

## **In defence of suppressing racist speech**

Panel discussion “Letting racists speak: what’s the problem?”  
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Not letting racists speak can consist in any of a variety of doings. Prior censorship to prevent people expressing racist views, confiscation of racist publications and the computers and photocopiers used to produce them, and fines and imprisonment are means to deal with racist expression that lie at only one end of the spectrum of suppression. Other, more informal, means, means that people like you and me can use, people who are not acting under colour of uniform or office, include denying racists venues at which they can make their views known, shouting them down or otherwise disrupting them, refusing to run their ads, boycotting publications that do run their ads, defacing or removing their posters and pamphlets, and letting them know that we’d be happy to complain to the police should they express hate.

What means are most appropriate will depend on the circumstances or villainy of the expression. Sometimes the racist can be handled properly only by the police and the law, while other times shouting him down is just what’s called for.

But why should we want to prevent racists from speaking? Why should we want their views suppressed? We all agree, of course, that what the racists say is false or demeaning or vicious or worse, but shouldn’t we want to meet it not with suppression but with our own words, with criticism and truth?

There are, I think, three separate lines of argument in favour of not letting racists speak. The first concludes that attempting after the fact to defuse the threat posed by racist speech might well fail. The second concludes that attempting after the fact to rectify the harms racist speech causes must fail. The third concludes that preventing racists from speaking is a fine way to express our own commitment to anti-racism and social justice.

1. When racists speak publicly, their views get heard. They get heard by people who are not racist and who are prepared and able to explain the superiority of their anti-racist attitudes of inclusion and justice. But they also get heard by people of two other sorts. They get heard by white people who already harbour racist attitudes. And they get heard by lonely and bitter and excluded white people. Those who already harbour racist attitudes find, in hearing racism spoken publicly, their attitudes legitimated and validated. This emboldens them to act on those attitudes. The targets of racism then suffer. When racism gets into the air, its targets suffer in ways big—in difficulties finding housing or education or jobs or policing—and in ways small—at the lunch counter, on the bus, on the street.

Lonely, bitter, and excluded white people are like the rest of us: they want to belong and they want a purpose. Racists and racism can give them both. They hear the racists and they find that they themselves belong to a good and noble group, the white race. They hear that their

group has been stripped of its birthright by people inferior to them. Their purpose is now clear: to overcome this injustice, to right this wrong, to enable their group to reassume its proper place in the scheme of things. Again, then, the targets of racism will suffer.

Criticism of racist ideas and proposals might well lose in the competition for these people's attitudes. Indeed, most probably it will. Racism and anti-racism, after all, are not really matters of facts and figures about the races. They are, rather, emotional attitudes, ways of feeling. The mildly racist shop keeper or landlord isn't best understood as holding mistaken beliefs about blacks or about their differences from whites. He's best understood simply as not liking black people. What an informed researcher might have to say in response to racist claims about innate differences and abilities most likely will not connect with any of what moves these everyday racists. Even less likely will the researcher's pronouncements connect with any of the cares or concerns of lonely, bitter, and excluded white teenagers.

Now criticism and truth do sometimes make a difference. Our emotions and feelings and needs are not totally isolated from our empirical beliefs. Criticism and truth *can* make a difference, but usually they don't, and the matter is just too important to be left to chance.

2. When racists speak publicly, their views get heard. They get heard not only by white people, but also by black people, by First Nations' people, by whoever is the target of the racists' speech. Hearing racist views and hearing the solutions the racists propose can be debilitating and frightening. Neither the emotional scars left after hearing yourself demeaned and mocked nor the fear that you will be treated unfairly or with violence can be healed by critical discussion and argument. Scars and fears aside, people from oppressed groups just ought not be subject to insult, ridicule, or calumny.

Criticism and truth in this case are not even unreliable tools with which to put things right after the fact; they are simply not tools at all. The damage has been done and cannot be undone. With the racist words themselves comes the hurt and the harm. For the sake of people's emotional health and their happiness, and even just to keep them safe from unearned insult, we ought, then to prevent racists from having their say.

3. We are anti-racists committed to warm, friendly, caring relations among all people and to social justice for the oppressed and marginalized. These commitments are humane and noble. They are partly constitutive of who we are. We take great joy in expressing them. One way in which to express them is to stand up to racists, to stand in their way. Another way in which to express them is to show our solidarity with the targets of racism. In suppressing racist speech, by tearing down posters, disrupting lectures, or however else, we are standing up to racists and showing solidarity with the people they attack. We are, that is, expressing our humane and noble commitments.

To refrain from attempting to suppress racist speech would, then, be to deny to ourselves a set of our deepest commitments. We could have a good reason to deny these commitments only if they conflict in the case with other, even deeper, commitments. But nothing is more important to us socially or politically than anti-racism and social justice. So we have no good reason to deny our commitments. We are right to act on them and to attempt to suppress racist speech.

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One might worry that since people can mistake legitimate socially-responsible criticism of, say, affirmative action for racist speech, we who advocate not letting racists speak might now and again shout down people who in fact are not racists. One might worry, moreover, that our standing ready to suppress racist speech will have a chilling effect on criticism and discussion of

sensitive matters. Even with the best of intentions, we might apply our methods too widely and, thereby, reap bad results.

We ought to take this worry seriously. Even so, we should continue to be prepared to suppress racist speech. We need to be careful, of course, but our care ought not paralyze us. We can, most often, get it right that this and this *is* racist speech while that isn't. When we do make a mistake, we must correct it quickly and learn from our experience, so as to be less likely to make a mistake the next time. Though we cannot say we will never make mistakes, we can nonetheless maintain that we won't make many, and that the good we do overall in the fight for inclusion and social justice will far exceed the small, and correctable, wrongs we might occasionally commit.

[Note: The philosophy society sought to have on the panel someone who advocates suppressing racist speech. When no one they contacted accepted their invitation, I decided to present what I take to be the best arguments for censorship and suppression.]