

Free Speech for All, Except...

BY MARNI SOUPCOFF

While speaking at a recent conference on “offense, respect, ethics, and the law,” I decided to try to keep an open mind about my fellow speakers. A lot of them had the sort of lefty credentials that usually cause me to roll my eyes involuntarily. But I figured, if there’s one thing lefties and a libertarian-leaning writer can agree on, it surely must be the legal protection of offensive speech.

Ah, how naive 10 years away from the ivory tower have made me, and how terribly did I underestimate lefties’ creativity when it comes to rationalizing the regulation of speech they don’t like. Today, I learned, we can’t just defend a speaker’s freedom of expression.

First we must explore the speaker’s power relationship to the rest of society (duh!). Is the speaker talking about the differential impact of poverty or protesting the domination of the corporate media? If so, then full steam ahead and damn the security-obsessed fascist censors (and shame on the very same corporate media for not giving the speaker more coverage). This is a minority voice that must be protected from systematic exclusion.

But what if the speaker is talking about something, well, not so progressive? Like opposing immigration? Or — God forbid — defending the military industrial complex? Of course, then, the speaker must by definition be socio-economically privileged — wealthy and powerful. His speech does not need protection because his venom is already being spewed by the corporate media. Hell, he probably *owns* the corporate media. Don’t waste your precious time and activism on *him*.

Sure, the speakers did their best to appear balanced. “We have defended the rights of white supremacists” was a typical phrase tossed around to prove a speaker’s liberty-loving bona fides; but is that really such an achievement when one gets the impression that these people find crude racist rubes less offensive than a biting right-wing columnist like Mark Steyn?

And of course, I was truly wet behind the ears to have thought that any discussion of free expression could occur without the race of the debaters being made an issue.

One member of the audience told me that being a libertari-

an (I outed myself at the beginning of my talk) is a “privilege” that would not be available to me if I were of a different race or religion (for example, a dark-skinned Muslim rather than a white Jew). At least that’s what I think she meant. What she actually said was that being a libertarian is a “privilege” that would not be available to me if I were “a terrorist.” Which is equally untrue, but far more confusing.

And this same questioner wanted to know the racial make-up of the newsroom of the paper where I work in order to judge our decision not to publish the infamous Danish Mohammed cartoons. Apparently just knowing what considerations the individuals on the news desk weighed — which my colleague explained in his own speech — was not enough. The questioner had to know what color everyone was in order to deduce how much relative “power” they had. I suppose the fact that my colleague is a white male — a perspective that is already *sooooo*

totally readily available and amplified by the ruling class — negated everything he had to say on the matter.

But didn’t anyone stick up for the good old-fashioned notion of legally defending all speech, no matter how odious (or, you know, *corporate*)? I mean, besides us media-mogul acolytes? A couple speakers did, but it was disheartening that the only truly vigorous traditional defense of speech rights came from the oldest member of the gathered “civil liberties” crowd. Apparently, defending expression from censorship across the board is now seen as something of an old-fashioned notion — one from which the younger generation of academics and activists has moved on.

Worse, it quickly became clear that broadcasting speech has come to be seen as an entitlement. If people from a “marginalized community” have an opinion to express, I was told, they should have a positive “right” to express that opinion in the private publication of their choice, regardless of the opinion of that publication’s editors or the coherence of the marginalized person’s writing.

Clearly depending on the new “progressives” and “equality lovers” to keep government from suppressing dissent is a dodgy prospect. So don’t kid yourself about this. The next time free expression needs defending, you’re going to have to do it yourself.



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