Weapons of Criticism, Criticism by Weapons: On Punching Nazis

J. Jesse Ramírez

University of St. Gallen,
Switzerland

Abstract: *This essay reflects on the uses of political violence in the contemporary "Resistance" movement against the US far right. In particular, I focus on the figure of "punching Nazis." Neither denouncing nor endorsing the latter, I sketch a dialectical position that might be dubbed "anti-anti-punching Nazis."*

As white supremacist, Richard Spencer, began to explain the meaning of his Pepe the Frog lapel pin during a street interview on January 20, 2017—the day President Donald Trump was inaugurated—he was suddenly punched in the face by a masked assailant (probably a member of the anti-fascist movement, Antifa).[1] Video of the attack quickly went viral, inspiring numerous Facebook posts and tweets, Tumblr pages, musical remixes, and, more substantively, a debate over the legitimacy of political violence in the "Resistance" movements against the contemporary American far right.

"Is it OK to punch a Nazi?" mused Liam Stack of *The New York Times* on the day following the inauguration (2017). To some political commentators, the punch was an attack on free speech and the normative foundations of liberal democracy. According to this view, expressed by liberals and conservatives alike, punching others with whom one disagrees sets a dangerous precedent that can legitimize violence against almost any political opponent. Moreover, since the punch assailed the liberal principle of civil discussion, it channeled the authoritarian spirit of the Nazis themselves and lowered the puncher to their moral level. Being a Nazi and punching a Nazi are thus virtually the same (Stack 2017). For others, the punch was not only a satisfying comeuppance for Spencer, a dangerous bigot who has advocated for "peaceful ethnic cleansing" (Southern Poverty Law Center n.d.), but it was also a necessary and justified response to the white supremacist and fascist elements of Trumpism. Writing for *The Nation,* Natasha Lennard described the punch as "pure kinetic beauty" and reasoned that

> if we recognize fascism in Trump's ascendance, our response
> must be anti-fascist in nature. The history of anti-fascist action

is not one of polite protest, nor failed appeals to reasoned
debate with racists, but direct, aggressive confrontation (2017).

The videogame designer Ramsey Nasser makes a similar point by way of parody in *Dialogue 3-D* (2017).[2] A modification of the popular first-person shooter *Wolfenstein 3-D* (1992), *Dialogue 3-D* is Nasser's response to liberal defenders of civility. In the original version of the game, the player is an Allied spy who battles Nazi soldiers. But when the player in *Dialogue 3-D* encounters an armed Nazi, a dialogue box opens and prompts the player to consider the following questions: "Wouldn't peaceful protest be more effective?"; "Has violent resistance ever solved anything?"; "Is it okay to deny fascists a platform?"; "Doesn't this make you the real Nazi?" Like Lennard, Nasser's game suggests that dialogue and debate are radically inadequate responses to far-right violence.

The shorthand "punching Nazis" raises difficult questions about the proper tactics for resisting an ascendant far right. To be sure, I sympathize with Lennard, Nasser, and even the puncher himself. The dangers posed by the American far right are real, serious, and underreported. Lennard notes that since 1990, "there have been 450 deaths caused by white supremacist violence in the United States, compared to only one believed to be related to far-left activity" (2019, 12). In many ways, the framing of confrontations with far-right figures and movements as conflicts over free speech is a red herring. It ignores the far right's disproportionate violence and supports its conspiracy theory that a leftist Big Other, to use a Lacanian term, is suppressing truths that the far right alone has the courage to express. But the figure of the Nazi that animates much of the debate is misleading. Consider how *Dialogue 3-D* uses what Ian Bogost calls the "rhetoric of videogames" (2007) to

embed an argument about the necessity of violence in the game's rules. Since the dialogue box interrupts the player's action but allows the Nazis to shoot, the player can usually survive only a few encounters before dying. By procedurally linking dialogue with death, Nasser attempts to persuade players to share his own conclusions about the absurdity of being civil with Nazis.

But the same processes that make the game compelling as an act of digital rhetoric—namely, the way it uses algorithmic rules to constrain players' actions and force a particular outcome—weaken its political analysis, especially if the game is played in the context of the assault on Spencer. For even if we reject Spencer's insistence that he is not, in fact, a Nazi—this "alt-right" leader identifies instead as a "white identitarian" or "white nationalist"—we must still concede the obvious fact that he was not shooting at people like the Nazis in *Dialogue 3-D* and *Wolfenstein 3-D* do. Nasser suppresses this distinction; the game's procedures automate the identification of Spencer and the Nazi combatants of World War II. Obviously, it is justified to do much more than punch actual Nazis in the context of war and self-defense. But Nasser's "Nazi" is an abstraction that smooths over the differences between the Nazis of World War II and the contemporary American far right; between Germany in the 1930s and the United States under the Trump administration; between the contemporary far right's various and sometimes conflicting factions; and between racist speech and physical violence.

