The 180

with Jim Brown

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Should you punch a Nazi?

"Should you punch a Nazi?"

That was the big debate on social media this week (and still ongoing,) following a widely shared post-inauguration public punching.

The man who was punched does not describe himself as a Nazi. The identity and motivations of the puncher are unknown.

The punchee was Richard Spencer, a man who claims he coined the term "Alt-Right," and runs a white nationalist website which publishes essays on Jewish conspiracies, claims about the lesser intelligence of black people, and examinations of how *Gilmore Girls* is indicative of America's moral failures.

Following the U.S. election, Spencer in a speech to his followers — which was filmed and released online — used various snippets of Nazi terminology, while some supporters gave the Nazi salute.

So anyway, the day of Donald Trump's inauguration, Spencer was out in public in Washington DC, talking to some gathered media, when all of a sudden someone just up and punched him square in the face.

The clip spread online, was gleefully remixed, and the debate began, in the language of social media: "should you punch a Nazi?"

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>
> - Stewart Prest, Carleton University

However, the question has broad implications, according to conflict and democracy researcher Stewart Prest, a post-doctoral fellow at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University. While it may focus on one incident (involving a guy who contends he is not a Nazi,) it's also a very old question.

The following interview has been edited for length and clarity.

How big a question is "should you punch a Nazi?"

It's a pretty big question. Or I guess "big league" as the new President would say. On the surface we're talking about a Twitter fight and that seems normal, but when you go a layer deeper we're talking about 'under what conditions is it defensible, permissible, to try and counter someone else speech using violence? How tolerant must we be of intolerance?' It goes to the heart of what it means to be in a liberal democracy.

What's the difference between punching a Nazi in your own society, and punching a Nazi that's trying to start a war?

It goes back to that idea of - what is the context of what you're dealing with. When you're dealing with states versus states, the only way to oppose a powerful state that's trying to be aggressive is for other states to try to hem them in. If we're talking about individuals within the context of a liberal democratic state then it's a very different question. So you decide it's important to stand up to someone who's spreading intolerance and it's a question of "what's the best way do that?" and that's actually a question we have some good social science research on. There's a scholar named Erica Chenoweth at the University of Denver for instance, who's looked at different kinds of protest across a wide variety of cases and what she finds is that almost independent of the situation, it can be very dire situations where you're opposing intolerant states even, the non-violent strategies seem to come up with better results more often than violent strategies of resistance, if we're putting it in those terms.

What happens to politics in a society where people use violence to further their views?

There's this element of spectacle to the politics. Two people confronting one another, someone hits another person, and that introduces violence into the discussion. That creates a newsworthy event, so people start talking about the violence itself, rather than perhaps the ideas behind the people on either side of the confrontation. It changes what people talk about, it changes how viewers who are looking at this spectacle will think about the individuals involved. So rather than someone who's on the side of tolerance and someone who's on the side of ethnic hatred, you have two people who are involved in an act of violence. So now you're debating something different than you might have been otherwise.

Social scientists talk about something called the 'repertoire of contention.' That's a big phrase, but it means 'what are the different ways we accept (that) people go about their politics?' So, what are the things you can do in your politics that are seen as legal or tolerated. So once violence enters into a political system it can be replicated by others. There's a tit-for-tat element to this as well. And once you see one violent act, well, how do we know this is the last one?

Presumably, the puncher was motivated to to punch Richard Spencer as a stand against intolerance. So you have the person trying to make the 'tolerance' argument throwing a

punch at someone.

Right, and that's really difficult to deal with. When you think about confronting this kind of rhetoric by Spencer and people like him.... they are not opposed to violence. Violence sits with their message in a way that doesn't seem consistent with a liberal pluralistic message. It's not necessarily fair, when we're thinking about how these people are confronting one another, but if you're trying to advance an argument that we need to support norms of pluralism and tolerance and we're doing so by going outside the structures of the state - even if the state, we're not totally sure is going to back up that message of tolerance - it has this undermining effect to that message.

Can you understand where the impulse comes from? Given the fact that Spencer's views are so utterly incompatible with liberal democratic norms, can you understand why someone might say 'look, we gotta start punching these guys?'

Oh absolutely. It's difficult for someone like me to talk about how we all must let processes play out. That we all must trust judicial processes or trust democratic processes, when someone is speaking in those terms who isn't even directly targeting me. The rhetoric is clearly targeting other communities: targeting blacks, targeting Jews, targeting a whole array of people, and those are people for whom the state hasn't always been a reliable ally. So when you're saying to people who are the target of that message 'you ought to trust the process of liberal norms to play themselves out,' they have reason to say 'well we've done that and that hasn't worked terribly well for us, so we need to find other strategies.' It's a naivety to deny that that's what's happening.

What's the concern? If we as a society decide to justify punching Nazis, what's the worst outcome?

We've seen some pretty bad outcomes in history. This isn't the first time people have had this debate. When we say nationalism rise in Europe through the teens and the '20s and the '30s, these debates happened there too: what's the best way to oppose? And you had the same bifurcation, there was a sort of liberal view that we need to support the system, support the state, nurture it, and work through those institutions. And there was a more radical position that, no we need to oppose the fascists, oppose National Socialists at every turn and do it in the streets. And we actually had street battles in Italy, street battles in Germany.

There were a couple of confrontations in the UK as well, where the white nationalists were often outnumbered, but then that element of spectacle came back to it. People started to debate whether the violence sort of neutralizes the arguments on each side, and people started to think of other things: of fear, of disorder. That's a pretty bad outcome, where you have pitched battles in the streets... and then people just become scared of the whole enterprise. And then they default to something that seems like security. And that often is, and certainly was in

Germany and Italy, a default to the nationalist option. That became a part of how those groups came to prominence. It's a question of, if you are resisting violently, where does that lead you? And evidence suggests it leads to pretty dark places quite often.