

# DEBATE YOU...

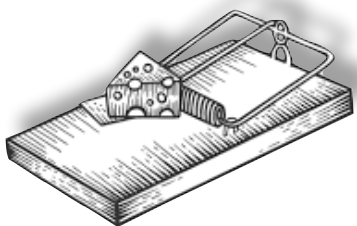
It's theatre. And right now the bad actors are winning.

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The far right does not respect the free and liberal exchange of ideas. It is not open to compromise, and it does not want a debate. It wants power [and] exploits the values of the liberal establishment by offering an impossible choice: betray their stated principles (free, open debate) or dignify fascism and white supremacy. This weaponizes tolerance to legitimize intolerance. If we deny racists a platform, they feed off the appearance of censorship, but if we give them a platform, they've also won by being respectfully invited into the penumbra of mainstream legitimacy. Either way, what matters to them is not debate, but airtime and attention. They have no interest in winning on the issues. Their image of a better world is one with their face on every television screen.

The marketplace of ideas is just as full of con artists, scammers, and Ponzi schemes as any other marketplace, and as always, when the whole thing comes crashing down, it's ordinary marks who lose everything.

The ideology: win at all costs and screw the other guy, because fools and their morals are easily parted. There is no deeper truth to be divined from "holding him to account," no point at which his racism and xenophobia will somehow become unacceptable to a public that has already bought its penny stocks in neo-nationalism.



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Too many well-meaning liberals are clinging with ten fingernails to the idea that their institutions are robust enough to withstand fascism. They believe, because the belief is soothing, that the marketplace of ideas cares about the value, durability, and quality of its wares rather than how shiny the packaging is, how catchy the jingle, how many times it shows up in your peripheral brand awareness, until it's the one you reach for on the shelf. They're the equivalent of the people who tried to sell cars in the 1920s by taking out full-page ads solemnly explaining how unlikely their machines were to break down rather than trying to sell you a dream of freedom and potency on four wheels.

The left is catastrophically losing the PR battle in the marketplace of ideas. I'm not saying that there's no point in talking to the far right at all. I have interviewed members of the far right in my capacity as a journalist. But academic research and investigative journalism are very different from formal public debate. Public debate — at least the way I was taught to do it at my posh school — is not about the free exchange of ideas at all. You only listen to the other guy so you can work out how to beat him, and ideally, humiliate him. I'm choosing my pronouns deliberately here. The format is fundamentally an intellectual dick-smacking contest dressed up in institutional lingerie, and while there are plenty of women out there who can unzip their enormous brains and thwack them on the table with the best of them, the formula is catastrophically macho.

**People rarely change their minds in the course of formal public debate.** Not the people on stage, and very few of those in the audience. Years of robust debate in my capacity as a commentator and journalist have taught me that you don't change minds simply by pointing out where someone is wrong. As a dear friend once told me, trying to bring someone over to your side by publicly demonstrating that their ideas are bad and that they should feel bad is like trying to teach a goat how to dance: the goat will not learn to dance, and you will make him angry. The ways people actually change their minds is by reading the mood of those around them and then going away and thinking about it, by being given permission to think what they were already thinking, or by being shamed into realizing how ignoble their assumptions always were.

Plus, being better at debating does not make you right. It just makes you better at debating. Any prep school debate champion can tell you that a bad story well told can beat a sober litany of facts, though it helps if you also have facts on your side.

Curating debate participants is itself a political choice, because the terms of a debate inform public opinion as



much as its content. I've lost count of the number of evenings I've spent in the role of "shouty leftist" juxtaposed with a set of Tory talking points in a suit, with ten or fifteen minutes (if we're lucky, a whole hour) to decide whether poor children should be allowed to eat during school holidays or whether migrants deserve human rights. What matters is not who wins on the merits. What matters are the terms:

### who gets to speak, and who must be silent.

The idea of the public sphere has always been elitist in practice, if not in principle. The people most likely to lose out are some of the least likely to have been trained in the art of public speaking or to have spent the past decade building a career in the media. They were too busy holding down four jobs, or trying to escape a civil war, or practicing medicine in a different language in a country they fled to with their family, or raising and then mourning their children. These are the people whose voices are truly being silenced, whose place in the lofty theatre of formal political debate is not subject to public discussion because they were never invited in the first place.

