Speakers Cornered

by Theodore Dalrymple



One of the most beautiful towns in England, Lewes is relatively unspoiled by the twentieth-century British architectural incompetence that has proved so destructive of urban grace, spreading the most hideous ugliness almost everywhere as a kind of metonym for social equality. From Lewes's streets can be seen the lovely, rolling downs of Sussex, and it is curious how the sight of green hills from the center of a town or city (still possible in Dublin, for example) soothes the mind. Among Lewes's most famous residents were Thomas Paine, author of *The Rights of Man*, and Charles Dawson, the man most likely to have forged Piltdown Man, the hoax human fossil whose inauthenticity was not exposed until 40 years after its "discovery" in 1912. To my great delight, Lewes's High Street has three excellent secondhand or antiquarian bookshops.

I had been invited down to a literary event, the Lewes

Speakers Festival, to talk about my recently published memoir of life as a prison doctor, *The Knife Went In*. I was to be the penultimate speaker, followed by a controversial conservative journalist, Katie Hopkins, who was to talk about her own recently published memoir, *Rude*.

The event ended in violence.

The festival organizer, Marc Rattray, had informed me in advance that there might be trouble from demonstrators who would want to prevent Hopkins from speaking. No doubt it is a measure of how detached I am from the ordinary life of my country that I had until then scarcely heard of her, for she is either loved or abominated by millions of my fellow countrymen. (I would have guessed, if put to it, that she was an actress or a pop singer.) Some love her because she says things that many think but dare not say, while others abominate her, accusing her of bigotry and spreading hatred—hatred directed at the wrong people, that is.

To say that she is unafraid of controversy or criticism is to understate the case. They are her stock-in-trade. Whatever her other qualities, she is certainly valiant. Now 42, she suffered most of her adult life from severe nocturnal epilepsy, enduring many dislocations of her shoulder as a result, until she underwent a successful operation to remove the epileptic focus in her brain. Many people with such a condition would have retired from life, as it were, especially when the state makes it possible for them to do so, but Hopkins carved out an eminent, or at least a prominent, career in journalism for herself instead.

If she had espoused views other than the ones that she actually holds, she might have expected sympathy and even admiration for her personal courage; but being, on the contrary, an outspoken, not to say militant, mocker of current political pieties, she is herself the object of the most severe objurgation, with no allowances made. In debate, she is

uncompromising and fearless. For example, she has expressed the view that people are fat because they eat too much and exercise too little. When faced by an audience in a television studio of grotesquely fat people (or people who would once have been regarded as grotesquely fat, before their obesity became so commonplace), she does not retreat from her view or qualify it in the slightest, as more emollient or pusillanimous persons such as I might do, and instead calls them greedy, lazy, and stupid. This is in marked contrast to the line taken by such publications as *The New England Journal of Medicine* or *The Lancet*, which treat obesity as if it were of the same moral order as, say, multiple sclerosis: something that just happens to you. To prove her point, Hopkins deliberately ate too much for three months, put on 60 pounds, and then lost the weight in another three months by diet and exercise. If Hopkins did not exist, it would be necessary to invent her.

No doubt she is a terrible *simplificatrice*, but her simplifications often contain more truth than her detractors' supposedly sophisticated arguments. Moreover, she appears genuinely not to mind when attacked on television or in print or on social media: she accepts with good grace the fact that, if you express opinions in public, you must expect criticism and detraction, fair or otherwise, though she always returns blow for blow. She laughs at insults.

It is only to be expected, perhaps, that such a person should sometimes be immoderate, going too far and even saying disgraceful things. She has twice been successfully (and expensively) sued for libel, for example, by accusing members of a named family of Pakistani origin of extremism. This was, for the family, a damaging and even dangerous assertion, and MailOnline (the website of the *Daily Mail*), which had published Hopkins's column in which she made these claims, agreed to pay the family £150,000 (about $200,000) in damages.

