*

Why Berkeley’s Battle Against White Supremacy Is Not About Free Speech

*The alt-right’s First Amendment narratives just give cover to campaigns of intimidation.*

*By* [*Meleiza Figueroa*](https://www.thenation.com/authors/meleiza-figueroa/) *and* [*David Palumbo-Liu*](https://www.thenation.com/authors/david-palumbo-liu/)

SEPTEMBER 8, 2017

*The Nation*

Outrage at the murder of Heather Heyer in Charlottesville and [wanton attacks](https://radicaldiscipleship.net/2017/08/23/my-nonviolent-stance-was-met-with-heavily-armed-men/) on peaceful students, clergy, and people of color at the hands of white supremacists kicked off nationwide protests against racist violence, which led to the cancellation of dozens of right-wing rallies and the fall of Confederate monuments from Durham to San Diego. There is much hope in the undeniable public support to resist the so-called alt-right. Yet confrontations at the University of California, Berkeley, have polarized activists on how best to oppose these movements of hate and bigotry.

On August 27, several thousand Bay Area students, teachers, and community members attended the “Rally Against Hate,” which was organized by [an unprecedented coalition](https://www.facebook.com/events/1554573591279582/permalink/1573523779384563/?ref=4&action_history=null) of over 100 campus, labor, interfaith, community justice, and socialist/anarchist groups. Despite the mostly peaceful character of the demonstration, the media focused overwhelmingly on a few instances of violent skirmishes, painting Berkeley as a hotbed of far-left extremism.

This emphasis plays into the hands of the far right by creating a public backlash against antifascist and social-justice movements. Within two weeks of Charlottesville, widespread revulsion at the images of torch-wielding white supremacists faded into a quagmire of moralistic debates about fighting Nazis. At best, Berkeley’s antifascist militancy is regarded by liberal pundits as a useful foil for the far right; at worst, it’s depicted as equivalent to fascists who, from [Dylann Roof](https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/dylann-roof-radicalization-alt-right-and-ritualized-racial-violence) to [James Alex Fields](https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/08/12/alleged-charlottesville-driver-who-killed-one-rallied-alt-right-vanguard-america-group), have proven capable of [cold-blooded murder](https://video.vice.com/en_us/video/charlottesville-race-and-terror-vice-news-tonight-on-hbo/59921b1d2f8d32d808bddfbc).

It is absolutely crucial to understand what is going on in Berkeley—not only because of how the coverage of protests has been used to shift public opinion on antifascist actions, but also because the sequence of events from Berkeley to Charlottesville dramatically illustrates why this battle is emphatically *not* about free speech. This is about the ability to shape consensus in a time of rising mass anxiety and political extremism. The “power of framing,” as linguist George Lakoff puts it, is everything.

It is not antifascist resistance but the uncritical acceptance of manipulative framing *by those who should know better* that puts Berkeley and other campus communities at risk. If the specter of “antifa” becomes an excuse to justify the use of repression through [state](https://www.newsmax.com/Newsfront/dhs-antifa-anti-fascist-domestic-terrorism/2017/09/01/id/811109/) or [extrajudicial](http://www.wweek.com/news/2017/06/30/multnomah-county-republican-party-approves-oath-keepers-and-three-percenters-as-private-security/) means, then no college campus, marginalized community, or organized social movement of the left is safe from attacks from the alt-right and its fake-news machine.

The clashes between the alt-right and antifascist protesters at Berkeley cannot be taken out of the context of the climate of terror that has been brewing since white-nationalist and Nazi flyers began to appear at [over 100 college campuses](https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/adl-white-supremacists-making-unprecedented-effort-on-us-college-campuses-to) across the country after the election of Donald Trump.

A [letter circulated to Berkeley faculty](https://www.docdroid.net/XPh80Z5/letter-to-berkeley-faculty-feb-10.pdf) by student activists in the wake of the [dramatic shutdown](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/01/milo-yiannopoulos-uc-berkeley-event-cancelled) of Milo Yiannopoulos’s speaking event on February 1 reveals the extent of the intimidation campaign waged against the campus community and the failure of administrators to address safety concerns. Berkeley students had seen the rise of white-nationalist recruitment on campus and witnessed the tactics employed by Yiannopoulos and his followers surrounding the shutdown of an event at UC Davis—which included [violent provocation](https://socialistworker.org/2017/01/17/uc-davis-takes-on-alt-right-hate), [stalking](http://www.davisvanguard.org/2017/01/local-expresses-condemnation-concern-hateful-rhetoric-milo/), [manipulative lies in the press](http://www.davisvanguard.org/2017/01/view-alternative-explanation-milo-taking-shape/), and a [perverse reenactment](https://medium.com/%40karlosreneayala/counter-narrative-on-the-uc-davis-protest-social-media-fake-news-and-milo-yiannopoulos-1f18c999b9d5) of the incident when Occupy student protesters were pepper-sprayed by police in 2011. With this in mind, students began writing letters to campus administration, faculty, and media voicing their opposition to the Berkeley event. In retaliation, far-right trolls sent intimidating messages and death threats. Students were doxxed (their personal information hacked and revealed on message boards) and stalked by alt-right activists who followed them on and off campus. Incidents were reported to top campus and UC administrators to no avail.

