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NO PLATFORM

an interview with
Mark Bray



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The role of protest and attempts to shut down the talks of alt-right/far-right wing figures such as Milo Yiannopoulos have been a controversial topic on the left and the media. But what are the actual goals of anti-fascists, anarchists and others on the left who advocate giving "no platform"? The following is a transcribed interview with Mark Bray of Black Rose on the Feb. 10, 2017 broadcast of WNYC's *On the Media*, and is reproduced here as a tool to be used for friends, family, co-workers or others who struggle with the idea of "free speech" in regards to opposing fascism. It should be noted that this interview does not touch on the critiques of power and authority that are also present in some antifascist circles, which often creates a broad amount of space (and rightly so) between itself and larger leftist movements. For anarchy and life, against the death machine of fascism! ~1312 Press

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Brooke Gladstone (WNYC): Those who subscribe to liberal values are supposed to “defend to the death the right, not only of their friends, but of their foes to speak their minds.” But anti-fascist protesters, or as they’re more commonly known, Antifa, follow a different path. Mark Bray is a visiting historian at Dartmouth College and the author of *Translating Anarchy: The Anarchism of Occupy Wall Street*. Mark, welcome to the show.

Tell me about the origins of anti-fascism – when it first began, I assume back in the 20s?

Mark: Sure, well, anti-fascism is as old as... fascism. And, so, certainly in the 1920s and 1930s, as fascist regimes in Italy and Germany started to gain political prominence, a number of left political groupings—socialists, anarchists, communists—started to organize primarily self-defense units, initially, because part of the Nazi and the Italian fascist *modus operandi* was to

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everyday anti-fascism is not having any tolerance for intolerance. It’s not agreeing to disagree about hateful behavior. It’s saying, ‘look, if you’re going to be a part of my life, you need to shape up. You can’t treat people like this; you can’t say things like this.’ And it’s holding people accountable. And sometimes that means you need to end some friendships. Or it means maybe you should boycott the business down the street that’s been rude to Latino immigrants.

Brooke: You say that our goal should be that, in twenty years, those who voted for Trump are too uncomfortable to share that in public.

Mark: Raise the social cost of being a bigot. And sometimes that’s enough to make it so that someone doesn’t feel empowered enough to act on it in a way that puts people in jeopardy. But, there is a growing radical sector of the left that is simply not going to take any chances of the possibility of ‘Alt-Right’ politics becoming the

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part of the strategy, right?

Mark: Yes, it is. It's an illiberal politics of social revolutionism applied to fighting the far right.

Brooke: In a recent article, you advocated for "everyday anti-fascism," that is, "anti-fascism that goes beyond punching Nazis."

Mark: Right. So, there are these glamorous topics—the video of Richard Spencer getting punched got millions and millions of shares. But if we want to think about how to create an anti-racist and anti-sexist society, we need to think about the everyday interactions that we have with each other at our workplaces, in our families, among our friends, and say: if someone is articulating a homophobic perspective, or prejudicial against immigrants, am I doing what I can to try to change their mind? Am I raising some sort of opposition or am I tacitly going along with it because I'm just letting it slide? So,

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organize paramilitary units that would terrorize their left opponents. So, the different communist parties and socialist parties would organize their own anti-fascist militias—one of which was called Anti-Fascist Action, the first group to use the name that's now become common for anti-fascist organizations around the world, and the derivation of the shortened term, Antifa. Moving into the 1930s, the Spanish Civil War and the struggle against Franco spread anti-fascist organizing around the world. Then, in the 1980s and 1990s, you have a re-birth of anti-fascist organizing, especially starting in Britain and Germany, as neo-Nazis started to target migrants and other marginalized communities. What we see today is the spread of that to the United States and beyond.

Brooke: One of the most frequently cited actions in Antifa history is what's referred to as the Battle of Cable Street, right? Talk about that, because it begins to set the stage for what we're seeing now.

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Mark: It certainly does. In 1936, the leader of the British Union of Fascists, Mosley, organizes a march of a couple thousand fascists through the East End of London which is a predominately Jewish neighborhood. In response to that, a whole group of leftists and Jewish residents of the area and other ethnic minorities organized a militant demonstration against this fascist march.

Brooke: How many?

Mark: Between 15 and 20 thousand people. This was a massive response. The police did what they could to defend the fascists from the anti-fascist demonstrators but ultimately were overpowered. The fascists had to cancel the march and essentially back down. So, this Battle of Cable Street is an emblematic example of anti-fascist politics put into practice, in terms of preventing fascists from marching through a Jewish area.

