



SYMBOL CLASH

Intolerance is not the way to engage with a symbol of hatred, writes Frank Furedi.

For millions of Europeans, the swastika represents a powerful and frightening symbol of hatred. My 87 year old mother – who spent five months in a German concentration camp – still experiences an overwhelming emotion of fear whenever she sees this symbol. And of course, individuals and groups who want to promote hatred and fear know only too well just how potent this symbol can be. Just two weeks ago, racist vandals painted swastikas on gravestones in a Jewish cemetery in Aldershot. Their aim was not simply to desecrate the Jewish graves but to shock and scare and gain publicity for their evil cause.

The horrific legacy of the Nazi occupation of Europe ensures that anyone sporting a swastika or anyone using this symbol in public is likely to provoke intense passions. Therefore it is not surprising that the UK royal, Prince Harry's ill-advised choice of a Nazi uniform with a swastika armband for a fancy dress party unleashed worldwide hostility and criticism. Sensible people know that memories associated with this symbol are far too painful to treat in a light hearted or cavalier manner. However it appears that some people are not prepared to limit their reaction to Prince Harry's stupid behaviour to criticism. Rather they want to use the



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achieve other than tell the public what they already know? - which is that it is a widely despised symbol of evil.

Some MEPs take the view that since the wearing of the swastika has been banned in Germany, the threat posed by the far right has diminished. Unfortunately banning books, parties or symbols does little to create a more tolerant and humane society. Strong sentiments and hatreds cannot be banned out of existence. If people are genuinely inspired by Nazi ideals they are unlikely to change their minds because the wearing of the swastika has become illegal. All that happens is that a ban of the display of Nazi insignia creates the illusion that everything is alright. But the absence of any outward display of such insignia fails to reveal how people actually feel and what they believe in. Inadvertently such bans make it difficult to grasp the scale of the real problem posed by Nazi sympathisers.

Instead of devoting energy to the banning of the swastika, democrats ought to address the question of how they can develop symbols that promote the spirit of freedom and tolerance. Banning despised insignia provides politicians with the pretence that they have made a contribution to the fight against intolerance but such censorious measures distract from confronting the real problem.

Then there is the little matter of the freedom of speech and of expression. Such freedoms become compromised when they are made available to some but not to others. It is difficult to assume the role of a champion of liberty against a symbol of repression and hatred if one seeks to counter intolerance with intolerance. Indeed it is perverse that it is MEPs who claim to be liberals who are in the forefront of demanding such an illiberal measure. There is nothing liberal about the demand to ban a

political symbol – even if it has the dreadful connotations associated with a swastika: if one such symbol can be banned today then why not another tomorrow?

Worse still the banning of the swastika is likely to have the effect of endowing this insignia with the kind of mystique that attracts those who like to shock through making extravagant gestures. Many politicians and commentators have failed to consider just why Prince Harry chose to wear Nazi insignia at a private fancy-dress party. Possibly his decision was motivated by the understanding that wearing such uniform would shock the other guests. Possibly, he sought to defy conventions with a gesture of rebelliousness. That is indeed the reason that motivates most people who purchase and wear Nazi insignia. So members of motorbike clubs wear them not because they are drawn towards the philosophy of National Socialism but because this is their way of acting defiantly. Throughout the western world thousands of ‘underground’ shops cater for this mainly youthful consumer demand for disturbing and shocking badges, t-shirts and other insignia. One of the inevitable consequences that a Europe-wide ban of the swastika would have is to drive this symbol further underground. It would further enhance its mystique and attract the interest of young people inclined towards a self-conscious display of outrageous behaviour. Turning the swastika into a cultural icon of groups of misguided and alienated youth could be one of the consequences of the illiberal demand to ban this symbol of hate.

Frank Furedi is Professor of Sociology at the University of Kent
www.frankfuredi.com

publicity that surrounded this incident to call for a Europe-wide ban on the wearing of Nazi insignia altogether. A spokesman for EU justice commissioner Franco Frattini has indicated that it “may be worth looking into the possibility of a total ban”.

Some German MEPs have been at the forefront in demanding the banning of the swastika. Silvana Koch-Merlin, vice president of the European Parliament’s liberals argues “all of Europe has suffered in the past because of the crimes of the Nazis, therefore it would be logical for Nazi symbols to be banned all over Europe”. But is it? What will the banning of the wearing of the swastika