While critics of Spencer's attacker are guilty of a "bothsidesism" that absurdly groups white supremacy together with its opponents, the case for punching Nazis suffers from its own paucity of political distinctions. The problem with punching Nazis is not that it makes the puncher a Nazi, too, or that it violates a civility

that, when insisted upon with sacrosanct unconditionality, gives license to the free circulation of genocidal propaganda. Instead, punching Nazis is problematic because it obscures theory and tactics. Is the United States in what Antonio Gramsci (1971) calls a "moment of consent," in which a hegemonic coalition rules by popular consensus, or a "moment of force," in which a weak ruling coalition must resort to coercion to secure its domination? Or more concretely: in what specific ways, and for which social groups, did Trumpism rule by popular consensus, and in what specific ways, and for which social groups, did Trumpism rule by force? Where are the various elements of white supremacy, from neo-Nazis and the alt-right to more institutional and mediated forms of racism, located in this political terrain? How are structural ("organic" in Gramsci's terms) phenomena, such as economic stagnation, manifested in particular, conjunctural situations of struggle?

To be sure, the issues are not so clear cut. Force and consensus often overlap in hegemonic rule; rightwing factions share ideas and members even as they disagree; structural-organic phenomena and conjunctural situations can be difficult to distinguish from one another. But only by confronting the issues in their full complexity can political movements transcend abstract enthusiasms for punching Nazis and mobilize around theoretically-informed tactical action. Such action requires careful analysis of the types of response that are appropriate to particular individuals and political formations at particular times, and not to others. As I will clarify below, physical force is legitimate against *some* actors and under *some* conditions, but not all. When Lennard praised the "kinetic beauty" of the punch, she substituted analysis with the undeniable, yet nonetheless inadequate aesthetic pleasure of watching a bigot get his just desserts.

The internet meme that Lennard celebrated is also problematic because of its cultural location in transgressive internet humor. Although the meme is usually understood as leftist, it shares its cultural form with the ideologically flexible internet humor that Angela Nagle describes as being rooted in "public humiliation as viral entertainment" (2017, 5). While political memes express a broad range of political participation (Shifman 2014), the Punching Nazis meme exists in a digital ecosystem of memes with a common form, which has been called "justice porn." The website, Know Your Meme, defines justice porn as "online media depicting events in which criminals, bullies and other aggressors are thwarted, exposed or punished for their wrongdoings" ("Justice Porn" n.d.). Justice porn appeals to a desire for spectacles of "pure" justice, preferably dished out with maximum public disgrace, and without messy questions about who is truly in the right. One critic notes that in another kind of justice porn, reality court television, "[a]ll power is consolidated in the hands of a single capricious authority, judgments are rendered swiftly and permanently, and even if the metaphorical glove don't [sic] always fit, defendants get the punishment they deserve" (Beato 2009). Since morally simplified justice is the core of justice porn, one can celebrate Richard Spencer's masked assailant with one click and Darien Long, the so-called Kickass Mall Cop, with the next. Among Long's many recorded encounters with customers at the Atlanta shopping center where he once worked is a video of Long tasing an African American woman in front of her children. Long, who was eventually fired and jailed for his vigilantism, is a justice porn hero on the social news website, Reddit. Although punching a white supremacist and tasing a mother are two radically different acts, they are consumed in the same meme ecosystem and get their "lulz"—a corruption of "Laughing Out Loud"—from summary judgment and "amusement at other people's distress" (Phillips 2015, 27).

To return to the question of free speech, Samuel Farber's "A Socialist Approach to Free Speech" (2017) is a useful attempt to think concretely about political distinctions and how they might inform political struggle. Farber's argument is based on the difference between what he terms "racist persuaders" and "violent racist intimidators" (2017). On inauguration day, Spencer was a racist persuader. Racist persuaders spew all manner of dangerous nonsense, but their action remains discursive and is legally protected as long as violence is not intended, likely, and imminent, to use the legal concepts of the so-called Brandenburg Test established by *Brandenburg v. Ohio* (1969). If we find the racist persuader's ideas to be repugnant, then we should counter them by expressing our own free speech—assembling, picketing, shaming, heckling, and discursively refuting them, but stopping short of using physical assault to silence them. When Spencer appeared at the deadly "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017, he was no longer a racist persuader, but part of a mob of violent racist intimidators. To appreciate the difference, consider the 2003 Supreme Court case *Virginia vs. Black*. In 1998, three men were convicted of violating a Virginia statute that held that cross burning is "prima facie evidence of an intent to intimidate a person or group of persons" (*Virginia vs. Black* 2003). The Court found that cross burning with the *intent* to intimidate is not protected speech, but also that some cross burning is done without such intent. The Court thus struck down the Virginia statute's definition of cross burning as an *inherently* intentional act of intimidation. In a rare display of passion, Judge Clarence Thomas's dissenting opinion emphasized the Klan's long "reign of terror" against African Americans prior to the Virginia statute. Thomas described cross burning as "unlike any symbol in our society" because "there's no other purpose to the cross, no communication,

