

The left's version of hate speech: guilt by association

Leftists who argue for hate speech bans ignore the far left's own version, argues Eric Heinze.



The far-left accuses Western capitalism of entrenching worldwide economic and ethnic underclasses. In solidarity with disempowered groups, leftists identify hate speech as a symptom, or indeed a cause, of broader discrimination. The notion of leftist hate speech is, for them, a contradiction in terms.

Within classical Marxism, the symbol of oppression was the large property owner. Yet that figure was not altogether a target of 'hatred'. There's certainly no such thing as a leftist *Mein Kampf* and that's no accident. Marx could be deliciously sarcastic, but was too much an intellectual snob to bask in so tawdry an emotion as hatred. He would disdain any such impulse as false consciousness, an 'alienated' response in a world overwhelmed by economic forces beyond ordinary people's control. Marx's nemesis was neither individuals nor groups on grounds of any

intrinsic human quality but rather an entire exploitative system. Marxist animosity against the wealthy classes therefore differs substantially from racist or other more familiar types of hate speech.

Leftist stances are by no means the preserve of quaint oddballs. After all, centrists and social democrats often share leftist ideals in principle, worried only that the left falls short on pragmatics. Centrists may hurl plenty of accusations at the left such as economic illiteracy or soft spots for dictators, and may poke fun at caricatures of angry or aggressive leftists. But I doubt many of them see leftists as hateful. Humourlessly self-absorbed? Perhaps. Smugly self-righteous? At times. Stunningly hypocritical? Well, nobody's perfect. But can leftists be hate-mongers?

During the G20 summit in Hamburg in July 2017 clashes between police and leftist protesters attracted considerable attention. The protesters were virulent, though that's scarcely a surprise at such events. The way the German media portrayed the clashes, however, differed markedly from the international coverage. Not just among right-wing outliers, but throughout the mainstream and even left-leaning press, protesters were accused of inciting hatred.

There's nothing unusual about this or that columnist grumbling from time to time about the left being as vicious as the people they condemn. These responses, however, went much further. The notion of leftist hate speech is now widely acknowledged in Germany. Given the nation's past, such a term isn't invoked lightly. To accuse an organised group of stoking hatred is to draw an unmistakable and ominous historical parallel.

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Riots on the Schulterblatt during the G20 summit. (Image by Bastian Schumacher under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license) Image link: <http://bit.ly/2wL5EOf>

Sadly, political practice rarely obeys high theory. One learns no more about the fullness of leftist movements from ploughing through Marx than one learns about the texture of liberal capitalism by traversing Adam Smith, or of Christianity and Islam by reciting sacred texts.

A hallmark of racism and other more customary hatreds is guilt by inclusion, an identity or characteristic attributed solely through belonging to some reviled group. The hallmark of leftist hate speech, by contrast, is guilt by association. The pristine theoretical tract may well portray the moneyed elite as a contained group, but leftist histories have looked vastly different. From Lenin, to Stalin, to Mao, to Pol Pot, to Castro, to Chavez, countless voices venturing doubt about official doctrine have become instant 'class enemies' or 'foreign agents', with tens of millions of corpses to prove it. Yet today guilt by association is applied inconsistently. Why do leftists commonly condemn social democrats and centrists, but not the Soviet Union or Chavez?

On a smaller and tamer level, many people challenging the positions of British Leftists like Jeremy Corbyn or Ken Livingstone, even when doing so from a centre-left standpoint, end up being rebuked as 'right-wing fascist', 'Tory scum', 'Zio', and such like.

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'Right-wing fascist'? I guess it's plucky enough, but is it hate speech? Ironically, it is above all on the far-left where we witness campaigns to censor speech on the view that even mildly crude utterances can snowball over time with devastating effect. When it comes to free speech, leftists have an equality problem.

On closer empirical and historical analysis, that snowball theory turns out to be rather complicated. Still, if we're searching for evidence supporting that view, then leftist movements supply it in heaps. The cries of 'fascist' by revolutionaries have often proved potent in history. Leftists purport to condemn hate speech because it not only hurts feelings but because it fuels brutality. But if violent consequences are their ultimate concern, then a long and bleak history points to their own backyard.

'Silence is complicity' has become a well-worn slogan. Yet when we witness not merely silence but outright leftist apologetics for some of history's and today's most heinous regimes, then we must wonder whether violence or brutality were ever really a core concern on the far-left at all.

Leftists do have hate speech of their own, not through guilt by inclusion but through guilt by association. It leaves them in a bind. They may well continue to push for bans on hate speech. Still, we must wonder how coherently they can define that term when their own rhetoric has historically correlated to colossal brutality.

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