Perhaps her most notorious utterance was a tweet in the

immediate aftermath of the May 2017 Manchester bombing in which 23 people, including the bomber, were killed: “22 dead—number rising. . . . We need a final solution.” Immediately afterward, she was dismissed from one of her jobs as a commentator on a London radio station.

In a subsequent interview, she admitted that a *lasting* solution might have been a better way of putting it (though even a lasting solution to this problem is not easy to imagine); but such is her nature that she cannot remain apologetic for long. Her main mode of defense is always attack, and she immediately claimed that it was absurd and morally disproportionate for her to have been the object of so much opprobrium for a single tweet written at 7:30 in the morning following the attack (implying that she had hardly had time to think, in which case one might have supposed it better to have said nothing), when the terrorist danger was so prevalent and 22 young people were dead because of the latest outrage. Further, she said later, the hostility expressed toward her was much greater than had been that toward the Labour Party’s Friends of Palestine Group when it had tweeted, “Two state solution with END to occupation—our solution will be the final solution.” As nearly a third of Labour’s members of Parliament belong to that group, including the party leader, Jeremy Corbyn, and as Corbyn and the party may well form the next government, this locution was far more worrying when used by the group than when used by a lone journalist, however famous or notorious.



Controversial British journalist and author Katie Hopkins (NEIL MOCKFORD/GC IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES)

The *tu quoque* argument, however, is, in effect, an admission of guilt. It is a poor response to an accusation of misconduct that someone has done something worse, even much worse, than oneself. Hopkins should therefore have admitted at once the egregiousness of her error and apologized for it. But it is also a sign of the crudity of our intellectual life that no one thought to ask her what she had actually *meant* by her remark: gas chambers for every Muslim, or philological criticism of the Koran to undermine an unreasoning set of beliefs? It was the use of the words, not the main idea behind them—in this case, that Islamist terrorism is a serious threat

that must somehow or other be reduced—that attracted attention. But the world is as it is, not as it ought to be, and people such as Hopkins should be aware that form can easily overwhelm content in importance, especially where content is itself unwelcome. Crudity of expression, while gaining fame and notoriety for those who employ it, will enable opponents to divert attention from any unwelcome truth—and serve to justify further encroachments on freedom of expression, known as political correctness.

So Hopkins is widely regarded as a purveyor of hate speech—utterance that is to be answered by prohibition, rather than by argument. The category of hate speech is disturbingly expandable and depends on the propensity of groups of people to take offense or feel threatened (where it pays to be offended, people will take offense). Certain groups, but not others, are accorded legal or social protection from unpleasant name-calling, as if they were endangered species. This, ultimately, is the legacy of Nazism, collective insult or criticism being held to be the first step on the slippery slope down to Auschwitz. This is not an entirely dishonorable fear, and many writers on the subject of genocide have noted the role of dehumanizing language in preparing whole peoples to accept or to commit this most heinous of crimes. But if all that separates us from genocide is preventing Katie Hopkins from speaking in Lewes because of a few injudicious remarks that she has made, we are in a sad moral condition indeed—much worse than even I had envisaged.

Considerable efforts were made to bar Hopkins from speaking at the event. When I arrived in Lewes, posters in many windows proclaimed that Lewes wanted no hate speech. A town councillor had argued that the invitation to Hopkins should be withdrawn. The council had the right to ask for this because it owned and ran the venue, a deconsecrated church; and the councillor argued that the demonstration against Hopkins would be so violent that her appearance would constitute a threat to

health, safety, and public order. On legal advice, however, that this argument was blatantly political, the council, with not a single Conservative member despite the town's evident prosperity, voted overwhelmingly for the invitation to stand.

It turned out that the councillor who had argued for the withdrawal of the invitation was sympathetic to the demonstration against Hopkins, so that in essence his argument had been almost a threat: if you do not do as I say, like-minded people will react violently, and since you have been warned, such violence will be your fault. Do as I say, or else: the new democratic principle.

