Do not silence people; debate and engage them

Jonathan Petrie
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During the protests of President Donald Trump's inauguration, you may have seen Richard Spencer — notable alt-right, white nationalist leader — get punched in the face during an interview. In response, a lot of people shared the video praising the actions of the violent perpetrator, citing Spencer’s racist ideology as a means to justify violence. Here’s the issue. No matter how much you disagree with someone, you do not get to punch them. Violence does not solve this debate.

I do not sympathize with the ideology of the alt-right. I think a lot of their ideas are ignorant and dangerous. When you watch alt-right rallies, you can even catch people using the Nazi salute, which is worrisome and a telling sign of the horror their ideas can lead to. But still, don’t hit them.

Let’s flip the situation. Say that there was a leftist feminist leader being interviewed and you saw a video of a guy punching them. Is that okay? Surely if you are for one, you should be for the other. If not, you are being a hypocrite. To you, it is okay to hit people you disagree with, but not people you agree with. You wish to silence others through violence.

Regardless of the joy that may arise from seeing someone you hate getting hit, if you are going to be a true liberal, you must respect the rights of others to speak freely. Liberals believe in free speech, civil engagement and open debate. Silencing the opinions of other people is not liberal; it is illiberal. The proper way to respond to bad ideas is to engage and debate them. But I think the left may have forgotten how to do that.

Obviously, advocating for violence is not a doctrine of the political left, but the lack of open forum and debate has been an issue. It almost sounds cliché to argue, but on college campuses across the country, you can see students not allowing political conservatives like Milo Yiannopoulos, Ben Shapiro and Steven Crowder, or liberals like Ayaan Hirsi Ali or Bill Maher speak on their campuses because they might offend somebody.

This “political correctness” culture has done a lot of damage. One thing particularly important was the election of Trump. Because of the constant clamoring of the politically correct, Trump was unstoppable. Think of the story of the boy who cried wolf. In the time leading up to Trump, the politically correct left had called so many people “sexists” and “fascists” that when someone who actually had sexist proclivities or made a fascist appeal showed up, nothing they said could hurt. Their words were rendered meaningless.

Trump’s supporters weren’t a bunch of racists or sexists. They were a bunch of people fed up with the political establishment. When you have people like Hillary Clinton go on stage and refer to these people as a “basket of deplorables,” how do you think that makes them feel? Do you really think that is how you win people over?
The only way to constructively discuss political issues is to sit down and listen to someone. When there is disagreement, argue the facts and don’t just hurl insults. If someone doesn’t believe in equal wage laws, it is not because they are sexist. In some cases, that may be true. But most of the time people are just unconvinced by much of the data. By telling someone that they are sexist for not believing the same as you, you are achieving nothing. You did not win an argument. They are not only unconvinced by your insults, but they may not want to engage with you again. And lastly, what if they had a valid point about the topic? You have now limited yourself from hearing more information and denied yourself the chance of having a better grasp on the issue.

I want my fellow liberals to start engaging in smart, civil debates with people. I do not want them to hide behind ad hominem buzz words like “bigot,” “racist,” “sexist,” “transphobic,” “ableist” or whatever else there is and expect that to win people over. Allow, or even encourage, people that you disagree with to come speak at your campuses. Our issues will never be solved using political correctness. It will only come by listening to each other and seeing where we can work together.

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