

## The Worldwide War Against Free Speech

Sony's withdrawal of *The Interview* didn't happen in a vacuum. It's only the latest evidence of a wave of 'grievance fundamentalism.'

By FLEMMING ROSE

December 23, 2014

COPENHAGEN – Sony's decision to withdraw its movie *The Interview* under threat from North Korea—at least temporarily—did not happen in a vacuum. It is part of a rising trend that I call “grievance fundamentalism,” which is, bit by bit, squelching free speech around the world. It's not just the hyper-sensitive Kim Jong Un in Pyongyang; more and more people and groups think they have a special right not to be offended – from Moscow to Manhattan, from Bombay to Berlin. Dictators and movements with an oppressive agenda are learning the language of grievance fundamentalism and use it with some success. I am speaking from experience. I went through something similar after my newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, published 12 cartoons depicting the Muslim Prophet Mohammad in September 2005.

In response, violence erupted in January and February 2006 and hundreds of people were killed, embassies were burnt down in the Middle East and Danish products were boycotted in the Muslim world, though few people in fact had seen the images of the Prophet.

And I was accused of being complicit in these crimes because I had published the cartoons. Even a serious newspaper like *The New York Times* wrote that the cartoons “incited violent and even deadly protests in other countries” – as if the perpetrators were robots without a mind to make a decision on how to react.

In the same way, Sony could be held accountable for a terrorist attack - God forbid – as revenge for the movie, a comedy that depicts the assassination of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. It's like accusing a rape victim: Why did you wear a short skirt at the discotheque Friday night?

Free speech is getting an increasingly bad name even in democracies. Earlier this year the Swedish artist Dan Park was convicted in a hate speech case and sentenced to six months in jail after nine of his images were exhibited in a private gallery in Malmo. The court ordered his works destroyed. They were denounced as racist, though an art critic explained that they in fact were targeting racial discrimination with the language of sarcasm. There was no debate whatsoever in Sweden about the imprisonment of Park. The public applauded the verdict.

In the fall of 2014 Christ Church in Oxford, England, cancelled a debate about abortion. The pro-choice and pro-life arguments were to be presented by men. This caused furious feministic Oxford students to set up a Facebook page with demands for the debate to be called off on the grounds that the protesters were deeply offended. Only women had a legitimate right to discuss the issue, the implication being that only Nazis have a right to debate Nazism, and only Communists are entitled to talk about Communism. Christ Church caved in.

So did the London Barbican when in September of this year it pulled the plug on an exhibit exploring racism by the white South Africa artist Brett Bailey. A re-creation of a human zoo from the 19th century that features African performers in cages, it was intended to provoke a debate about slavery, colonization and racism, but the artist was instead accused of racism himself. People behind the petition to cancel the exhibition argued that they wanted barbaric things of the past to remain in the past. The logic is amazing: If you don't talk about any given thing it will cease to exist. This is the way a totalitarian regime treats the real world. If you ban certain words the reality behind them will disappear.

Grievance fundamentalism, and the belief that a thought police can create an offense-free world that will be better, is also popular within the European Union. A few years ago the EU adopted a policy framework that requires every member state to pass legislation against hate speech and Holocaust denial. It means that several new democracies had to pass additional laws limiting free expression and in order to balance the books some of them passed laws banning denial of the crimes of Communism as well. When I researched my new book, *The Tyranny of Silence*, I was surprised to find out that the majority of laws against Holocaust denial in Europe were passed after the fall of the Berlin Wall. One would think that they might have made some sense in the post-war years when there was a widespread fear in Europe for a repetition of the mass killings, but in a new Europe, united and free, half a century after the fact?

This new trend is driven by a belief that evil words sooner or later will lead to evil deeds, and that there is no principle difference between the two. This sounds to me like dangerous logic, popular among fanatics who equate blasphemy and terror, who identify critical words with violent actions. It is widespread in countries like Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia, where both terror and blasphemy are crimes punishable by death.

This logic was also behind the clamp-down on dissidents behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War. Critical words were perceived like physical attacks on the regimes in the Communist bloc. In this kind of world it can be difficult to figure out the difference between an offensive cartoon or movie and committing mass murder.

To me it is a reverse logic that involves evaluating speech on the basis of the reaction it generates, without considering whether those reactions are proportionate or reasonable, or whether the thing that is said is legal or meaningful or uttered as a satirical comment. Basically it amounts to giving people who feel like reacting with violence a free hand to decide whether speech incites terror.

The fact is that none of us can control or determine the reactions of others to what we say. Words or images cannot in themselves cause action. This is even less so in a democracy than in a

dictatorship where state propaganda is used to create reality. Probably that's why Kim Jong Un and his propaganda machine believe that a comedy of fiction equals factual action.

To uphold free speech in a democracy, it's crucial to distinguish between words and deeds. Both democracies and dictatorships do qualify certain actions as crimes, though they do apply different kinds of punishment. Both systems prohibit theft, speeding, tax evasion and other violations of the law. The crucial distinction between open and oppressive societies ought to be unconditional freedom of speech.

Unfortunately that isn't the case in most liberal democracies anymore as the examples above show. In that sense the relationship between words and deeds begin to resemble one another in the free and non-free world. There's no principal distinction between them. Evil words ought to be banned like evil deeds, because words are actions and they create the reality they express. Any dictator like Kim Jong Un believes this is the case, but why should free societies accept this absurdity, though the grievance lobby, do it with the best of intentions?

Thus we are witnessing, in effect, an unholy alliance between oppressive regimes like North Korea and grievance fundamentalists in international organizations like the European Union and the UN and powerful lobbies, NGOs, student organizations and parts of the human rights industry in democracies that call for more legislation against hate speech. By doing so, they are blurring the distinction between words and actions, between offensive words and violent actions undermining our understanding of the nature of human actions and moral responsibility, and what it means to live in a democracy.

In today's grievance culture, with its identity politics and cultivation of the victim, the grievance lobby has succeeded in shifting the fulcrum of the human rights debate from freedom of speech to the necessity of countering hate speech; from the individual pursuing individual liberties to the individual being aggrieved by the liberties taken by others. That shift becomes counterintuitive, the logic increasingly absurd. Those aggrieved by free speech are defended, while others whose speech is perceived as offensive to such a degree that they are exposed to death threats, physical assault, and sometimes even murder are deemed to have been asking for it: "What did they expect offending people like that?"

Thus, perpetrators are transformed into victims, victims into perpetrators, and it's impossible to know the difference. The distinction between critical words and violent actions, between a picture and a violent reaction, between tolerance and intolerance, between civilization and barbarism is being dissolved.

That's what happens if we fail to insist on the distinction between words and actions, the distinction between movies in which an acting head of state is killed and the actual killing of a political leader. To escape the logic of Kim Jong Un and people like him we have to take a hard look at ourselves and our own culture. We have been preparing the ground for this for a long time through repeated calls for self censorship among artists, writers, museums, theaters and moviemakers. It will take the understanding of the fact that in a democracy we enjoy many rights that the people of North Korea can only dream of: the right to vote, the right to freedom of religion and speech, the right to freedom of assembly, to freedom of movement and so on and so

forth. But the only right we do not and should not have in a liberal democracy is a right not to be offended. Instead of sending people to sensitivity training when they say something insensitive, we all need insensitivity training. We all need thicker skins if freedom of speech is to survive in the age of grievance fundamentalism.

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