I gave my talk without interruption from the gathering crowd outside, but during the question-and-answer that followed, as Hopkins's time to speak grew nearer, I heard some banging on the windows, at which fists and angry faces also appeared. Then there was some chanting, but not so loud as to make me inaudible. The trouble really began after I had finished speaking, in the short break before Hopkins was to start. The councillor's self-fulfilling prophecy was about to come true.

A crowd of perhaps 120 had by now gathered outside the hall. Initially, only two policemen were present. One was pelted with so many eggs that he looked as if someone were planning to make him into an omelet. Eyewitnesses attested that some of the demonstrators handed eggs to children to throw at the police, presumably because the children would be too young to be arrested for assault. At any rate, it is significant that some adults were so determined to prevent Hopkins from speaking that they thought it reasonable and appropriate to bring children to a potentially violent occasion—an occasion, in fact, at which they themselves were prepared to employ violence. This is surely a demonstration of the ability of ideology to induce practical moral blindness.

Some of the demonstrators were masked. They tried to prevent those who had bought a ticket for the event from entering the

building. One of those ticket holders subsequently wrote and published an account of what happened when she attempted to gain entrance:

> *There was a very large and noisy demonstration in the grounds and spilling onto the road, and we were immediately taunted as we made our way to the lynch gate [sic: a Freudian slip, if ever there was one, from lych-gate], despite no one knowing who we were. A militia of masked young men dressed in black tried to prevent us from entering the grounds. At first I thought they were working with the police, controlling the flow to protect attendees from the scuffles ahead, because a couple of policemen were observing at close quarters. One militiaman asked me why I was there. I said to hear Katie. He immediately swore at me, called me a fascist, bounced against me, manhandled me and tried to push me over. I was wearing stilettos and he easily pushed me into a bush, which thankfully cushioned my fall. I said: I have every right to be here. I looked towards a policeman for support, but he turned away, having seen everything. Anthony, who was now a few yards away, came to my side, and we stayed very close from then on as we determinedly made our way through to the church doors. Anthony is visibly Asian/ethnic and was not attacked as I was. Our keeping very close afforded me some protection as the crowd was chanting that it was pro refugees, unlike fascist Hopkins.*
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> *We came to a stop about six feet from the church's main doors, which were solidly closed. A line of five thugs, a man on a large mobility scooter, and a woman had blocked our path. I tried to reason with the woman, who looked out of place and even a little scared herself, being so petite. She said that people with vile views should not be allowed to speak. I said I thought we fought two world wars to protect free speech. I mentioned that my grandmother's brother ended up in a concentration camp because he was a French citizen who stood up against the Nazis' bullying. She maintained the*

mantra that evil people should not be allowed to spread their filth. There was no reasoning, and I didn't want to provoke anyone, as we were trapped, and there were calls for Katie's blood; so, I kept quiet.

Suddenly, the crowd behind surged, and it looked like we might be in serious danger as eggs were thrown, a placard headed our way, and more militants appeared. Just then a journalist from More Radio appeared at my side. He was immediately denounced as a fascist by one of the thugs, but he brought out a mike and began to interview the most vociferous one, a particularly on-edge individual who looked a cigarette paper away from hurting someone. The ghastly young thug said it was necessary to stop this speech because if it was allowed we would soon become like Nazi Germany and worse.

It was well after the start time by now, and the journalist phoned a colleague and confirmed to us that the event had been cancelled.

News got around. The protestors chanted their victory. Some cried something like "When she comes out, we'll get her." We could hear others asking what to do when Katie appeared. At this point many photos were taken of me by a couple of young men who were standing on top of a tomb. (It was shocking how the graves and graveyard were shown no respect by some of the protestors.) The church door opened briefly and protestors surged forward. It was quickly shut. A policeman, who looked terrified, came to the front and spoke into his walkie-talkie, but soon disappeared into the graveyard. We knew we had to get out, as the crowd wanted blood.

