

Tade IPADEOLA

Speaking Freely Today

Idi Amin, one of the most notorious autocrats in the history of Uganda, once said that Freedom of Speech was guaranteed in his country but he could not guarantee freedom *after* speech. This, sadly, summarizes the situation in many countries in contemporary Africa and the rest of the modern world, even today. In the past, policing speech was limited to State actors. In the contemporary world, multinational corporations, religious fanatics and ethnic irredentists have all joined the ranks of those seeking to police speech.

Because speech is so closely allied with thought, there is always the risk of virulent speech, the most dangerous form of which is hate speech—truly, speech becomes most dangerous when it threatens people for belonging to a specific group, and treats humanity the way humanity treats snakes, mosquitoes, and other pests. Words can do more than break bones and end lives—this is a fact played out in the many theaters of history.

In Africa, one way in which hate speech has manifested itself over the centuries is to describe people in terms usually reserved for insects or cold-blooded animals (and even the rare mammal, such as the rat). History has taught us that whenever any part of humanity is described in terms of cockroaches, snakes or rats, some monstrosity lies in wait around the corner. Such was the case in Rwanda in 1994, and in South Africa for almost three hundred years.

While the most extreme forms of hate speech are now subject to severe legal sanctions, it is also true that the forms taken by hate speech have evolved and continue to evolve. Political populism has ensured that Orwellian doublespeak is alive and well and taking root in ostensibly democratic countries around the world. The danger is not academic. Indeed, wherever humanity finds itself on the planet, and even in outer space, this corruption of language is a real threat.

If we need any reminders of the true power of hate speech, we can readily remember the gruesome manner in which the journalist Jamal Khashoggi was butchered by operatives from the government of his own country on foreign soil; we can consult the improbable list of banned (but important) books across the world (*To Kill a Mockingbird* is still banned in some places)—or we can look away.

But, really, looking away is not an option. Articulation is one of the few distinguishing factors that separates humankind from other life forms on planet earth. With speech, humanity has civilized itself, created song and poetry – the very things that artificial intelligence, no matter how advanced, cannot create. To attack free speech is therefore to attack the touchstone of human culture. Those who argue against free speech do so knowing two things: one, those who are denied speech are not citizens but mere objects, and, two, denial of free speech is not sustainable, long term. Africa has taught the world many lessons but perhaps the most urgent

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lesson at this time is that every society needs conscientious objectors and whistle blowers who must be protected.

This is what we can do to support free speech.

We can support broader education in human cultures while attacking the logic which produces hate speech in the first place: the logic of extraction without compensation, of use without regard for dignity, of the corruption of capitalism and individual freedoms, the divorce of socialism from human responsibilities.

We can insist on an end to the continued preservation of Criminal Defamation laws on the statute books and codes. We can seek an increase in State resources channeled toward ensuring education for citizens for broader cultural awareness and sensitivity across borders.

We can continue to champion the glorious legacy of the satire, the lampoon, the pasquinade, the comic cartoon – forms that are now in danger of extinction because of the presumption that people in power worldwide must have superior wisdom.

Finally, we must insist that the *civis* is always greater than the *polis*—or it ought to be—and that the sanctity of human life is recognized in every public space.