

## What is 'dehumanising' speech?

**Eric Heinze provocatively argues that no-platformers need to look into the mirror and examine their own blind spots.**



A prominent standpoint frequently arises in controversies about free speech. We can call it the 'Dehumanisation Thesis'. Its proponents believe that speakers ought to be denied platforms when their opinions [dehumanise](#) others, particularly members of socially vulnerable groups.

An accusation of dehumanising speech has been brought, for example, against Oxford Law Professor John [Finnis](#), who condemns homosexuality as a deviation from 'natural' sexual behaviour. Students have demanded Finnis's dismissal. To say the least, Finnis's opinions about sexuality, like the views of many figures targeted for no-platforming, lack rigour. But what does it mean to claim that certain types of speech 'dehumanise'?

As chillingly dissected in Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, processes of dehumanisation have led to full-scale atrocities, from the trans-Atlantic slave trade, to colonial atrocities, to the Holocaust, to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Some people may see those as anomalies, but they are in fact expressions of an historical constant: societies throughout time have implemented hierarchies of power, both social and political, both formal and informal.

No, not all hierarchies lead to Auschwitz. But nor does all dehumanising speech. To say that [Steve](#)

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[Bannon](#), [Nick Griffin](#), or indeed Finnis 'dehumanise' members of vulnerable groups is to say that such speakers relegate those groups to a subordinated social status. By implication, those who accuse such speakers of dehumanisation are doing so in the name of a politics that does not dehumanise.

Is there such a thing? I object to the dehumanisation charge not because it is wrong, but because it is too right by half, applicable to so much speech that it's doubtful even the most seemingly benign political speaker could ever avoid it.

Just as human societies have always maintained hierarchies, arbitrarily subordinating and in that sense dehumanising one or another group, pretty much every political or social philosophy ends up doing the same, even if most of us choose our preferred philosophies by 'focussing on the positive'. Shall we admit only those speakers who tell the sanitised versions of their own theories, who peddle political fairytales in which no innocents are ever sacrificed? Are we not better off with those who lay their bigotries on the table in plain view?

For leftists, those questions pose some embarrassments. The likes of Bannon, Griffin, or Finnis are the least of their problems. If protesters are concerned about dehumanisation, they would have to demand the elimination of most economics faculties in the Western world. After all, even if we leave aside the outright free-marketeters, most left-leaning economists can promise only incremental improvements, still usually maintaining some greater-or-lesser commitment to markets that consign millions to poverty, and therefore to arbitrary subordination – to dehumanisation. Curiously, in the years since no-platforming disputes have raged, even the most laissez-faire of economists are rarely, if ever, targeted.

While we're at it we'll also need to ditch most politics departments, until every staff member can openly commit to a political model that entails no arbitrary power relationships. To be clear, I don't deny that free speech can pose risks when speakers preach hierarchy. Equal dangers come, however, from those who insist that they do not. The loftiest egalitarianisms have been marshalled to kill and brutalise in the millions.

My demand is not for flawless consistency. My point is not that campus censors can legitimately ban some offensive speech only if they ban all of it. Rather, my objection is to their unacknowledged assumption that their own politics remain cleansed of dehumanising elements. They assume their own political hygiene.

Leftist thought has done much to tear down myths of philosophical purity. For example, it has challenged views that the Enlightenment was altogether progressive, as if colonialism had been merely peripheral. Leftists maintain that subordination of the non-European savage became constitutive of notions of a civilised Europe. They reject any attempt to portray racism as a sheer aberration. Leftists call the dehumanising of blackness constitutive of whiteness, the dehumanising of sexual minorities constitutive of monogamous heterosexuality, the dehumanising of women

constitutive of masculinity.

Whiteness, masculinity, and heterosexuality are not, then, inherently pure categories, as if only accidentally contaminated by their trespasses and therefore handily cleansed by adopting some new policy or tinkering with some old one. Can anyone still claim that such failings were merely mistakes – that they were not the real culture of whiteness, not the real culture of masculinity, not the real culture of heterosexuality? Those who attempt to whitewash the past in such a way are rightly greeted with derision.

Curiously, however, the same analysis never applies to leftism. As always, of course, we must recall that 'leftism' means many things and applies to people with often highly divergent, at times mutually exclusive perspectives. Much leftist writing does grudgingly concede the horrors of Stalinist, Maoist, Khmer and other such regimes (though is still reticent on Castro, Ortega, or Chavez), but then solely on the assumption of leftism's inherent hygiene: those regimes weren't the real Marxism! Suddenly all the horrors are only peripheral to leftism, not constitutive of it. Similarly, as we see today, leftist antisemites are only a few bad apples, entirely peripheral, fundamentally pure because they only really care about Palestinians. According to Alain [Badiou](#), it is 'not possible' for leftism to contain any inherent, any constitutive antisemitism. Leftist antisemitism is merely a pesky (or deviously engineered?) misunderstanding. And so we have it: leftist purity.

To be clear, my view is not that, since all political models dehumanise, one philosophy is no better than another. My stance is not ethically relativist. I agree with many of the leftist stances of no-platformers. But they need to stop peddling a simplistic dichotomy, namely, that their censorship campaigns pit their own non-dehumanising theory against someone else's dehumanising theory. They should proclaim candidly that they are censoring someone else's dehumanising politics in favour of their own dehumanising politics, presumably in the (wholly untested) hope that their own politics are relatively less dehumanising. Notwithstanding their strident vows to the contrary, today's no-platformers simply aim to do what all censors have always done – to suppress others' philosophies in favour of their own.

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