no particular message. […] It was intended to cause fear and to terrorize a population" (Greenhouse 2002). Thomas challenged the applicability of free speech law to the Virginia statute and wrote that "just as one cannot burn down someone's house to make a political point and then seek refuge in the First Amendment, those who hate cannot terrorize and intimidate to make their point" (2003).

Thomas's terroristic cross burners were among the white supremacist groups that gathered in Charlottesville in 2017. These groups were not interested in discourse. When they marched through the University of Virginia on the evening of August 11 carrying torches and chanting "Blood and Soil," "white lives matter," and "Jews will not replace us," they unambiguously represented political groups with histories of genocidal violence, and were engaged in a show of force designed to terrorize. In Farber's words: "Violent intimidators are not trying to persuade, but to intimidate. Their language is the language of violence" (2017).

In this situation, the Brandenburg rule that speech is protected up to the moment when violence is imminent "should not apply to these violent intimidators" because "that principle allows them the choice to select the time, place, and manner most favorable for their violent actions" (Farber 2017). In other words, if violent racist intimidators are misrecognized as racist persuaders, the Brandenburg rule's protections may simply grant them greater latitude in organizing terror. Indeed, this is precisely what happened after the torchlit march through the University of Virginia. On the following day, members of the same white supremacist groups brutally beat DeAndre Harris and killed Heather Heyer. More counter-protesters might have been killed if not for forceful resistance; Cornell West,

for example, thanked Antifa specifically during an interview on *Democracy Now* for saving his life in Charlottesville. It thus seems clear to me that punching Nazis, as a synecdoche for physical force against violent racist intimidators, was justified in Charlottesville.

But tactical analysis remains indispensable. This analysis must tarry with questions about whether the opposition consists of racist persuaders or violent intimidators and which type of force is possible, given the level of organization and political consciousness. It must also consider which type of force is appropriate, given the political context and the composition of the opposing forces, which might include various elements of the state or commercial media. Using disproportionate violence to shut down racist persuaders and intimidators could backfire by confirming the far right's narrative of persecution in the eyes of the media and public, thus helping the right's recruiting efforts. Moreover, even if the concern over free speech arguments can be a red herring, resistance movements have a strong interest in preserving free speech rights because their own political rights are under threat. To give just one example, California police collaborated with white supremacists to identify and charge anti-racists who demonstrated against the Traditionalist Workers Party, a neo-Nazi group, at a violent rally in Sacramento in 2016 (Levin 2018).

In the text from which I have derived this essay's title, Karl Marx seems to provide a justification for political violence that is tailor-made for punching Nazis. In his introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law,* in which he comments on the abstractness of German political thought, Marx observes that "the weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism by weapons, material force must be overthrown by material force" (1975, 183). If white supremacists are a material force, then the

opposing force must be equally material; Nazi violence can be stopped only by counter-violence. But Marx qualifies his claims: "theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses. […] Theory can be realised in a people only insofar as it is the realisation of the needs of that people" (183-184). While political transformation is a material process that cannot happen through words and ideas alone, words and ideas can become a material force in their own right when they are embodied in a mass political movement whose needs they articulate. The "weapon of criticism" and "criticism by weapons," discourse and force, analysis and action, are thus not opposites but dialectical pairs.

Resistance should not be abstractly committed to one in isolation from the other, especially when considering how to combine the negative moment of resistance with the positive moment of building a mass political movement. Riffing on Hannah Arendt (1972, 143-55), we might say that punching Spencer was an individual demonstration of *strength*, but not necessarily an act of political *power*, which requires collective action and deliberation. Critical political thought must repudiate the bothsidesist critique of punching Nazis without reifying resistance as sheer aesthetics, humor, and moral simplicity.

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Endnotes

1   For a concise history of the video, see the
website Know Your Meme ("Richard Spencer Punched
in the Face" n.d.). On Spencer, the alt-right, and Pepe
the Frog, see Neiwert (2017) and Phillips (2018).

2   The game can be played at https://nasser.itch.io/
dialogue-3-d.