

No-platform: some thoughts*

Nicholas Vrousalis[†]

February 2013

The Cambridge Union Society (CUS) of the University of Cambridge recently announced it has invited Marine Le Pen to address its members.¹ A common liberal argument against not giving a platform to Le Pen has two parts:

- (1) To deny fascist speech freedom of speech is to violate a right to free speech.
- (2) No-platform denies fascist speech freedom of speech.

Therefore, no-platform violates a right to free speech.

Two things can be said about this argument.

The first is that (1) is not obviously true. To the extent that fascist speech comes under hate speech it is not obvious that one is entitled by right to articulate it. If I publicly say hateful things about you, then I am also *doing* hateful things *to* you. Just as my freedom to punch you (assuming I can punch you, and that there are no physical impediments to me punching you) shouldn't be protected, likewise my freedom to insult you in hateful ways shouldn't (always) be protected, at least not by right. At best, fascist speech raises no *general* claims for protection.

This claim is strengthened if we grant that hate speech *constitutes* harm to those it is directed against, or, more weakly, is very likely to *cause* harm to them. Here's a *liberal* case against fascist speech:

An opinion that corn dealers are starvers of the poor... ought to be unmolested when simply circulated through the press, but may justly incur punishment when delivered orally to an excited mob assembled before the house of a corn dealer, or when handed about among the same mob in the form of a placard. (Mill 2008, p. 62)

*Prepared for the Cambridge Anti-Fascist Teach-in, held at King's College, Cambridge, on Sunday 17 2013

[†]Faculty of Philosophy and Trinity Hall, Cambridge CB2 1TJ, nicholas.vrousalis@1mh.oxon.org

¹I reject both the claim that the CUS had a right to issue such an invitation (or a right to do so for the obvious, and cynical, publicity-related *reasons* it did), *and* that Marine Le Pen has a right to address the members of CUS. But I will not argue against the former claim here.

If we think, not implausibly, that is a *necessary part* of fascist action and propaganda that, whatever fascists actually say, and whatever they do, they say and do as an *'excited' mob* (Mill means here: very probably violent), then (nearly?) all fascist speech has the form of opinion that Mill is opposed to.

But even if we grant (1), that fascist freedom is generally protected by right, it still does not follow that *no-platform* for fascists is a violation of that right. What needs to be shown is that no-platform denies fascists freedom of speech, which is about having extensive, and sufficiently open, opportunities for self-expression. But it is a mystery why, if I sit in the middle of a room (in which neither you nor I are entitled, by right, to be), or lock you outside the room, or start reading poetry out loud, I thereby deprive you of such opportunities. Freedom of speech does *not* entail a right to be heard by others at any particular place and any particular time, for there is no such right. One might say that *others* have a right to hear what you have to say at some particular place and time. But no-platform does not encroach upon that right, for they can come and speak to you, or read your readily available stuff, at any particular place and time.

So both claim (1) and claim (2) are questionable. No-platform does not necessarily violate peoples' rights, or their freedom of speech. A final caveat about tactics: it does not follow from what I've said that there should be a *blanket* no-platform policy vis-à-vis fascist speech. All I've done is argue against the view that there should be a blanket *yes-platform* policy. The answer to the question whether there should be a blanket no-platform policy will depend, among other things, on empirical questions such as whether, for any particular social and political milieu, denying a platform to fascist X or fascist Y is more likely to increase their following and/or social appeal, in what ways, etc.. All this will depend, in turn, on how susceptible particular groups of people are to fascist ideology, what the probability of a pro-fascist backlash is, and so on. But in present circumstances a selective no-platform policy seems to me amply justified.

References

Mill, J.S. (2008), *On Liberty*, Oxford.