

Recanting Fascism

Fascists who have left the movement, provide opportunities for learning about how other fascists might be weaned away from their destructive way of life. Key turning points for four such people are summarised together with some lessons for anti-fascists on the importance of developing dialogue with fascists.

Racism, nationalism and fascism are key problems faced by society in Britain, Europe and across the world. We need to explore ways of addressing them urgently.

The first three of these people were dedicated nazis who had become leaders in the movement. (1)

Ray Hill was living in South Africa in 1979 when he met an Indian family squatting by the roadside. (2) They had been evicted by police from a house as a result of demands to strengthen apartheid made by the South African National Front led by Hill.

“I felt a knot tighten in my guts. How on earth could I begin to tell him that I was responsible for what had happened to him? On one level I wanted to show my sympathy for this poor family, stuck out here in the streets with nowhere in the world to go, but this simple human response was ruled out by the knowledge that I was to blame for their predicament....I fled feeling thoroughly ashamed....My days as a racist were over.”

He decided that he had to make amends, some kind of reparation for all the damage caused over the years by his political activism.

Back in Britain he became a mole for Searchlight, which gathers information on fascist activities, creating havoc for the nazi movement during the early 1980s.

Matthew Collins' change came in 1980 when the British National Party got a group of football hooligans to break up a meeting of elderly people who were protesting about the

BNP setting up their head office in their locality. (3)

“I'd been involved in lots of fights but I'd never seen anything as terrifying and pointless as this.

“I left and ran off - feeling physically sick. I sat in my bedroom for the rest of the evening, I couldn't believe anyone wasn't killed.”

Two days later he went back to the local BNP headquarters. “They were sitting around, talking about how they'd bashed those Reds and those Pakis. But they weren't - they were women. Old women.”

He contacted Searchlight and over a period of four years provided inside information to help undermine the BNP and Combat 18.

George Burdi's turning point came when he was imprisoned for his involvement in an assault on an anti-racist. (4)

“When a week seems like an eternity and you've got months ahead of you, it's easy to sit back and think about your life. I decided I was going to get out of the movement when I left prison. The three biggest things for my decision were the pain I gave my parents, the futility of my cause, and the judgment of the 12 jurors who were all whites...here I was, supposedly fighting this fight for white people like them. I started thinking that there must be something to their perspective.”

Maureen Stowe, was a local councillor representing the BNP. (5) “I had no idea what they really stand for.” She began to have second thoughts when she attended the BNP annual rally in nearby Ribble Valley,

Lancashire. "I was only there for ten minutes on the Sunday and I didn't like what I saw. It was really nasty." Her turning point came in 2004 when the leader of the council called her a racist. This rankled with her when she knew she wasn't. He explained that the BNP is a racist party and that she was their representative.

Lessons from these stories

Anti-fascists often say that there is little point in trying to persuade fascists to change their minds. The assumption is that they are too far gone to listen to anything that challenges their world view. The recommendation is to focus on enlightening the 'soft' racists who might be easily led to more extreme views.

The fact that fascists at all levels in the movement have indeed rejected everything they previously stood for indicates that it is worth thinking about what causes them to turn. The lessons below are presented as suggested points of departure for further exploration.

These stories show that there is no single easy explanation of why people get into or out of extreme right politics.

They illustrate the finding from social psychology that the roots of fascism are not necessarily to be found in some kind of standard fascist personality such as the 'Authoritarian Personality'. There may be some people whose basic psychological make-up predisposes them towards the extreme right. However, Maureen Stowe illustrates how a person can become involved and even take the high public profile of becoming elected to the local council without even knowing that she was representing a nazi party.

A number of psychological mechanisms and social processes can be identified. If we can tease them out we can get a better understanding of the lives of those who get

involved in this destructive approach to life. We can also see better how to respond to the presence of fascism in our society.

All the people showed that they were not without conscience even if some of them might have appeared so to some observers. Ray Hill showed great empathy and remorse for the evicted Indian Family. Matthew Collins was repelled by the violence of his colleagues. George Burdi was concerned about the hurt he had caused his parents. Maureen Stowe had adopted a child and helped a refugee. They demonstrated that they retained their humanity.

The question arises as to how best to elicit any empathy a fascist might have so that they can appreciate the human cost of their activities. How can we appeal to their essential humanity? Of course, empathy may not be accessible for some fascists. They may not be capable of responding positively to any such appeal. However, the stories above show that, at least for some, the effort may be worthwhile.

One possibility might be to attempt the restorative justice approach when perpetrators of racist crimes are being sentenced in court. Victim Offender Reconciliation Programmes (VORPs) have been successful in bringing victims of crime and perpetrators together with mediators. (6) This experience can give the opportunity for genuine shame and remorse which is less likely to occur when society seeks punishment and retribution. Of course, attempts at reconciliation won't always work but if it works for some, then it is worth trying.

A major lesson lies in the importance of maintaining personal contact and dialogue between fascists and anti-fascists. The usual situation is that the two groups polarise, each demonising the other. The end result is that members of each group talk within their respective groups encouraging more and more

extreme dislike between the opposing sides. This is a vicious circle in which conflict escalates. Strong suspicion between the two groups means that dialogue across the divide and building trust is likely to be very difficult.