We followed the radio journalist, who conducted a tortuous route to safety through the muddy graveyard. Later, on the pavement, when I suggested to him these folks were Momentum [a militant left-wing organization affiliated with the Labour Party], he said he believed they were from Antifa [a

militant, ostensibly antifascist, movement that believes in political homeopathy, namely, that the employment of fascist methods will drive out fascism]. He said that most of the protestors were not people from Lewes (where he lived).

While all this was going on, my wife and I, who had intended to leave to catch our train before Hopkins spoke, were trapped inside the hall, having been advised by the egg-covered policeman to wait. The banging and the chanting were now incessant. There were about 40 of us inside to 120 outside. One lady I spoke to was terrified and in tears because she had been separated from her husband by the mob and did not know where he was. One man described how one of the demonstrators said to him that he would let him pass and enter the hall, as if he had the authority in his gift to permit or prohibit. Another lady wished that she had never come. A German lady said that she had come to live in England in 1968 precisely to avoid this kind of thing, which had then seemed so common in Germany. Where had the tolerance and good humor she had known in those days gone?

Some of the demonstrators managed to break into the disused church using a crowbar. Bouncers provided by a security company (after another such company had pulled out, fearing more serious violence than it could handle) rushed after the intruders. One bouncer suffered a serious injury to his arm, requiring an operation.

Hopkins was smuggled out of the building, the police having advised her, before she was able to speak, that they could not guarantee her safety if she stayed. She tweeted that she had left the building and asked the demonstrators to disperse peacefully. When police reinforcements arrived, somewhat tardily, the people in the hall were escorted under cover of darkness out through a back entrance and through the ancient graveyard. This was no doubt advisable, but, in effect, it turned the law-abiding rather than the lawbreakers into

fugitives.

The police made no arrests, despite having been assaulted themselves and witnessed others being assaulted, despite the fact that a building was illegally broken into, despite the fact that 40 people had been falsely imprisoned, despite the fact that threatening language (of a degree likely to make any reasonably firm-minded person afraid for his safety) had been used repeatedly. They failed to protect citizens who were going about their lawful business. To say that they were useless would be an exaggeration: goodness knows what would have happened had they not been there. But they did not carry out their duty with alacrity, and the social media—videos, sound recordings, photographs—that helped to call the mob into being in the first place are now being used to hold the police to account for their passivity in enforcing the law.

The question arising from the episode is how far it was isolated—was it one of those things that happens from time to time?—and how much was it a harbinger of things to come? Certainly, it gave me another lesson in how fragile public order is and how quickly it can break down. True, Lewes is only a small and not very important place, but it did not take many people to make ugly and potentially dangerous scenes there. The Hopkins incident also demonstrates how weak is the attachment to freedom of speech and thought, especially among people so convinced of their own rectitude that they feel entitled—indeed, duty-bound—to silence others.

In my more pessimistic moments, I see in this episode the future of Britain. The next government could easily be formed by an unreconstructed admirer of Hugo Chavez. In March 2013, on the death of the Venezuelan leader, Jeremy Corbyn tweeted: “Thanks Hugo Chavez for showing that the poor matter and wealth can be shared. He made massive contributions to Venezuela & a very wide world.” A man who admired Chavez will not be alarmed—rather, the reverse—by any gulf in society that his ignorant economic policies will produce, a gulf far

exceeding any within living memory. Moreover, his most fervent support comes from people so wedded to their own Original Virtue that they feel they are properly the arbiters of what may and may not be said and are therefore justified in resorting to violence to enforce their prohibitions.

One of the problems of this, apart from its sheer moral and intellectual idiocy, is that it will eventually call forth equal and opposite violence. Thus, the Lewes Speakers Festival would be an episode in the forthcoming English Civil War, the second of that name.

On the other hand, none of this may come to pass.

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