UC Berkeley graduate student and union steward Beezer de Martelly recounted:

*When we began organizing publicly against Milo Yiannopoulos’s scheduled talk, we started receiving disturbing messages on our public Facebook event page warning us that if he were prevented from speaking, we should expect people to come with guns to shoot demonstrators. After publishing our* [Official Anti-Milo Digital Toolkit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1_sMfpylYUyH8TpkZy9nJCX1VpHCnmp4k0H6zGf7FEio/edit)*, several of the contributing women and non-binary femmes (myself included) were doxxed on numerous men’s rights and misogynist message boards where members distributed our workplace addresses and emails, shared fantasies of enacting violence towards us, and some of us began receiving threatening emails sometimes with gruesome rape and death threats.*

An [open letter](http://www.dailycal.org/2017/01/10/open-letter-calling-cancellation-milo-yiannopolous-event/) encouraging the cancellation of the event was published and signed by over 100 faculty members, some of whom then began receiving hate messages and death threats. Graduate-student instructors submitted over 50 union grievances claiming that their work environment had become unsafe. Targeted students [wrote op-eds in the school paper](http://www.dailycal.org/2017/01/17/open-letter-milo-yiannopoulos/), for which they also received death threats. Again the university administration failed to respond. After the [shooting of an antifascist protester](https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/04/26/husband-and-wife-accused-planning-violence-shooting-uw-milo-protest) at a Yiannopoulos event at the University of Washington on January 20, alarmed students contacted state and local politicians pleading for an intervention; again, no response, even as administrators became aware of Yiannopoulos’s intent to [reveal the identities](http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/UC-warns-campus-group-Yiannopoulos-event-could-10901517.php) of undocumented students, in violation of Berkeley’s sanctuary-campus policy.

The [free-speech narrative](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/02/us/university-california-berkeley-free-speech-milo-yiannopoulos.html?mcubz=0) perpetuated in national media by the [alt-right](http://www.breitbart.com/milo/2017/02/01/milo-true-heir-berkeley-free-speech-movement/)—and by prominent pundits on the [center](http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/feb/4/bill-maher-berkeley-riot-left-has-problem-free-spe/) and [left](http://www.inquisitr.com/4166976/bernie-sanders-backs-ann-coulter-speech-at-berkeley/)—provided cover for these threats. While student efforts to tell their stories were largely ignored by the media (perhaps for fear of appearing to support leftist “censorship”) and Koch-funded Republican lawmakers [implemented plans](http://www.alternet.org/education/right-wing-billionaires-are-funding-cynical-plot-destroy-dissent-and-protest-colleges) to crack down on student protest and academic freedom, Yiannopoulos and avowed white nationalists were celebrated as heroes of free speech. Far-right pundit Ann Coulter even [personally thanked](https://twitter.com/anncoulter/status/857302808780881920) liberal TV-host Bill Maher for his support.

This cycle has repeated itself again and again over the past seven months—up to and including the events on August 27. Almost immediately following [on-the-ground reports](http://www.motherjones.com/media/2017/08/what-the-media-got-wrong-about-last-weekends-protests-in-berkeley/) showing provocations—including the pepper-spraying of peaceful protesters by alt-right demonstrators—pundits, who were not on the scene, began decrying antifa’s tactics as “bullying” and “terrorism.”

In response to the selective reporting of these incidents, authorities have turned to law enforcement, exacerbating the situation. Berkeley Mayor Jesse Arreguin has [asked](http://www.newsweek.com/berkeley-mayor-calls-antifa-be-classified-crime-gang-after-clashes-sunday-656286) that antifa be categorized as a “crime gang,” and [calls have been made](http://insider.foxnews.com/2017/08/22/thousands-sign-petition-urging-white-house-label-antifa-terrorist-organization) for federal agencies to label it a terrorist organization. Given the fact that there is no unified “antifa” organization with standing members or leaders, the very idea of labeling anyone who [conceals their identity](https://theintercept.com/2017/08/31/antifa-violence-gives-far-right-provocateurs-crave/) so as not to be doxxed and stalked by white supremacists a “gang member” makes any outspoken activist subject to state repression.

