed, while the repressive strategies of those in power are legitimated, naturalized and ideally rendered invisible. The corporate state and their pawns in the media and elsewhere thereby seek to establish and maintain a monopoly on invisible violence.

One crucial question in this regard is why the conversation about violence that is continually re-staged in the media overwhelmingly focuses on tactics of resistance by the underclasses. Among those who are vociferously proclaiming a pure form of “non-violence” as an unquestionable moral principle, who of them is arguing that this principle should be applied to the corporate state and all of its imperial endeavors? Alongside the countless statements reprimanding anti-capitalist activists for street scuffles, where are the articles calling for the dismantling of the military-industrial complex, the dissolution of the police force, or the abolition of the prison system? Why isn’t the debate around non-violence centered precisely on *those who have all of the power and all of the weapons*? Is it because violence has *actually worked successfully* in these cases to impose a very specific top-down agenda, which includes shutting out anyone who calls it into question, and diligently managing the perception of their actions? Is violence somehow acceptable here because it is the violence of the victors, who are the ones who presume to have the right—and in any case have the power—to define the very nature of violence (as anything that threatens them)?

Clearly, the fetishization of non-violence is reserved for the actions of the underlings. They are the ones who, again and again, are told that they must be civil (and are never sufficiently so), and that the best way to attain their objectives is by obeying the moral dictates of those above. Let us recall, in this light, James Baldwin’s powerful statement in the context of the black liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s: “The only time non-violence is admired is when the Negroes practice it.”

It is time, then, for us to get violence. We need to figure out how it functions and the work that it does as a practical concept to orchestrate a field of political possibility, distribute tactics, legitimate or discredit movements, render particular actions visible or invisible, and ultimately define the very nature of

what is politically acceptable. This will allow us to refuse the handcuffs of the oppressive moralism that shackles agents with the inchoate question: “violence or non-violence?” Throwing off these shackles, and the assumption that there are two purely delimited forms of action between which we must choose once and for all regardless of circumstances (including those of self-defense), we should instead be engaged in a much broader and deeper inquiry, which the latter question seeks to obfuscate: what are we to do with the deadly white supremacist, capitalist empire at this precise historical moment when it is emboldening its most fascist elements, and how can we make sense of the ways in which it operationalizes “violence” to simultaneously stigmatize resistance and perpetuate its monopoly on invisible violence? We really need to get violence. We need to understand it and wrest control of it away from those who marshal it—under so many different guises and with such force—against us.



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