



UC Berkeley, Sproul Hall Plaza, October 1 1964. Free Speech Movement leader Mario Savio, speaking from the roof of a police car. He removed his shoes in order to do no damage. In the back seat of the car sits another leader of the movement, whom the police have arrested.

RADICALLY WRONG IN BERKELEY

By Raymond Barglow

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BERKELEY California is famous for its history of political protest. In 1949, faculty and students at the University of California opposed an anti-Communist loyalty oath imposed by the Board of Regents. In 1964, Berkeley was home to the Free Speech Movement and subsequently to resistance against the war in

Vietnam. These political efforts were all peaceful — very deliberately so. In the early 1960s, some Berkeley activists had traveled to Mississippi and other Southern states to give support to the Civil Rights Movement, and they returned as advocates of Martin Luther King's politics of nonviolence.

During the Free Speech Movement (FSM), the protesting students made a point of allowing the speech of those who disagreed with them. They held that even speech deemed repellent should be countered not by disallowing that speech but by meeting it verbally with a different point of view. "Freedom of speech," said FSM leader Mario Savio, "is something that represents the very dignity of what a human being is. ... That's what marks us off from the stones and the stars.... It is the thing that marks us as just below the angels." This high-minded ideal has not weathered well in Berkeley in recent years. In 2017, this town, former champion of free speech, has become known instead as its enemy: those who gather here in Berkeley to express their support for right-wing causes cannot anticipate that their meetings and rallies will be allowed. Committed to shutting down such events are several small but very militant left groups: "black bloc" and "Antifa," both of which originated in Western Europe in the 1980s, and "By Any Means Necessary," a revolutionary organization that was founded in the United States in 1995.



UC Berkeley, Sproul Hall Plaza, February 1 2017. Protesters light a bonfire, assault police, break windows, and prevent right-wing pundit Milo Yiannopoulos from speaking. A few demonstrators then march downtown, setting more fires and damaging property.

On February 1, 2017, Milo Yiannopoulos, a right-wing media star, was prevented from speaking in Berkeley by violent activists belonging to these groups and intent on, in their terms, “stopping Fascist speech.” On the day of Yiannopoulos’ scheduled appearance, Berkeley Mayor Jesse Arreguin tweeted: “Using speech to silence marginalized communities and promote bigotry is unacceptable. Hate speech isn’t welcome in our community.” A few hours later he qualified that statement in another tweet, “Violence and destruction is not the answer,” but that scarcely corrected the first impression conveyed to the world: across the political spectrum, the mass media condemned the “bigotry” and “hypocrisy” of Berkeley’s far left. An article in the liberal-leaning *Huffington Post* pointed out that Berkeley had gifted a propaganda victory to the right:

The violence at the UC Berkeley campus Wednesday night which cancelled the speech of alt-right provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos is such a debacle for the national opposition to Trump that it almost defies belief.... At exactly this moment, because of what happened at Berkeley, the Trump regime gets to present itself as the guardian of free speech in America.

Yiannopoulos’ aborted talk on the UC campus in February was followed by two more attempted right-wing rallies in downtown Berkeley on March 4 and April 15. On each occasion, activists were successful in using violence to prevent the gathering from happening. Then on August 27, Berkeley again drew national attention. In the morning, about 4,000 citizens rallied near the UC campus. The day was sunny and the demonstration entirely peaceful, organized in response to a planned “anti-Marxist” right-wing rally scheduled to take place that afternoon.

Mocking the stereotype of Berkeley as a bastion of Marxism, some of the counter-protestors donned Groucho Marx costumes. (Photo on the right taken by Emilie Raguso, used with permission)

This counter-protest gave peaceful expression to Berkeley’s solidarity with immigrants and other threatened communities. But several hours later and several blocks away, a small number of



leftists, most of them clothed in black, once again started fights with individuals whom they deemed “fascist” and therefore unwelcome in this city.

Defense of immigrants, African Americans, and Muslims is these activists’ avowed altruistic aim. But ironically, their strategy of violence and destruction of property has the opposite effect, casting the far right as staunch, outspoken freedom fighters, rather than increasing support for the very communities that they claim to “protect.”

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As a consequence of its new reputation for suppression of public speech, Berkeley has become the most coveted town in America for rallying the right. Celebrities like Ann Coulter, Ben Shapiro, and—again—Milo Yiannopoulos want to give talks in Berkeley because they know that the violent response to their appearance will vividly illustrate the right’s view of the left as intolerant and vile. As Michael Shermer noted on Twitter, Milo *wants* protesters at his events, even titling his latest tour the “Troll Academy Tour”, reminding students that if they really wanted to hurt Yiannopoulos just ignore him completely. There’s nothing a public political speaker hates more than staring out at an empty room.

