

Steve Bannon at Oxford. Protest and Debate at the Oxford Student Union

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Steve Bannon. The Oxford Union. A university that has been the breeding, sculpting and minting ground for British prime ministers for centuries and the Establishment. [Here](#), Bannon, strategist of the Trump campaign in 2016, was in full swing, spearing his enemies and mocking the elite with an approach he has come to master. The audience was hushed, bewildered, even stunned.

The thrust of his anti-elite argument was something that sat strikingly well with a figure he failed mention: John Ralston Saul. Saul was himself an investment manager and oil executive turned pure; he has reflected upon the failings of the system occasioned by an elite that has duped, gulled and hoodwinked entire nations, citing the value of rationalism filled by an “obsession with expertise”. They are, as Bannon reminded his audience, the party of Davos; they are the ones who prospered as bailouts were being dished out after the financial crisis of 2008-9, socialising privately made losses. They are, as Saul claimed, [Voltaire’s bastards](#), the ones who hijacked reason to despoil societies in the name of an estranged technocracy.

Perversely, the weapon to initiate this upending and bruising of these laboratory technocrats was Donald Trump, a person very much part of a system riven by decay. Trump had himself been beneficiary of its fracturing, one that left former employees without work and a string of bankruptcies. He fed the world of reality television with viral dedication. But instead of seeking a professional campaign manager, Trump struck electoral gold, appointing, in Ken Stern’s [words](#), “a media bomb-thrower with no experience on the trail.”

Trump, in turn, served a useful purpose (in Bannon’s own [description](#), a “blunt instrument for us”): he could slay sacred cows, mock members of the establishment and foul the temples. Bannon gave a taste of this sentiment, a true politics of aggression. “I said I wanna unchain the dogs on Megyn Kelly and I’m proud of it – politics is war by other methods.”

There were those who felt Bannon had no place at the Union. The Oxford Students Stand Up To Racism took issue with the body for “giving credibility to racism and fascism”, a view as childish as it was ill-thought. In a [press release](#), the group claimed that Bannon was “attempting to build an Islamophobic international of far-right groups and is looking to fascist Tommy Robinson here in Britain as a key figure for his movement.” Anneliese Dodds, MP for Oxford East, thanked the demonstrators for not welcoming “white supremacists like Bannon.”

A rough estimate of 1,000 protestors had gathered; Bannon was himself smuggled into the talk “in the back of a police van” [according](#) to the *Daily Mail*. There were chants.

“The police protect the Nazis!”; “Say it loud, say it clear, Bannon is not welcome here!”

Two men happily [goaded](#) the protests in St. Michael’s Street, mimicking Nazi-style salutes and causing, according to the police, “alarm and distress to those who were present”.

The address was peppered with the observations of a man who is now speaking to a political orthodoxy that has taken root in numerous states.

“I did the original travel ban, it made our citizens safer. Zero-tolerance at the border is a humanitarian policy.”

The view has been endorsed by both conservative and Labor governments in Australia since the late 1990s.

Bannon betrays a certain ideological inconsistency, suspicious of cults and followings of protest he sees as equivalent (naturally, he exempts his own):

“Nazis and the KKK have no place in our society, they should have never been allowed to march in Charlottesville.”

But the blade cuts all ways:

“The same can be said about Antifa and Black Lives Matter – they shouldn’t be allowed to be doing what they are doing.”

The problem here is that both Bannon and the protestors sport the very same defective positions they wish to promote. Scotland’s First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, for instance, [boasted](#) about her belief in free speech but refused to appear at an Edinburgh conference attended by Bannon for fear that she risked “legitimizing or normalizing far-right, racist views.”

Both sides want to ban each other in fits of self-conviction, ideologically convinced they have found the appropriate way. Both feel they have found some unassailable truth in their Manichean struggle. Consider the student at Oxford who was [reported](#) to say that he was “here to protest against the Student Union events being used for right wing personalities.” (Keep them vanilla, safe, or left, whatever that might entail.) To be right is to be wrong and worthy of silencing.

“I am Australian and we already have a fascist government so it’s important to fight right-wing politics while we still can.”

Tossing about vague labels serves more to restrict discussion and confuse social symptoms rather than advance argument which is, ultimately, the aim of most regimes of censorship. Tagging alt-right and fascist to the Bannon show is handily reassuring for the ideologically closeted, but it betrays a convenient ignorance. For one, it resists an inquiry into the causes for the rise of Trumpism, and the broader Bannon [agenda](#) of a neo-nationalist international.

A set of [brief contributions](#) to the *Times Literary Supplement* this month from a range of thinkers on the subject merely served to illustrate how unsure the field of comparative studies on fascism is.

“We could no more define [fascism],” argued classics titan Mary Beard, “than most of the mid-twentieth century fascists themselves could.” To use the word “fascist” in the Trump debate “has become a sloppy, and even dangerous, alibi for failing properly to analyse conduct.”

Bannon is not in any conventional, let alone unconventional sense, fascist, but a sharpened reactionary attuned to the impulses of a malcontent. He is the perfect condottiere’s type, having become an advisor for the European, and generally global right, on those populist disruptions that now find shape inside and outside numerous governments. Some of these have an undeniable encrustation of neo-fascism. But the essential point here is hardly to shut them up and ignore them but rally with appropriate antidotes. Censorship, notably at such forums as the Oxford Union, would be a poor, and ultimately weak form, of combat.

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