In a grotesque parody of the Berkeley students who stood up for civil rights on Sproul Plaza in 1964, the far right has made free speech on campus a shield for hate groups as it recruits and organizes. College administrators’ knee-jerk defenses for free speech avoid addressing legitimate concerns regarding safety and academic freedom for faculty and students.

UC Berkeley Chancellor Carol Christ [quoted John Stuart Mill](http://news.berkeley.edu/2017/08/23/chancellor-christ-free-speech-is-who-we-are/) in defense of free speech, but conspicuously left out the context. Mill firmly believed speech that advocated harm to others is an abuse of the right to speak. In 1969 the Supreme Court agreed, ruling in *Brandenburg v. Ohio* that there is no free speech right to advocate violence when violence is likely to occur. There are, in fact, [solid legal reasons](https://www.nlg.org/free-speech-on-campus-a-critical-analysis/), particularly after Charlottesville, why campuses can and should deny a platform to far-right speakers, precisely because they encourage violence against specific groups and enable situations of imminent danger.

The threat of white-supremacist violence is real. [Leaked threads](http://archive.is/b0r8z) from an alt-right message board reveal the sadistic aspirations of self-identified Freikorps who gathered online in hopes that their “[Day of the Rope](https://itsgoingdown.org/alt-right-full-genocide/)”—referring to a Kristallnacht-inspired mass lynching and genocide depicted in the white-nationalist novel *The Turner Diaries*—would kick off at Berkeley on April 27 when Ann Coulter had been scheduled to speak.

No altercations materialized that day, but determination to provoke violence and justify a state crackdown on antifascist resistance motivates far-right groups to keep coming back to Berkeley. Breaking this iconic “commie” stronghold, in their eyes, would achieve a major milestone on their path to power.

Right-wing speaking events—including the “Free Speech Week” scheduled for late September at Berkeley, featuring the odious trifecta of Yiannopoulos, Coulter, and Steve Bannon—are part of an [increasingly coordinated nationwide effort](http://www.salon.com/2017/04/27/trolling-for-a-race-war-neo-nazis-are-trying-to-bait-leftist-antifa-activists-into-violence-and-radicalize-white-people/) among far-right groups to recruit on college campuses. Using free speech as a wedge to [silence dissent and discredit opposition](https://www.wrn.com/2017/05/critics-attack-campus-free-speech-bills/), they intend to radicalize white youth by waging psychological warfare on academic leftists, social-justice organizations, and minorities. It should be no surprise that Jeremy Christian, white-supremacist murderer of two men in Portland, [cried out](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/portland-stabbing-suspect-yells-free-speech-or-die-first-court-n766416) “Free speech or die!” during his day in court. For white supremacists, the push for free speech is directly connected to their campaigns of terror.

Tone-deaf campus administrators continue to ignore the warnings of students and faculty, and prioritize making campuses “safe for free speech” by militarizing university spaces with a heavy police presence—unsurprisingly, with [disproportionately detrimental effects](http://www.berkeleyside.com/2017/04/28/uc-berkeley-students-protest-april-27-arrest-heavy-police-presence/) on students of color. Violent confrontations can be avoided entirely if responsible decision-makers acknowledge that fascist gatherings *by their very presence* pose a threat to our spaces of work and learning. Trump’s repeal of DACA this week makes this imperative even more urgent; we must not forget that what is being contested at Berkeley is not just “free speech” for racists but the [enforcement of sanctuary-campus policies](http://www.frontpagemag.com/fpm/265620/freedom-center-campaign-will-oppose-sanctuary-nosanctuarycampusorg) against ICE.

It cannot be the sole responsibility of communities facing white-supremacist violence to be suitably respectable victims for public consumption. Commentators, politicians, and campus administrators must reject the alt-right’s framing of this as a battle over free speech. Regardless of the far right’s strategies to divide us, we must prioritize the safety of students and amplify the voices of the vulnerable—not promote narratives that serve racist ideologies. ##

[Meleiza Figueroa](https://www.thenation.com/authors/meleiza-figueroa/) is a PhD candidate at UC Berkeley and a member of the Campus Antifacist Network.

David Palumbo-Liu is the Louise Hewlett Nixon Professor at Stanford and a member of the steering committee of the Campus Antifascist Network.