Not surprisingly, Berkeley’s intolerance has become a favorite subject on Fox News and other right-wing media. (Fox News host Tucker Carlson has a regular feature titled “Campus Craziness” that finds plenty to ridicule about Berkeley’s free speech fights.) But voices on the left have criticized this intolerance too: veterans of Berkeley’s Free Speech Movement issued a statement in support of Yiannopoulos’ right to speak on campus, explaining that “Banning him just plays into his hands politically.... The best way to battle his bigoted discourse is to critique and refute it.”

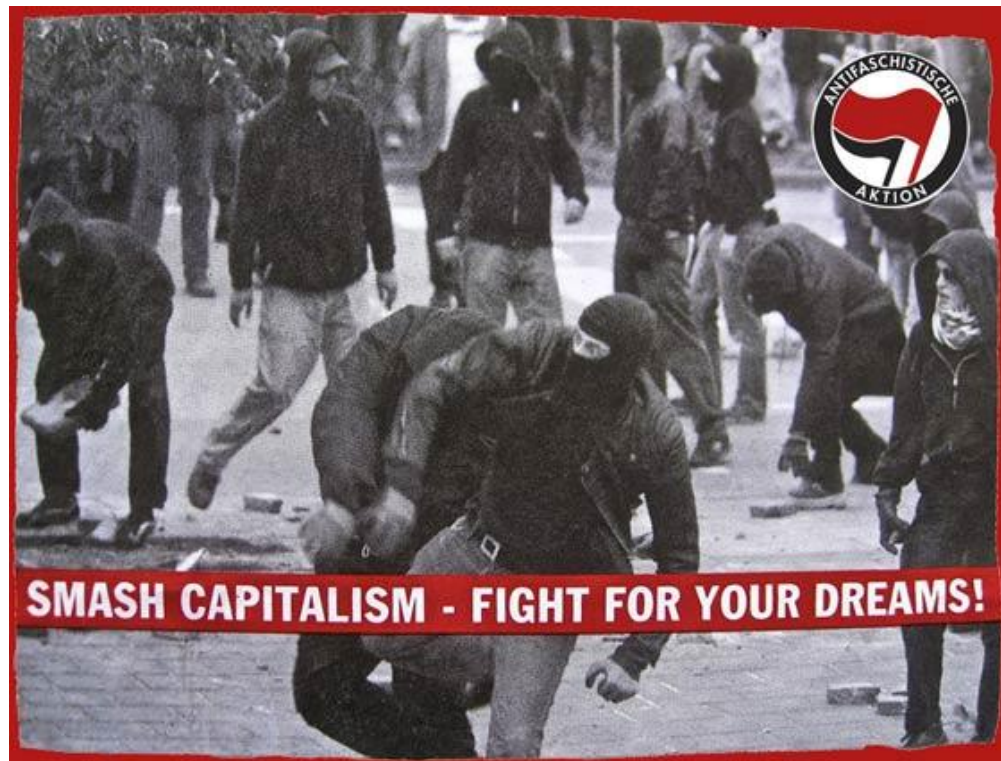
Violent demonstrations in Berkeley, purporting to “fight fascism,” fuel it instead; they not only communicate a negative image of the left to the entire country but also confirm the convictions of the assaulted right-wing protestors: the violent opposition that they encounter, which is abetted by the inaction of the Berkeley police,¹ reinforces their conception of the left as antagonistic to talk that it does not like. They leave our town strongly convinced that the left is an enemy of free speech.

This does not have to happen. Berkeley is not Charlottesville.² Some of us who have attended right-wing gatherings in Berkeley and have talked with pro-Trump demonstrators have found that we sometimes agree with them on fundamental values, including support for the struggling working class in this country. Although wide differences remain, it clearly is possible for us to reach through to one another, not with a fist but with an open hand.³ Dialogue of this kind is nearly excluded, though, by violent confrontation. Each side creates a reductive profile of the other. The far left reasons that the President is a fascist and white supremacist, so those who support him must fall into that category too. Protestors on the right similarly essentialize those whom they confront at the barricades: they are all communists who hate America. Contrary to these simple mirror images, sociological surveys disclose diversity within the ranks of the pro-Trump protestors as well as among those who demonstrate against them.⁴

Diligence on the part of city officials would have prevented the recent political violence in Berkeley. Although the fighting on the city’s streets has been conducted by a few alt-right and extreme left activists, its enabler has been a third party: Berkeley’s civic authority and police. The Mayor, City Council, and City Manager have neither spoken out clearly in favor of free speech nor worked with the police to ensure that freedom. (In stark contrast, UC Berkeley’s new Chancellor, Carol Christ, has unequivocally announced the university’s commitment to freedom of speech.⁵)

City leaders attribute the attacks against pro-Trump rallies to outside agitators, and it’s true that some of the adversaries of free speech come to Berkeley from elsewhere, intent on silencing right-wing speakers. But the thinking that lies behind their actions is far from foreign to the left in the Bay Area and beyond. The self-described “anti-fascist” activists in Berkeley are not “mindless” or “crazy.” They conceive of themselves as aligned with left theory and practice as

these have evolved over the past century and a half. They can cite precedents for their approach to politics in both the anarchist and Marxist traditions. The slogans proclaimed by Antifa, such as “Become Ungovernable” and “Smash Capitalism,” draw upon vintage strategy of the revolutionary left.



