

Is it O.K. to Punch a Nazi?

On January 20, 2017, Richard Spencer, a well-known member of the American “alt-right”, was punched in the face by an unknown assailant while he was being interviewed by an Australian journalist. The attack, which was captured on video, was almost certainly a reaction to Spencer’s vocal form of white nationalism, which includes his public support for the establishment of the U.S. as a white ethnostate.¹ Footage of the attack soon became a popular internet meme, accompanied by the question, “Is it O.K. to punch a Nazi?”² with some people comparing the masked assailant to Captain America and Indiana Jones.

The punch, and the internet memes that followed it, have spawned vigorous debates about how people should respond to increasingly frequent, public displays of racism. Critics of the assault argue that violence is not the right response to political disagreement. Instead, according to this view, racism and other repugnant attitudes are best combatted with open conversation and rational argument. Such violence, in contrast, seems to be incompatible with treating someone else as a fellow citizen. This seems to be Spencer’s view of the attack: “I kind of like getting into vigorous back and forth with people who disagree with me. ... But punching like that just crosses a line—totally unacceptable.” He admitted that he feared future attacks, saying, “Certainly, some people think I’m not a human being and I can just be attacked at will.”³

Some anti-racists, by contrast, maintain that violence and intimidation are perfectly legitimate response—and perhaps even the best response to political views that themselves seem to call for or condone violence against vulnerable groups. They argue that trying to appeal to the better natures of, or try to reason with, those who openly endorse white nationalist and white supremacist ideologies will very likely be futile. Interventions like these, then, seem only to provide the opportunity for hate speech and racist attitudes to flourish without effective opposition. Admittedly, punching a vocal white nationalist (or threatening to do so) might not be a way to reason with them as fellow citizens. But there may be other important values at stake. Rapper B. Dolan, created a line of hats with the slogan “MAKE RACISTS AFRAID AGAIN” in order “to express solidarity with those opposing racism, homophobia, and fascism worldwide.”⁴ As Dolan explains his motivation, “If we can’t change their minds, we can at least drive them back into isolation so their targets can be free from harm and harassment. We can make them afraid again.”

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How could one convincingly argue that violence is sometimes a justifiable response to political views that one disagrees with or finds objectionable? What are the best counterarguments to that position?
2. Is making racists afraid a morally good aim? Is it morally better or worse than trying to reason with them, and to convince them through rational dialogue that is unlikely to succeed?
3. How should someone express their solidarity and support for those who oppose or are affected by bigotry?

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_B._Spencer

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/21/us/politics/richard-spencer-punched-attack.html>

³ <http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/20/politics/white-nationalist-richard-spencer-punched/>

⁴ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/b-dolan/the-hat-making-trump-supp_b_10824872.html