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Brooke: Physically confronting people, that's

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Mark: Right. So, the message that I'm trying to get across with that is that we have a certain set of societal taboos around what one can say and can't say, and those have shifted over time. The words that are acceptable to use about different ethnic minorities, about women, about all sorts of groups, have shifted over time. The way that I think that we maintain a firm barrier against the 'Alt-Right' making racism okay again, making sexism okay again, is to really increase the social cost of presenting oppressive views out in public. So that when someone like Donald Trump says something sexist, we raise a ruckus, we disrupt business as usual, to make it so that it's not acceptable to raise these views in public. Increase the social cost of that being able to be a public discourse, and push back through politics.

Brooke: So, what does the American Antifa movement look like? What are its tactics?

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Brooke: But not just that, right? Antifa is fundamentally against the right of fascists to speak and be heard.

Mark: That's entirely correct. So, in your open you mentioned the popular slogan that liberals have adopted from Voltaire that, "I may disagree with what you have to say but I will defend to the death your right to say it." Anti-fascists fundamentally disagree with that premise. They argue that, given the horrors of Auschwitz and Treblinka, the destruction that Nazis have caused, that fascists, white supremacists shouldn't be granted the right to express their ideas in public, in part because, they argue, had that been done earlier in the 1920s, the 1930s, we might have been able to bypass what ended up happening.

Brooke: I get that as a tactic, but I'm still not sure how the philosophy of anti-fascism squares with the liberal values of free speech and open dialogue, and I guess it doesn't.

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Brooke: I get that as a tactic, but I'm still not sure how the philosophy of anti-fascism squares with the liberal values of free speech and open dialogue, and I guess it doesn't.

Mark: To some extent, it doesn't. The question is: if we want to prevent something along the lines of what happened in the 1930s and 40s from happening again, how do we do it? And the liberal prescription for doing it is, essentially, free and open debate and dialogue, and if Nazis do something illegal then hopefully the police will stop them. Antifascists recognize that in the 1930s, 1940s, the police supported fascism. The fascists didn't actually stage a revolution to come to power; they worked within the political system. And all the reasonable dialogue and debate that one could muster did not do the job. The argument is that, if we want such a horrific crime to not reoccur, it needs to be nipped in the bud, through a variety of tactics, but one of which is through violently disrupting Klan rallies, neo-Nazi speeches, and so forth. The other thing to remember is that anti-fascists identify as communists, as anarchists, as socialists, and want to organize for a revolutionary rupture with the prevailing political system, and that this is in-line

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following the election of President Trump — the idea is that the people who carry out these crimes are listening to Richard Spencer speeches, going on Stormfront websites, imbibing this hateful doctrine, and that, to the degree that we can shut it down, we will have fewer people copy-cattng them into attacking vulnerable populations. Most people would agree that it was acceptable in the 1930s and 1940s to organize armed resistance to the Nazi regime. The question is: how terrible does it have to be before that becomes legitimate? And the anti-fascist answer is: you need to nip it in the bud from the beginning.

Brooke: You wrote that “liberals tend to examine issues of sexism or racism in terms of the question of belief, or what is in one's heart. What is often overlooked in such conversations is that what one truly believes is sometimes much less important than what social constraints allow that person to articulate or act upon.”

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Brooke: But where does it stop? How are we different from our fascist opponents if we both subscribe to the idea that speech should be repressed when we regard the message to be dangerous?

Mark: Germany has a prohibition against advocating for Nazis publicly. That doesn't mean that Germany is a closed society where people can't say whatever they want to say. You can have some prohibitions against speech without going all the way. In the context of an increasing number of hate crimes — the Southern Poverty Law Center cited over 800 such crimes immediately

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with that. That's also another reason why the two philosophies don't quite jibe.

Brooke: So, the liberal idea that in a marketplace of ideas the good ideas will rise to the top and the bad will drop out the bottom—they don't buy that. You don't buy that either?

Mark: Well, unfortunately, terrible ideas have risen to the top throughout history. The liberal ideal is that the government is a referee in a game that all parties are invited to play. But, in actual fact, whenever left groups have become threatening, you get Red Scares, you get repression, you get COINTELPRO in the 1960s and 70s. And so, anti-fascists are arguing that we want a political content to how we look at speech and society which is drastically different from a liberal take, and that this entails shutting down the extreme manifestations of fascism and neo-Nazism. We need to recognize that this is not simply a question of whether a fascist government

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