The longing for a better world can result in acts of foresight and courage—or in the dashing of any hope for such a world at all.

From an orthodox Marxist or anarchist perspective, a ruling class has to be overthrown, not persuaded. Since the time of Karl Marx, leftists have observed that capitalism maintains “law and order” by the application of coercion: the wealthy and the politicians whom they “buy” will deploy any means required to assert their rule, such as police intervention to break labor strikes and military action abroad to ensure access to raw materials and a cheap supply of labor. There has always been disagreement within the left about whether such predation can be peacefully resisted. A classical location of this debate was Germany at the turn of the 20th century, when Eduard Bernstein criticized the revolutionary scenario of a sudden rupture with capitalism and violent inauguration of a classless society. Some Social Democrats found that scenario

increasingly unlikely and joined Bernstein to advocate instead on behalf of an “evolutionary socialism” that would transform capitalism gradually.

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This debate within the left has never been resolved. In the 1960s, the American New Left departed from the Communist and Socialist left in significant ways, but never reached consensus about the use of force to advance progressive causes. In her 1969 essay “On Violence,” Hannah Arendt concluded that “The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is a more violent world.” Others on the left disputed that view. Martin Luther King Jr.’s pacifism, for example, was rejected by Malcolm X.

There are historical reasons why leftists give up on nonviolent paths to social change. During the early 1960s, it was plausible to believe that racial segregation and war could be countered effectively by means of marches and rallies and peaceful acts of civil disobedience. But in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as the war in Indochina dragged on, and American urban ghettos remained destitute, those willing to take extreme measures, such as the Weathermen and Symbionese Liberation Army (and groups like the Baader-Meinhof Gang in Germany and the Red Brigades in Italy), resorted to violent assault against “the system.”

Such “rage against the machine,” taken up these days in Berkeley by Antifa and its allies, targets the entire apparatus of public decision-making, including elections and the mainstream political parties that engage in them. This contempt for mainstream party politics, which is not just a marginal phenomenon today but has wide support on the left, is counter-productive. When the Democratic Party is written off as hopelessly compromised and corrupt, that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: abstention by those who are too “pure” to participate in the Party allows moneyed interests to play a dominant role in the Party and to set a conservative agenda that the left abhors.

Is there an effective alternative to a left politics of despair? The challenge facing the left today is to persuade the public that it really does have a program that will serve the common good—an inclusive program in keeping with the progressive vision written into the 2016 Democratic Party National Platform by activists in the Clinton and Sanders campaigns. Can a progressive coalition hold the line against the Trump agenda, take back the Congress in 2018, and win elections in state legislatures as well? Protect those communities that are threatened by the current Republican administration? Replace resurgent militarism with a peace program that provides jobs and rebuilds America? Impassioned organizing and advocacy, not violence in the streets, will advance the causes that communities like Berkeley hold dear. **S**

About the Author

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References

1. Police officers have been present at the pro-Trump rallies in Berkeley, but instead of protecting the demonstrators, they have mostly stood by inactively as the brawling occurs. According to Alex Vitale, a professor of sociology at Brooklyn College who advises law enforcement agencies, police are capable of intervening effectively in situations of this kind: see Veklerov, Kimberly and Ioannou, Filipa. 2017. "Berkeley Police Get Flak for Hands-Off Approach to Protest Mayhem." *San Francisco Chronicle* (April 17).
2. Many of the leaders of the pro-Trump rallies in Berkeley have been extremists with racist, totalitarian ideas. But many of their followers, although they may voice some of these ideas too, are self-styled "freedom lovers" and "patriots" who regard the left, not themselves, as anti-free speech and fascist.
3. Nonviolent intervention is capable of inaugurating dialogue between warring perspectives. See Chenoweth, Erica and Stephan, Maria J. 2012. *Why Civil*

Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict. New York: Columbia University; Nagler, Michael, 2014.

4. Diversity within the ranks of the alt-right is documented in Nagle, Angela. 2017. [Kill All Normies](#). Alresford Hants, UK. 2017.
5. “[T]he First Amendment protects even speech that most of us would find hateful, abhorrent and odious, and the courts have consistently upheld these protections.... We will not tolerate violence, and we will hold anyone accountable who engages in it.” Christ, Carol. 2017. “Chancellor Christ: Free speech Is Who We Are.” *Berkeley News, Public Affairs* (August 23).