Group pressures within each group serve to maintain and strengthen their cohesion and boundaries, so perpetuating the conflict. For members of either side, to have any friendly contact with the opposition is likely to be seen as betrayal and suspect by members of one's own group. Loyalty to one's own group is highly valued. Anything which looks like disloyalty is seen as threatening the survival of one's own group.

“For my friends, it would have been inconceivable that one might actually talk to a member of the National Front, let alone have a conversation.” (7)

Anti-fascists need to learn to be more open to contact with fascists. For most people, quite apart from not wanting to appear disloyal, it will be difficult to overcome strong emotions aroused by the opinions and activities of nazis. However, keeping the door open to the possibility of contact and dialogue is necessary.

Anti-fascists have to condemn what is wrong and make it clear that racist actions are not acceptable in a decent society. How do you do this while at the same time maintaining the possibility of dialogue? This requires skills which most of us don't have. Making the commitment to acquiring those skills will help. Name calling is much easier.

The driving force of fascism is hate. If we oppose hate with hate we are in danger of becoming that which we are trying to overcome. Commitment to respect for all includes respect for those we disagree with and who hate us. The trick is to learn to communicate respect for the person while making it clear that you disapprove of their actions and words: love the sinner, hate the

sin. If you can do this then you are more likely to be able to continue the dialogue.

Quakers have done much work on low key dialogue which provides useful suggestions. John Woolman (1720-1772) was an American Quaker who visited Quaker slave owners. He respectfully discussed slavery, appealing to conscience and without blame. Over many years he quietly persuaded many to give up slave owning before the main growth of the abolition movement. (8)

Creative Listening was devised by Rachel Pinney in 1962 to encourage greater understanding between political opponents. (9) It was later applied to a variety of situations, especially in therapy with children. The idea is to listen respectfully and attentively to someone who holds a view you disagree with. You explain beforehand that you will not attempt to persuade them or attack them or even present your own views.

Pinney says of the speaker “Not only is he heard, he hears himself. This is a fantastic experience, and it sends the speaker away re-thinking the subject, often for weeks to come.” The listener, by giving his total attention to the speaker, “will have a brand new experience: by not interrupting or arguing, he will hear things he has never heard before.”

George Burdi's story suggests a line of approach in appealing to fascists: to emphasise the futility of fascism and the fact that most people do not support the aims of fascism. For instance, at election time anti-fascists could contact candidates for racist parties and their supporters such as those who nominate them as candidates, explaining the futility of what they are doing. This needs to be done in a constructive way, without condemnation and pointing the finger of blame. It may not be immediately effective but seeds of doubt may be sown.

When your whole life has become bound up with the gang mentality of nazism it can be very difficult to leave it behind. One of the tricks of nazism, as of any gang, is to tie people in by getting them to break the taboos of mainstream society so sharing the guilt. It can be hard to break free all by yourself. A sensitive, listening ear can help but if you are a nazi how can you trust an anti-fascist not to betray you?

Most nazis in Britain know that Searchlight welcomes contact from anyone in the movement who is looking for a way out. Ray Hill and Matthew Collins certainly knew where to turn once they had made their decision to leave.

A scheme for helping people wishing to leave racist and nazi groups called Exit was started in Sweden in 1998 by a person who had broken his ties to the White Power movement. (10) Exit also provides support to parents of these people and information and expertise to those whose work brings them into contact with these youngsters.

Between 1998 and 2001 125 people had left the White Power movement out of 133 assisted by Exit.

A similar Exit group has been set up in Germany.

Conclusion

Much of the effort to counter fascism goes into preventing them gaining electoral success or disrupting their activities so that they fail to develop strong and lasting organisations. This strategy has largely been successful in Britain despite the electoral progress of the BNP since 2002. However, we need strategies to reduce racism and remove the attraction of fascism so that recruitment will be weakened for the long term. Otherwise, even if fascism

wanes as it has done in the past, the danger remains that it could rise again.

Dialogue with fascists is not going to bring quick change and it may not be enough in the short term. But for the long term it is essential.

Notes

1. See <http://www.rvar.org.uk/pages/FAQs/recaant.htm> for a fuller outline of these stories.
2. Hill, R & Bell, A (1988) *The Other Face of Terror: Inside Europe's Neo-Nazi Network*. London: Grafton Books.
3. The Observer, March 10, 2002.
4. <http://www.onepeoplesproject.com/burdispeaks.htm>
5. Searchlight archive <http://www.searchlightmagazine.com/>
6. For further details on VORPs see: http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/content/article_2003_06_23_justice.shtml
7. Buford, B 1991 *Among the Thugs*. London: Mandarin.
8. Reynolds, R (1972) *The Wisdom of John Woolman*. London: Quakerback.
9. Pinney, R (1992) *Creative Listening* London: Children's Hours Trust.
10. National Council for Crime Prevention *Exit: A follow-up and evaluation of the organisation for people wishing to leave racist and nazi groups* (English Summary). http://www.bra.se/dynamaster/publication/pdf_archive/0111226980.pdf

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