‘They used the oven to get tanned, you know…’

Marc-Antoine Dilhac recounts how he confronted anti-semitic prejudice in a French classroom, and argues that more good comes from an open debate about hate speech than from banning it.

It happened in 2008. Back then, I was teaching philosophy in a secondary school for vocational training, in the south of France, not far from the Spanish border, in the small town of Gourdan Polignan. My pupils were about eighteen years old and had, with a few exceptions, a rural background.

So, I had this class on the philosophical issue of technology (*la technique*). The topic is part of the philosophical curriculum for all French pupils. To sum up my course, as far as I can remember it, it started with a lecture on Aristotle’s conception of art/technè, then I presented the transformation of science in Bacon and Descartes’ work, and I went on with Marx’s analysis of production, etc. In the last lecture, I commented on the industrial revolution and addressed the Taylorist turn and the rationalization of mass production.

The last part of this lecture was about, as I put it in a provocative way, ‘one of the favourite hobbies of human beings of all time which is waging war and slaughtering.’ My purpose was to show how industrialisation entailed a new paradigm for a number of human activities, one of which was war. In order to keep the attention of my pupils, who were far more familiar with JayZ than Aristotle, I showed powerpoint slides with pictures and excerpts of movies such as Charlie Chaplin’s ‘Modern Times.’ While I was presenting the contemporary issue of mass murder, I displayed pictures of what seemed to be a regular factory but was in fact Auschwitz. Then, I led my pupils inside this factory and showed the ovens. At that very moment, I heard from behind someone telling an awful joke and his friends laughing out loud: “they used the oven to get tanned, you know…”.

Picture me in front of more than 30 big guys, rugby players and huntsmen, laughing about Jewish prisoners. I felt like I had been stabbed. But I faced the one who made the joke. “I beg your pardon? Can you repeat your joke out loud?” “Sir, it’s just a joke, don’t take it bad.” I was about to lose my temper and followed up: “No, please, I’d like to laugh too. What did you say?” “Oh nothing …” he replied. Then I asked: “What is so funny about the Nazi genocide of Jews? I must have missed something, I’d like to understand.” But they remained silent and I could not continue my class. I was just appalled at their behaviour.

During the trip back to Toulouse, where I used to live, I could not think about anything else. I could not sleep that night. Something had gone really wrong and I started to blame myself. I thought I should have been smarter, I should have tried to understand their reaction, and certainly I should not have reacted like I did. In the morning I was determined to have a talk with them and to let them vent their anti-Semitic rage. I was thinking of Socrates in front of the dangerous Callicles, and I was convinced that if Socrates could resist Callicles’ aggression, I could stand what I was about to hear. I was also confident in the power of dialogue to debunk wrong arguments, expose sophisms, and maybe to “heal” the vicious souls. But of course you have to assume that prejudices such as racism and anti-Semitism are supported, however remotely, by arguments or at least by some rhetoric.

At the beginning of the class, I apologised for my reaction the day before and told them that though I did not share their opinions I was interested in their justification. So I suggested that instead of carrying on the lecture on *la technique*, we should discuss their understanding of Shoah and their perception of Jews. At first, my proposal was roughly dismissed: “No Sir, we cannot talk about that. For one thing, we’re not on the same side, you know it, we know it. And if we told you what we thought of Jews, we would break the law, you would have to make a report to the head, and we would be in big trouble… so please, let’s move on.”

I was expecting this kind of reaction, so I tried to convince them that I would not make any report to the head and whatever was said in the classroom would stay there. For some reason, I had moral authority over them and they knew they could trust me. But even at this stage, it was quite difficult to engage in the discussion, so I had to break the ice: “Since you don’t want to talk, let me tell you how I understand your reaction. You think that we always talk about Jews, that too much is done for them, and you feel frustrated.” They nodded and finally they elaborated on their feelings.

Basically, they thought in good faith that because of the Shoah, we do not pay attention to other massacres such as the genocide in Rwanda; they claimed that because of the past suffering of Jews, we shut our eyes to the suffering of Palestinians. It is worth mentioning that there was no Arab, no North African in my class, but mostly of people ‘of French origin,’ if this expression makes sense. It was easy to counter this argument and to make them understand that to remember the Shoah only strengthens our sensitivity to injustice done to other human beings. Sometimes it was hard to endure their prejudices about Jews, but we discussed it in a respectful way. At the end of the class, they told me that they were grateful that I let them talk freely, that they understood their mistakes and why it was morally wrong to support and spread anti-Semitic views. At the end of the day, I thought I have done the right thing.

Now I cannot say that I succeeded in changing their mind altogether, but I surely avoided a situation of great concern: let the racist think that he is right but that the Establishment (biased in favour of Jews, immigrants, black people, etc.) prevents him from speaking the truth. That is why I deeply believe that we should not restrain freedom of expression except in the case of clear and present danger. I grant you that what I achieved “between the walls,” in a classroom, is certainly more difficult to achieve in the wider public sphere (“Between the walls”, *Entre les murs,* refers to a – not very good but famous – novel by François Bégaudeau about a teacher of literature in high school). But I believe this experience makes a strong case against legal bans on hate speech. Persecuting the heretic results in making him a hypocrite but it does not change his faith. This lesson from the 16th century remains true.

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