

## Assessment Piece

### “Free Speech?”

The line between free speech and hate speech is being blurred; but is anyone paying attention?

‘Millennials’, ‘snowflakes’, ‘lefties’, without a doubt - there is a fiery debate taking place about Generation Z and our ability to debate without getting offended. But beneath the surface of this war, there is something darker. Underneath all of the insults is the idea that people are somehow *entitled* to offend others. While everyone is entitled to their own opinion, there is no promise that anyone will accept that opinion, and there is certainly no guarantee that people won’t argue against it. Recently, there has been a trend of people - largely the self-proclaimed ‘Alt-right’ - who say that the introduction of trigger warnings, safe spaces, and essentially being more considerate to others *infringes* on free speech - but is the term ‘free speech’ being used to masquerade what is actually hate speech?

Royal Holloway’s past is rooted in the pursuit of equality and diversity. However, after a quick glance at our university’s favourite meme page (Royal Hateoway), and it would seem that our campus is completely polarised: The Left vs. The Right. But is it really the case that our university has become a hotbed for far-right views? The general consensus is... not really. Our university has not become inundated with radical, right-wing fascists - rather, there are a handful of people at Royal Holloway (some of whom publicly identify as Neo-Nazis) who are *weaponising* free speech. The lines between free speech and hate speech are being blurred, and nothing is being done to stop it.

For a wider discussion of the issue of free speech and its ties to far-right politics beyond the Royal Holloway campus, I spoke to James Smith, a Contemporary Debate lecturer at Royal Holloway. I asked James what he thought about the exploitation of the term ‘free speech’ by the far-right:

“Free speech is crucial to the self-representation of these new forms of right-wing movements. They come to us arguing that they are simply here to defend debate and open dialogue of different views, which they say has been betrayed or in some way stifled by today’s liberals and left-wingers. But there has also been this kind of anarchic, trolling culture within this new right, where you were getting really extreme things being said, but always with some form of plausible deniability. There was always this claim that it was all just a transgressive joke, and if you took offence to it you were just humourless or ‘politically correct’. These versions of free speech make the error of pretending that simply stating something is an innocent thing that happens in vacuum. If we buy into this definition of free speech, we overlook the fact that speech is always performative. So, when these people say, ‘I’m merely stating statistics or facts’, they are never merely doing that. They are always saying it in a certain political spirit.”

I wondered about incidents which have taken place at Royal Holloway, most of which were generally shoved aside as inconsiderate, but not outright dangerous to students. The most notable event being the appearance of the ‘It’s OK to be White’ posters around Englefield Green. Most have been removed, but this is exactly the type of act James is referencing. The posters may be defended because they don’t explicitly incite hatred towards anyone specifically, but they have a performative role. The signs, which originate from 4Chan, were first adopted by the far-right, white supremacists, and even the KKK. Clearly, these posters serve a darker purpose.

I interviewed students at Royal Holloway to better understand what their concerns were surrounding free speech: do they feel its being exploited, suppressed, or something entirely different? Peter Dowling, Treasurer of Mises society, who identifies as ‘right of centre, Conservative, and libertarian minded’, says that free speech should have no limitations:

“I believe universities should have a completely open attitude to free speech. Regardless of how controversial certain issues are, they all need to be discussed freely so we can formulate balanced and fair opinions on them. Even the most repulsive speakers - who I would never endorse - should have the opportunity to speak... If there are certain topics that are completely taboo to discuss under the banner of ‘political correctness’, then that can become an infringement on free speech.”

The Mises society have recently been subject to criticism because of their use of the Gadsden flag during the freshers fair; a flag has been linked to white supremacy. Peter responded: “It was a flag that was created during the American revolution and it simply means that we ‘don’t want to be tread on’. It has become a symbol of libertarianism”. The creator of the flag was a prominent slave trader, so I asked Peter if it was possible to remove the flag from its dark history. He said: “I think you need to understand the social context. In those days of colonial America, huge amounts of industry relied upon the slave trade. It was a tragic, terrible fact, but it was a fact of daily life in America.”

After receiving complaints about the flag, the Mises Society were forced to remove it from their stall. To some, this might seem like an example of free speech and political expression being (ironically) trod on. This is where the complexity of the issue lies. To some, free speech means allowing a flag with a bloody history to fly. To others, it would be best just to avoid the flag completely.

On the other side of the political spectrum, I spoke to Molly Arthurs - Treasurer of Young Greens, an eco-socialist, and a member of the Green Party. I asked Molly if they thought the line between free speech and hate speech is being blurred. They said it is:

“The entire concept of free speech is that you have the freedom to call out oppression, being able to speak against the government without being shut down, but for some reason these days people see ‘Free speech’ and they think it means they can go around using slurs and no-one can criticise them. Free speech does not mean the right to an audience. People are creating an environment where minorities feel unable to speak. Students need to feel safe on campus.”

Under the guise of "free speech", ‘OK’ posters, transphobic literature, horrific sexist and racist comments on social media, and chanting for Tommy Robinson in Founders Square have been ignored. These incidents are not merely harmless jokes or provocations, but very real indications of something dangerous brewing at Royal Holloway. The students who are suffering most are scared to speak, and their identities are being threatened in subtle, yet completely recognisable ways. Looking forward, it would be nice if Royal Holloway would unequivocally say that our campus has no place for such threats. In fact, it wouldn’t just be nice, it is crucial for the safety of our students, the integrity of Royal Holloway as a whole.

\*\*\*