

Insult and Injury, Ideas and Actions

An Anarchist Defense of Unlimited Freedom of Expression

BAD Broadside #10

Virtually everyone in the united states claims to support freedom of speech and expression. When debate arises around attempts by certain individuals to exercise this freedom, however, one frequently finds purported free speech advocates among those hoping to suppress the speech of others. Unfortunately, the position taken by many anarchists and leftists on this issue is no more principled than that taken by more mainstream conservatives and liberals.

In practice, most people, whatever label they use to describe themselves, support the freedom to say things with which they agree, but favor efforts to prevent the expression of ideas which they strongly oppose. Many conservatives, for instance, wish to prevent any discussion of homosexuality which does not condemn it, but advocate the freedom of college students to use racist expressions. While, on the other hand, quite a number of liberals and leftists support allowing black racists to speak on college campuses, but oppose attempts by white racists to have public rallies. And anarchists have frequently sided with those who oppose free speech, going so far, at times, as to physically attack white racists.

One argument heard from those who wish to stop others from expressing themselves is that saying or depicting something nasty is the same as doing something nasty. By this logic, racist speech is the same as physically attacking someone because of their color, or the acting out of a rape scene by performers in a video is an actual rape. This is simply untrue. But using expressions like "verbal assault" to describe name-calling tends to blur the difference between speech and action, between insult and injury. Even as children, we were taught that "sticks and stones may break our bones, but names will never hurt us." And, while it is not true that we are not in some way "hurt" by being called names or otherwise offended by the speech of others, a clear distinction must be maintained between emotional distress and physical pain. Self-defense is completely justified when one is physically attacked, whatever the reason. But, offensive speech, while we may wish to respond to it using various non-violent methods, is something we must allow if we wish to have a free society.

Another rationale for stifling the expression of others is that, even though the speakers or writers are doing no more than propagating certain ideas, these ideas might encourage some people to engage in actions which could physically hurt others. It is certainly true that people's actions are motivated by what they think, and that their ideas may be influenced by others. Nevertheless, wherever people acquire the beliefs which motivate them, each individual is responsible for her or his own actions. If someone, after hearing a racist speech attacks someone of a different color, or destroys someone's porn magazine after reading an anti-porn article, the attacked are justified only in defending against their attackers, not the speaker or writer. *Only hostile actions merit a physical response.*

The way to respond to ideas with which one disagrees is to propagate different ideas. Open debate of opposing ideas is the best method of finding the truth and promoting ethical philosophies. Only those who fear that they will lose in such a debate advocate that the views of their opponents should be suppressed. Those who advocate a new kind of society where people live in freedom, but feel it is necessary to suppress the ideas of others in order to achieve this new world, might benefit from a look back at the history of the soviet union, where exactly such a philosophy was implemented. As an early critic of the leninists said, "Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently."

Boston Anarchist Drinking Brigade (BAD Brigade)

PO Box 1323

Cambridge, MA 02238

Internet: bbrigade@world.std.com

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