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The far right are not themselves committed to the principle of free speech. Far from it. In my encounters with neo-nationalists and professional alt-right trolls I have found them remarkably litigious — more than willing to use money and legal threats to silence their more serious critics. I've been legally prohibited from describing racists as racists. That's why you'll see so many news outlets use phrases like "alleged white supremacist" or "the deportation policy, which critics have described as xenophobic." It's not because there's serious doubt over where these people stand, it's because journalists are silenced by threats from speech "defenders" who have the money and spite to shut down their critics. I will not be bullied by bad-faith actors trying to rules-lawyer my own principles against me into treating neo-Nazis with respect they don't deserve.

They are unscrupulous. They incite violence. It's not my place to tell anyone else who to host at their events, but I can make a choice as a free individual about who I choose to associate with in a professional context, and the more of us who make that choice, the stronger the message it sends.

**Sunlight is neither literally nor figuratively the best disinfectant.**

**Modern white supremacy does not grow like bacteria — it grows like a weed, aggressively, crowding out everything else that stretches towards the light.**

**Nor is sunlight what the ritual of formal debate offers.**

**What it offers is a chance to build one's brand.**

Curation is a political choice, and so is the choice of who we allow to take lead roles in the theatre of public discourse. The idea that politeness and civility is owed to anyone in a position of power is one of the great gotchas of liberal thought.

Moderate liberalism cherishes the idea of "civility" because it allows it to believe in its own goodness and relevance. To refuse to debate someone is an act of discourtesy. It is rude. It implies that you do not consider that person's ideas or behavior worthy of basic respect. You would be amazed at the contortions people yank themselves into to avoid being rude, especially to people in positions of authority, or simply people whose faces they've seen on the television.

**Television interviewers have repeatedly failed to hold far-right leaders properly to account because one simply does not call someone a liar and a bigot on a respectable news program.**

I've come to think of this as the deference trap. It's a huge part of why I refuse to formally debate fascists. It is staggeringly clear that formal debate is failing to stop white supremacy. This is not an abstract philosophical issue. White supremacy is here, at the heart of world governments. The discussion about whether free speech can stop fascism is not actually about free speech; it's a proxy for a rolling identity crisis among the political mainstream. About whether the mechanisms of state power can withstand fascist takeover. About whether good people with good ideas can stop bad people with worse ones. Which, right now, they cannot. The arguments about what freedom of speech actually means are endlessly reheated because they're the last piece of real philosophical meat moderate conservatives have in their cupboard. It's a mistake to think that the far-right cares about the free speech debate as anything other than a way of confusing the enemy. The far-right doesn't have a profound philosophy, it has a media strategy. The first time that white supremacists are denied a formal public platform, they get to plead martyrdom, to call the opposition cowards. And the second time. And the third time. But there are only so many times you can whine that people aren't paying you enough attention before those same people get bored and lose interest.

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If we deny racists a platform, they feed off the appearance of censorship, but if we give them a platform, they've won by being respectfully invited into the mainstream. Either way, what matters to them is not debate, but attention. There is no perfect choice.

But there is a choice, and this, to my mind, is the sensible one: to refuse to dignify these people with prestigious public platforms, or to share them; to refuse to offer them airtime or engage them in public debate.

Fortunately, we live in a brave new world where real censorship is something that is almost infeasible unless you are extremely rich and venal and have an army of lawyers. If you want to hear what [the far-right] thinks, you can. Extensively, at many, many websites and forums. If you want to try to tease out and challenge the deeper truth behind far-right ideas, you're free to do so, although be prepared to be disappointed. You see, the deeper truth is that there is no deeper truth, no hidden nuance. The new right have already shown us exactly who they are. Now the rest of us get to choose who we want to be.

**As for me, I can't dictate who should and should not be allowed to speak, and I wouldn't want to. But I can make my own choice as a free citizen. So I choose not to debate them. I choose not to treat them with deference they don't deserve. I am not interested in hearing out the ideas of the far-right, because there are no new ideas on the far-right. There are only new recruits. And every time progressives sacrifice the public good on the altar of personal purity, there will be more.**

Excerpts from a 2018 essay by  
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while my computer  
is getting fixed  
over at

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