Turn Pushers of This 'Anti-White' Conspiracy Theory Into Pariahs

Free speech proponents should shun the people who push lies so vile and dangerous that they should be ostracized in the "marketplace of ideas."

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All ideas are not created equal.

Even the most ardent free speech supporter should be able to make the distinction between "censorship" and marginalizing the worst ideas as beyond the pale—and to make proponents of those ideas unwelcome in polite society.

The tragedy in Buffalo has once again turned attention to the rise of so-called "great replacement theory" on the right. As with previous white supremacist terrorists—from the 2019 Christchurch shooter to the 1995 Oklahoma City bomber, the killer was animated by a noxious brew of ideas centered around the claim that there is a deliberate plot to commit to genocide against white Americans—using non-white immigration as its supposed primary means.

Tucker Carlson, the most watched cable news host in the country, has repeatedly endorsed the basic tenets of replacement theory. He does not even shy away from using the term, denouncing "the replacement of legacy Americans with more obedient people from far away countries."

Carlson's allusions are heavily sanitized and rarely cross the line into explicitly racial terms, though they often tiptoe right up to the line—like when he said immigrants are making America "dirtier." And unlike the much more extreme sources cited by radicalized terrorists, Carlson does not posit that the globalist elite plot to alter America's demographics is being run by the Jews.

The much more proximate influences on white supremacist terrorists can be found in online communities of openly avowed neo-nazis. It is this material that fills the rambling manifestos of many of the deranged killers. The relationship between such fringe environments and the xenophobic political messages that are broadcast to much larger audiences should not be overstated.

But what are we to make of the mainstreaming of replacement theory and its relationship to individual acts of terrorism committed by radicalized extremists who buy into it? Is it cancel culture run amok to draw a line from those who promote replacement theory to the actions of these terrorists and their rambling manifestos?

No, it's not.

Some ideas, on their own terms, imply justifications for violence as morally legitimate and justified.

That's in large part because such claims implicate our very widely shared moral sensibilities about when violence is justified. When somebody says that marijuana should be legal, or it would be good for more children to attend private religious schools, or that Biden should forgive student loans—there is no implication that you should go kill people to make it happen. They are understood to be part of the give and take involved with policy debates in a democracy, goals to be pursued by peaceful means.

Other assertions, by their very nature, suggest the necessity of violence, including extralegal violence.

If the 2020 presidential election really was stolen, then it is easy to conclude that the Constitution must be defended by any means necessary. If some segment of society is an irredeemable enemy class whose very existence is an injustice, there is no living with them under the governance of neutral institutions. If the United States government is conspiring to commit genocide and ethnic cleansing against Americans, and if immigration is an act of "invasion," that puts us closer to Nazi Germany (or at least Putin's Russia) than a functioning, legitimate liberal democracy. These are not mere public policy opinions, they're assertions of *casus belli*.

There's a wide range of moral culpability outside of what is properly a very narrow legal standard for incitement. It's entirely appropriate to negatively judge ideas, in part, because they have an obvious and demonstrated tendency to instigate horrific acts of violence. In some cases, we should judge them very harshly. There's nothing wrong with recognizing a difference between healthy civic discourse and somebody fuming about how America becoming a majority-minority nation is a crime against humanity and an act of war.

Not all political ideas one disagrees with should be shunned, and it is an important liberal virtue to leave a generous space for disagreement. But that doesn't mean we have an obligation to remain oblivious to the reality that ideas have consequences, and some extremely bad ideas have extremely bad consequences. Just because the government shouldn't interfere or censor doesn't mean our society is better off if every such idea is accepted in polite company, or that we shouldn't object to them being endorsed and promoted to a mass audience.

This impulse is, for good reasons, especially strong in cases of hateful bigotry and dehumanizing rhetoric combined with wild conspiracy theories. We're allowed to make this judgment, to exercise our freedom of association as well as our freedom of speech.

"Replacement theory" is firmly in that category. It's not a close call.

Its premises are false and its implications are extraordinarily harmful. Its normalization and spread enables a pipeline of radicalization that eventually carries some individuals, the ones who really take it seriously, to heinous acts of violence.

Speech should remain free, and ideas should not be criminalized. It is precisely because of that principle that we must exercise our own good judgment about which ideas we do not want to be associated with. It could be what you'd tolerate at the dinner table, or it could be what you'll allow on your website or TV station.

Regarding racist conspiracy theories as beyond the pale—and not just another entry in the marketplace of ideas—is what a healthy free society should do. And that means those who propagate such vile claims should be shamed, shunned, and discredited.

Doing so is our First Amendment right, an exercise of our most fundamental freedoms, no less than the right to promote hate and fear.

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